

# SERBIA AND NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO) – COLLABORATION AND GEOSTRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract:** According to many public opinion polls, more than two-thirds of the population of Serbia is opposed to Serbia's NATO membership. Serbia proclaimed military neutrality with a parliamentary declaration. The issue of Serbia's accession to NATO is complicated and burdened by several political and geographical factors: attitudes and programs of political organizations that make the majority in the Serbian Parliament, influence of Russia in Serbia, work of the NATO Military Liaison Office in Serbia, maintaining a policy of instability in the Central Balkans, absence of objective consideration of the positive perspectives of Serbia's NATO membership and insufficient activities to promote the social benefits of NATO membership. This paper aims to point out the objective advantages, consequences and disadvantages of Serbia's full membership in NATO, both for Serbia and NATO, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of Serbia-NATO cooperation. This cooperation is already underway within the *Partnership for Peace* program, through the implementation of the *Individual Partnership Action Plan* (IPAP), the *Status of Forces Agreements* (SOFA) and the *NATO Support Procurement Organization* (NSPO). Serbia's security alternatives were also presented, such as eventual membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Russian: *Организация Договора о коллективной безопасности, ОДКБ*).

**Key words:** neutrality, cooperation, partnership for peace, membership, declaration.

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## **Introduction**

Serbia-NATO relations have been burdened by Serbia's dissatisfaction with the way the Kosovo and Metohija issue was resolved after the conflict in 1999. The main outcome of the conflict was the creation of conditions for the forcible separation of the part of the Serbian territory.

The period after NATO's aggression on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) was used by Kosovo, the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA) to create the conditions for the creation of an independent state of Kosovo in 2008. By 2012, just over half of the respondents had a negative attitude about Serbia's NATO membership, and that year over 31% of the population said that Serbia's NATO membership would increase Serbia's national security. Russia has been steadfastly opposed to NATO enlargement since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it has been repeatedly presented to Serbia that such a move in the Kremlin would be interpreted as a security threat to the Russian Federation<sup>1</sup>. Since the change of government in 2012, the number of respondents who have a negative view of Serbia's NATO membership has been steadily increasing. Since then, the influence of the representatives of the Russian Federation on the negative attitude of the government representatives on NATO membership has been growing. There is a link between the strengthening of Russian influence in Serbia and the percentage increase in the expression of a negative public opinion on Serbia's NATO membership.

The rise in popularity of the right-wing conservative parties in Serbia and the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by almost all NATO members (Spain, Romania, Greece, Cyprus, and Slovakia have not recognized Kosovo's independence due to similar secessionist processes in their countries) significantly contributed to Serbia's alienation from the Atlantic integrations. Although NATO representatives constantly emphasize that Serbia has to decide for itself whether it wants NATO membership, there are no more intense motivational activities by this organization to bring it closer to the membership.

The bombing in 1999 is stated as one of the main reasons for neutrality in Serbia, as well as the distrust towards this organization formed after the massive attack by extreme Albanian civilians and the destruction of medieval

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<sup>1</sup> Milenković, 2012.

monasteries of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian property in March 2004. NATO-led Kosovo International Force KFOR (Kosovo Force), under its authority, has not responded adequately and timely to protecting Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija since 2004, which is one of the major reasons for mistrust and negative public opinion about NATO. NATO's indifferent behavior (KFOR) during the March 2004 events in Serbia was understood as non-verbal and undocumented assent to extreme Albanians for the expulsion of Serbs and destruction of medieval cultural heritage and property of Serbs by the former Kosovo Liberation Army members (KLA) (Serbian: Oslobodilačka vojska Kosova (OVK), Albanian: Ushtria Çlirimtare Kosovës (UÇK)).

### **Serbia's military neutrality**

According to Item 6 of 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 of 26 December 2007, Serbia is a militarily neutral state. Military and political neutrality can be temporary and permanent. Temporary neutrality means non-involvement and non-alignment in a specific conflict between two warring parties.

Serbia does not have a recognized neutrality status similar to Switzerland or Austria. From the Congress of Vienna in 1815, through the Hague Convention in 1907, the approval of the Council of the League of Nations in 1920, which recognized Switzerland's neutrality, until the 1955 Moscow Memorandum, which recognized Austria's neutrality, there is a defined path to gaining positions of the constant neutrality recognized by the great powers, military and military-political blocks<sup>2</sup>. Serbia is a part of the Partnership for Peace program, its military forces are participating in NATO exercises, participating in peacekeeping missions around the world and training of security forces within the European Union (EU) military operations. The aforementioned activities are in a collision with the adopted resolution on the policy of military neutrality. It follows that the Serbian army is committed to cooperation with NATO and that neutrality is emphasized when some benefits are to be obtained from the Russian Federation, or in situations where the Government does not have a defined position on a particular geopolitical issue<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Gaćinović, 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Aktuelne mirovne operacije, 2019.

Military neutrality cannot be enforced and promoted in an isolated manner. It is a part of the state policy, which means that the state also implements political neutrality. Political neutrality should mean that Serbia does not want EU membership either. The dilemma can also be semantic in nature. If Serbia wants to be merely military non-aligned, then the declaration of military neutrality is incorrect from the semantic point of view. In that case, the Assembly should adopt a new document on military non-alignment, because military neutrality is an integral part of political neutrality and Serbia is not a politically neutral state<sup>4</sup>. In many local conflicts, Serbia, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has come to one side (examples of Venezuela, Northern Macedonia, Ukraine, Libya, etc.), thus showing a principled inconsistency on proclaimed neutrality.

Serbia has not been accorded permanent neutrality by international documents or by a decision of the United Nations Assembly as in the case of Turkmenistan, and Serbia cannot, therefore, be considered a neutral state. Serbia does not pursue a policy of neutrality in principle, but neutrality is used as an argument in certain conflicts when the Government does not have a clear position, when assessing the harmfulness, or using it at a given geopolitical moment, or when it comes to the political blackmail of some major power. Neutrality is mainly used as an argument to avoid expressing one's foreign policy position on a particular issue. It is relatively common to hear that NATO respects Serbia's neutrality, but that neutrality is not recognized in any UN, EU, NATO, or other relevant international documents. Thus, Serbia is a sort of detainee of its declaration and is therefore unable to realize many benefits in international relations.

Neutrality is a constant and unchanging principled attitude of non-support to any party, whether conflict within one state, between two states or between state groups and alliances is in question. Neutrality is acquired and confirmed by international reputation, a realization of a national strategy that takes an impartial and neutral stance in conflicting states around the world. This stance should be recognized by international organizations (UN, EU) and countries with high international influence (above all permanent members of

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<sup>4</sup> The unprincipled neutrality is not only a feature of Serbia. The Republic of Austria, the Republic of Ireland, the Republic of Finland, the Republic of Malta and the Kingdom of Sweden are also neutral countries, but they implement the EU policy. Raising the issue of neutrality of these countries before full EU consolidation would have negative reflections on EU stability.

the United Nations Security Council, G7 and G20 members). A neutral attitude can bring many benefits but also long-term damages. The most significant advantage is the freedom to decide and the absence of foreign pressure to support one party in a conflict, contrary to the interests of a neutral state. On the other hand, a neutral attitude makes it difficult to establish friendly and privileged relations with states and alliances.

One of the significant strongholds of military neutrality is the economic self-sustainability of the state. The Serbian economy is highly dependent on international financial institutions and investments coming from the NATO countries. That is why the EU and NATO memberships are often linked as logical, although there are no official documents that condition the EU membership with NATO alliance.

Serbia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), banking system, and *the UN Human Development Index* (HDI) are significantly behind Switzerland or Austria, making military neutrality difficult to maintain. Serbia also has a demographic problem of depopulation and economic migration abroad, which significantly affects the operational military power. Serbia's refusal to discuss NATO membership can distance the country from the EU through indirect activities, both by the EU institutions and by the governments of high-impact countries (Germany and France). In the process of Serbia's accession to the EU, any member state may raise the issue of Serbia's membership in NATO as an informal condition for accepting the EU membership. In the event of rejection, another request may arise as a formal requirement, such as the border issue, which would be difficult for Serbia to accept and extend its candidate status for a longer period.

### **Serbia-NATO relations since 1999 and NATO ties with the KLA**

Officially, the conflict between Serbia and NATO arose as a result of exceeding the use of force by Serbian police, military reserve and paramilitary forces in Kosovo and Metohija to counter the emergence and development of terrorism. The interventions targeted the dismantling of the KLA units, which in 1996 carried out several bombings on police stations in Kosovo and Metohija and claimed responsibility for the attacks, thereby declaring it a terrorist organization in Serbia. In many countries, during the NATO bombing, the KLA was portrayed as a guerrilla group<sup>5</sup>. The actions taken and carried out

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<sup>5</sup> Kosovo Liberation Army, 2019.

by the KLA had the characteristics of rebel terrorism. In 1997 and 1998, attacks were extended to members of the regular army of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). The actions were funded by the Albanian diaspora, and no security agency, or organization of a similar type, announced the origin of the money. For such actions to gain the approval of the United States of America (USA), the Albanian diaspora has earmarked large sums of money to fund Albanian lobbyists in the US Congress. It is an organization that has portrayed itself as a liberation movement, but which has also been labeled as "the undoubted terrorist organization" by the US Special Envoy for Kosovo and Metohija Robert Gelbard<sup>6</sup>. In the US media, the KLA has often been labeled as a guerrilla group, but it has also appeared on the lists of classic terrorist organizations, whose units have been legalized by a transition into the *Kosovo Security Corps*, and since 2009 as the *Kosovo Security Force*. Milašinović and Putnik (2007) cite semantic dilemmas, differences, and clarifications regarding the meaning of the term "guerrilla" and emphasize that the terms "guerrilla" and "terrorism" should not be identified or linked. Guerrilla movements (Spanish: *guerrilla* - small war) and organizations are fighting to liberate the occupied territories from foreign forces and the object of their struggle are armed forces, while civilian targets and hostages are not their subjects of interest<sup>7</sup>. Most often, terrorist organizations attack police stations and military facilities, as well as facilities where it is estimated to be more civilian casualties. Activation of explosive devices on civilian objects or vehicles with mass fatalities are characteristic of terrorist organizations in Southwest Asia<sup>8</sup>.

NATO was clearly opposed to the secession of Kosovo before and during the bombing of the FRY and shortly after the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement. In NATO's political body, the bombing aimed at preventing a humanitarian refugee crisis from Kosovo and Metohija and repeating a similar situation as in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992-1995 Civil War. Although Kosovo Albanians were made aware that NATO had no intention of forcibly separating part of the FRY and that NATO supports the sovereignty of the FRY, extreme Albanians wanted to use the NATO-Serbia conflict to realize the goal of creating one more Albanian state on the territory of another

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<sup>6</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Milašinović and Putnik, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> On 16 February 2001, an explosive planted under the road in Livadice near Podujevo was activated at the time when a bus convoy of Serb civilians was passing by. At the time, 12 Serbs were killed and 43 were injured. There was no final court ruling for this attack.

sovereign state with a long-term goal of the unification of all territories where the Albanians are the majority into one state. However, NATO, Western European countries and the USA allowed the KLA to engage them in the war against the FRY using their information on the ground before the airstrikes and during the bombing of Serbia, and thus clearly aligned themselves with the extreme Albanians.

It is unclear what was the US interest in entering into a conflict over NATO with a sovereign state that did not directly or indirectly threaten its interests. Expecting NATO strikes in response to inadequate use of force by Serbian security forces, the KLA launched a large wave of refugees from Kosovo and Metohija towards Albania and other Balkan countries. The exodus was shown on all major international information networks and used as an alibi for a more intensive continuation of NATO airstrikes against military and civilian targets in the FRY. At NATO, they were aware that extreme Albanians would use the refugee crisis to gain the sympathy and compassion of Western countries and thus pave the way for the independence war. Taking into account Milošević's aggressive campaign, NATO and Western powers considered it to be the least bad option<sup>9</sup>. As a result of NATO's war against the FRY, in spite of all relevant UN documents and with great support from the USA and the EU, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008. The world thus began to recognize the independent state of Kosovo, which was declared on the part of the territory of the sovereign state of Serbia (one of the two republics of the FRY). And what failed the Kurds in Southwest Asia succeeded to the Albanians in the Balkans. Separation of the part of the territory of a sovereign state is known in political-geographical theory as secessionism. Even today, in the propaganda of Western media and politicians, Kosovo is considered to be a specific problem and no similar scenario can occur. This attitude has no scientific basis because every territorial-national issue is specific, wherever it occurs. There are many such examples, from Crimea, Northern Cyprus, Catalonia, Palestine to Taiwan, but the United Nations has not been involved in this process. The culmination of geopolitical incorrectness is the demand that Serbia recognizes the independence of the pseudo-state of Kosovo, which was proclaimed in its territory, without its consent.

Since 2006, when Serbia signed a cooperation agreement with NATO and the opening of the NATO Military Liaison Mission in Belgrade, relations

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<sup>9</sup> Allin, 2002.

between Serbia and the North Atlantic Alliance have been steadily improving, both through the Partnership for Peace program and the cooperation in the area of terrestrial security along the administrative borders of Central Serbia and the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija.

In the development of NATO-Serbia relations, the geopolitical problem of Kosovo and Metohija has begun to be an obstacle to NATO's efforts to win Serbia for the Atlantic integration because of the role NATO has accepted as the protector of the "oppressed" people of Kosovo. Now, this role is becoming an increasing burden each year for the implementation of the geostrategic plans of NATO, but Serbia as well. In the long term, NATO would have a more reliable, organizationally and technically capable and equipped member in Serbia than in any other Central Balkan country. Serbia is significant to NATO because of its geostrategic position, educational resources in the Serbian military, institutions cooperating with the military, scientific institutes and dedicated industries. The history of US-Serbian military relations is much longer and of better quality than that between the USA and Albanians. Serbia-US cooperation has always been at the level of state institutions and has not been funded with the money of dubious origin. On the other hand, Albanian lobbying in the US Congress makes sense to the point where the lobbying club, or the State Department, does not recognize that further representation of Albanian interests is in collision with the US interests. Albanian lobbyists are likely to get suspended in the future due to a lack of funding. Suspending lobbying would force Albanians from Kosovo and Metohija to devote themselves more honestly to negotiations with Serbian representatives in finding a lasting agreement on Kosovo and Metohija.

### **The future of Serbia's relations with Russia and the security alternative**

Russia conducts a wise long-term foreign policy and skillfully uses the intelligence of its security structures. It sees Serbia as one of the points of weakness in the Western civilization circle and builds on this the strategy to deter the most important Central Balkan country from full NATO membership.

Combining demotivation activities, the benefits of supplying natural gas and the sale of military assets at the border of operational use, Russia seeks to maintain the vulnerability of peace in the Balkans. This is evident in the presence in the Balkans, but also in the EU itself, and raises the question of the impact of Russia in declaring British society to leave the EU (*British Exit*,

BREXIT). Between BREXIT and Serbia's prevention to access NATO, there is a logical link and a geostrategic parallel. People's friendship has little to do with these processes and falls within the domain of gaining a psychological advantage by acquiring widespread civic support. Besides, Russia is not in the interest of the EU being too weakened because of the foreign investment from the EU and maintenance of a monopoly on energy sales on the Union market. Russia does not wish the strong US influence on the EU and is, therefore, able to afford the Union a good price for energy and raw materials. It is important for Russia to strengthen its presence in the EU as a depreciation zone for military-political relations with the US.

It is important for Russia and the CSTO that Serbia does not join NATO for several reasons. In its relations with Serbia, it uses mechanisms of threats and privileges. If Serbia applies for NATO membership, the Kremlin's threats are about changing its policy towards Kosovo and suspending its arms modernization treaty. If it remains permanently military neutral or expresses a desire to join the CSTO, Serbia can count on a stable supply of the economy with the required quantities of natural gas and the Kremlin's support in the UN Security Council concerning Kosovo. One of the main reasons is the loss of Russia's geopolitical influence in the world and the cessation of the political-geographical crisis and regional political tensions that allow Russia a high level of geopolitical presence and influence on the world map of neuralgic points. No less significant reason is the trade in geopolitical influence by which Russia may pursue other goals or interests. Under certain circumstances, Russia may agree to recognize Kosovo as an independent state if the USA and the EU accept that Crimea is an integral part of Russia and sanctions are lifted on Russia. In the long run, Russia would benefit from this scenario, Serbia would permanently lose Kosovo and Metohija, and the USA and the EU would pursue the long-term aspiration for Kosovo to become a full UN member.

Due to the non-resentment policy towards Russia, it can be interpreted that Serbia has abandoned the principle of sovereignty over the territory by tacit acceptance of Crimea's violent annexation. The principle of territorial sovereignty does not recognize the inconsistency. If Serbia does not recognize Kosovo because it has been torn from its territorial sovereignty without negotiation, then it should also disapprove any annexation or secession around the world, including the one that happened in Crimea. The history of Crimea is complex and Russia has claimed the right to return this peninsula under its sovereignty because Crimea was part of Russia until 1954 when Nikita

Khrushchev separated and annexed it to Ukraine. In 2014, a referendum was held in Crimea without consulting the Ukrainian authorities, in which more than 97% of citizens voted for secession from Ukraine and annexation to Russia. In this crisis, there was no more serious negotiation between the two countries than there was the negotiation of Albanian representatives in Kosovo and Metohija with the Serbian authorities when the declaration of independence from Serbia was adopted at the Kosovo Assembly. On the other hand, the unprincipledness of Russia is reflected in the non-recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, and itself annexed the part of the territory of Ukraine, without any negotiations with the Government of Ukraine. Referring to historical circumstances does not make much sense because in that case, everyone would refer to the historical periods that benefit them most.

Kosovo has been viewed by the western part of the international community as a special case (Latin: *sui generis*), and that there are no similarities to secessionist aspirations in other parts of the world. This argument does not have a foothold in political geography and international law because the same could be argued for all secessionist processes in the world. Moreover, Kosovo was not a federal unit of a state, but a province or a region, such as Provence. Other processes, the secession, and annexation of Crimea, the attempted secession of Catalonia, the separation of South Sudan, etc., have emerged as a result of Kosovo's recognition. The proclamation of an independent Kosovo is, from a political-geographical point of view, illegitimate because the provinces do not have a constitutional right of separation from their home country. Unlike Kosovo, which declared independence in the Assembly, in Catalonia, the Crimea, and South Sudan, referendums were held, with the overwhelming majority opting for separation from their home country. Despite a successful referendum, Catalonia was denied the right to independence, South Sudan was granted independence, and Crimea's annexation to Russia was not recognized by the EU and the USA.

In order to maintain good relations with Russia, Serbia should make a long-term treaty by defining bilateral perspectives and informing the Kremlin administration that Serbia's interest and intention is NATO membership, with the desire to further improve political, economic and cultural relations with Russia. In agreement with NATO, Serbia could avoid installing missile systems and other offensive weapons that could pose a threat to Russia or Belarus. Given the flexibility proclaimed, NATO would probably agree to such a proposal, but Serbia should make some other, less painful, concessions.

It is well known that every geopolitical move Russia carefully considers, the Kremlin does not take swift action and base its diplomacy on strategic priorities. Therefore, Russia would probably not take more rigid measures against Serbia. With negative reactions and possible penalty proceedings, Russia would lose influence in Serbia and the Balkans in the long run, and great powers are reluctant to hand over complete geopolitical power to other forces.

The European Union and the USA are demanding that Serbia support sanctions on Russia over the Ukrainian crisis, and that request is backed by NATO as well. The Serbian government has stated that it does not want to change its policy towards Russia because it is not yet a full member of the EU, and the obligation to impose sanctions applies only to EU members. This attitude can do more harm than good to Serbia. It should have justified its position by arguing the principle of opposition and non-imposition of sanctions to any country in the world because during the 1990s Serbia itself was exposed to inappropriate, lengthy and rigid sanctions. Due to their role in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the UN Security Council Resolution 757<sup>10</sup> from 30 May 1992 introduced to Serbia and the FRY economic, cultural and sports sanctions, which lasted until 1996<sup>11</sup>. The sanctions were reintroduced in 1998 by the EU and USA decisions for allegedly persecuting Albanians from Kosovo and Metohija and undue use of force in preventing terrorist acts. Interestingly, a dozen resolutions punishing Serbia during the 1990s were unanimously adopted by the United Nations Security Council, meaning that the penalties were also backed by the Russian Federation as well. The sanctions were finally abolished after regime changes in Serbia in 2000, and with interruptions lasted about 6 years. The sanctions have delayed the Serbian economy, the standard of living of the population, scientific and technological and cultural development for decades, but have not achieved the expected goals, but have strengthened the totalitarian rule of extremist forces. The damage from the sanctions was never accurately calculated, and the consequences were immeasurable given that the large state-owned companies, which were the engine of the economy, went bankrupt or under bankruptcy proceedings. Serbia's principled stance against the imposition of sanctions

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<sup>10</sup>United Nations Security Council, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 757 was adopted on 30 May 1992 on charges that Serbia, through Yugoslav People's Army, placed itself on the Bosnian Serbs side in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

would apply to all countries of the world and should be promoted as a *primum non nocere* (Latin for "do not harm").

### **Cooperation under the Partnership for Peace program**

The Partnership for Peace is a program that involves NATO's bilateral cooperation with individual non-alliance countries and refers to the empowerment of states to maintain peace based on the principles of voluntary transparency of cooperation. Specific cooperation is achieved through the exchange of information in the field of security and participation in international peacekeeping missions and other activities. Serbia has been a participant of the Partnership for Peace program since December 2006, when more mutually beneficial agreements were concluded with NATO. One of the most significant is the *Individual Partnership Action Plan* (IPAP)<sup>12</sup>. This document was also adopted by NATO in 2015 when its implementation began. The agreement allows partners to exchange information, protect classified information, cooperate within the *Science for Peace and Security* program (SPS).

NATO-Serbia cooperation under IPAP is planned and adopted for the periods of three-years. Progress in almost all areas of cooperation has been reported so far. The SOFA agreement was also signed in 2014, which legally regulates the transit and deployment of military forces and effective NATO member states through the territory of Serbia. The 2006 SOFA agreement was signed with the USA, enabling successful cooperation between the Serbian Army and the Ohio National Guard.

The Partnership Individual Action Plan emphasized that Serbia intends to conduct a comprehensive and active information campaign on key defense reform issues and the scope and benefits of Serbia's cooperation with NATO under the Partnership for Peace program. The proclaimed goals related to objectively informing the citizens about the nature of cooperation with NATO in Serbia have been seldom implemented. On the contrary, there is a noticeable campaign by some state officials against the cooperation with NATO and an emphasis on defense cooperation with Russia. As a result of ignoring the agreed plan, there is an increase in the number of opinion polls opposed to Serbia's NATO membership.

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<sup>12</sup> Radosavljević, 2017.

Public opinion on major social issues can be shaped in many ways, depending on the use of information resources that have the power to shape or change opinion in particular educational groups of the population. In the case of Serbia-NATO relations, the political structures opt for two variants: the first, to adapt to public opinion in order to achieve a favorable election result, shaping accordingly its position, and the second, to change public opinion following the political party objectives. Neither of these options is favorable to Serbia's long-term strategy. It is necessary to open a lengthy public expert discussion on the benefits Serbia would gain from NATO membership to objectively consider the possible consequences of that membership. National policy in the field of accession to military and military-political alliances should be harmonized in the framework of strategic documents, which should be designed by scientific institutes, faculties, and departments in this scientific field. The National Assembly should adopt a coherent strategy proposed by the competent institutions, and the executive government should implement this strategy in stages.

National Assembly declarations of military neutrality or membership of an organization reflect the superficiality of governing structures. Not all MPs can be expected to have a comprehensive view of long-term national interests. Often MPs have primary political party interests, and MPs vote per the political party discipline and are often driven by some short-term personal goals and ambitions. The decision of whether a country should be militarily neutral cannot be made by the individual or political structure currently in power since such an approach is characteristic of countries without entrenched democracy. Political parties and coalitions in power should pursue policies that are designed with strategic documents. The only difference is what dynamics and models will be used by the current government when implementing the policy defined in the national strategy papers. The most significant benefits that Serbia would gain from NATO membership are the following:

1. Security of state territory and population from attacks by other countries and organizations (primarily NATO members in Serbia's neighborhood);
2. Reconciliation with the countries Serbia conflicted the 1990s;
3. Protection of the population and institutions from terrorist activities;
4. Standardization and modernization of Serbia's defense system with the assistance of NATO institutions under favorable conditions;
5. Integration of the Defense System into the NATO Defense Structures Network;
6. Possibility of the presence of the Serbian army within KFOR forces;

7. Scientific and technological development in the domain of the defense industry;
8. Security of placement of combat assets on the market of NATO members and other countries;
9. Ability to resolve regional geopolitical misunderstandings within NATO institutions;
10. Guarantees of greater security of foreign capital in the country and significantly higher investments in the economy;
11. More favorable credit rating due to greater security of capital and opportunities related to membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO);
12. Faster and more relaxed EU accession process;
13. Extended and deepened cooperation with other NATO member countries in the field of training and education of the military members in reputable institutions;
14. Possibility to influence the decisions related to Serbia's strategic partners, which cannot be NATO members, within NATO;
15. Scientific and technical cooperation in the civil sector;
16. Harmonization and adoption of new procedures in civil protection;

The disadvantages of Serbia's eventual NATO membership should also be highlighted. The most important are the following:

1. Military-technical cooperation with Russia would have to be reduced;
2. Initially, significant investments would be needed in the modernization and harmonization of weapons, tools, and equipment according to NATO standards;
3. Harmonization of individual decisions in the field of defense with NATO institutions (principle of limited sovereignty that applies to all members);
4. Greater commitments regarding participation in combat operations and peacekeeping missions worldwide.

With a balanced approach and objective consideration of the benefits of Serbia's NATO membership, the perception of public opinion would begin to change. It would then highlight the benefits of Serbia's NATO membership. In a relatively short period, the public opinion of a significant part of the population would also change and the country's reputation would be at a much higher level. Surveys conducted by Ninamedia Research for the Institute of European Affairs in March 2019 showed that 79% of respondents did not support Serbia's NATO membership. The study was conducted on a sample of 1207 subjects. The negative attitude towards membership was mainly caused

by the educational structure and insufficient awareness of the benefits of NATO membership. Out of the total number of respondents, 52% were respondents without any school, with incomplete primary education, or with the second and third level of secondary education. With 4 years of vocational and high school education completed, there were 31% of the respondents, while only 17% of those with higher and faculty education. Interestingly, when asked if they know that Serbia has the highest status of a NATO partner country since 2015 and had 109 joint military exercises with NATO and NATO members in the last 7 years, 57% of the respondents said no<sup>13</sup>. This result indicates insufficient information on current forms of cooperation between Serbia and NATO. The low educational level of the population and the negative attitude of the state administration representatives on Serbia's membership in NATO explains the high percentage of the respondents who say no to the questions raised about Serbia's NATO membership. Despite the currently negative attitude of the public on Serbia's membership of NATO, the administration institutions are obligated to follow the interests of the state, regardless of the public support, or the opinion of certain persons from the state administration. Cooperation under the Partnership for Peace program empowers Serbia to develop regional cooperation and security initiatives through the Centre for Regional Security Cooperation (RACVIAC), whose main tasks are arms control in Southeast Europe, security dialogue and assistance in Euro-Atlantic integration.

## **Discussion**

Prior to the adoption of the Parliamentary Declaration on Serbia's Military Neutrality, there was no scientific analysis of the geopolitical consequences of such a decision. The Declaration of Military Neutrality has, in a sense, affected the indifference of many European countries on the occasion of Kosovo's Declaration of Independence not more than 2 months after its adoption (the Kosovo Assembly declared independence on 17 February 2008). Later, the declaration was used as a variable category in relations with the EU and Russia in order to gain a more favorable position in international relations at a particular geopolitical moment. A policy of loose and volatile military neutrality can bring some short-term benefits to Serbia,

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<sup>13</sup> Institute for European Affairs, 2019.

but because of its unprincipled attitude to significant global geopolitical issues, Serbia risks being labeled a country that does not have its foreign policy principles, since military neutrality is used to pursue short-term national and political party interests.

Public opinion polls on Serbia's NATO membership stratified by education level have shown that the largest number of residents expressing a negative view of Serbia's NATO membership belongs to the lowest education level. On the one hand, there are significantly more citizens of typically unfinished elementary education who have supported the right-wing political parties in Serbia and who have been in power for some time since 2000<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand, few citizens support political options for civic orientation (about 10%). They are mainly distinguished by the higher education and openness of Serbia's membership in NATO. The respondents who support conservative and right-wing options oppose Serbia's NATO membership, citing the bombing of Serbia and the intention not to disrupt relations with Russia and therefore support military neutrality. Attitudes of the population are often influenced by the attitudes of political structures, and often these attitudes are contrary to the state interests. Negative attitudes have been suggested by political organizations and prominent individuals. The government should not pursue state policy based on the public opinion of citizens but implement a state strategy defined based on the long-term interests of the state. Primary and secondary education is predominant in the educational structure of the population and one cannot expect such a majority to think prominently about state interests.

Consistent adherence to the results of public opinion implies that the less educated population generates the position of state representatives about opposition to NATO membership. Decisions that are not multi-layered and geostrategically thought out can produce long-term consequences for the geopolitical interests of the state. On this basis, it can be concluded that neutrality was declared in a hasty, reckless and affective manner.

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<sup>14</sup> From 2000 to March 2003 (until the assassination of the first democratically elected Prime Minister, Zoran Djindjić), the moderate Left was in cohabitation with the right-wing president. From 2003 to 2012, the moderate Right (Democratic Party of Serbia) and the Civic Left (Democratic Party) with the participation of smaller parties took part or rotated in power. Since 2012, the dominant Right has emerged in power, emerging from the wings of a national-chauvinist political organization, which opposes any debate on Serbia's NATO membership and advocates unconditional cooperation with Russia.

Opponents of the Atlantic integration in Serbia often argue for energy dependence on Russia, friendship with Russia, and the same religious affiliation. It is necessary to realistically look at the price of energy imported from Russia by Serbia and to analyze how Russia realizes its interests in Serbia by using the energy dependency position and using the veto in the UN Security Council. Germany also imports gas from Russia, but Russia does not influence German policy, even on the contrary, Germany significantly influences Russian economic policy. Serbia is not as economically strong as Germany, nevertheless, Serbia should pursue its interests and implement long-term geostrategic decisions, instead of subordinating itself to individual great powers. Serbia, on the other hand, receives military aircraft and tools that are at the limit of usability and whose servicing often exceeds the real cost of the asset itself. Information is provided to the public about the value of gifts of military aircrafts, helicopters and other funds received from the Russian Federation in order to give the impression that Serbia has weapons capable of repelling a possible military attack. The operational capability of these military aircrafts is at an unsatisfactory level of usability of the modern army due to obsolescence, costly overhaul, and maintenance, and fuel consumption is significantly higher than that of recent generations of combat aircrafts. Besides, Serbia has a poor experience in conflict with NATO when hundreds of NATO military aircrafts were active during the Alliance's airstrikes during the spring of 1999. The question is whether Serbia could, in a new conflict with a NATO member, provide more resistance with a fleet of up to 15 fighter jets and several helicopters.

Phraseological terms such as "fraternal country", "fraternal people" and the like are often used in Serbia's relations with Russia. The foreign policy of a country should not be based and planned on the phrases and statements of exposed government officials or other public figures. Culturally, historically, and in the way of life, Serbia does not belong to the Eastern civilization circle. The culture and lifestyle of Serbia and Russia are much more different than the Serbian public is aware of. There are not many similarities in the daily life of the population of the Urals, Western Siberia, or the Far East of Russia with the habits of the population of Belgrade, or Šumadia. On the other hand, cultural and lifestyle habits, the consumer lifestyle of the Serbian population is almost indistinguishable from the lifestyles of the peoples of Central and Western Europe. The Orthodox religion cannot be used as an argument for turning from the west and moving closer to Russia. Serbia has been a secular state for

centuries, and the geostrategic orientation of the state does not depend on the attitude of the church. The state addresses the church only on religious issues. All other issues such as integration processes, borders, population policy, etc. should not depend on the opinions of church institutions and the personalities representing the church. Apart from these arguments, it is important to recall that during the 1990s, Russia voted about ten times in the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Serbia. The arguments of domestic and Russian officials that this was a time when Boris Yeltsin did not want to resent the Western countries were not persuasive, as these were decisions of the Russian Federation. Serbia should not emphasize and criticize past decisions but should take them into account when pursuing its long-term geostrategic interests and aligning its foreign policy with the EU foreign policy.

Serbia's membership to the CSTO, as a security alternative to NATO, would produce certain benefits, but the political, geographical, economic and security consequences would be multiple. By joining this alliance, Serbia could expect more generous weapons assistance, but instead of deterrence, it would, with the great help of the USA, increase its neighborhood armaments activity. Becoming a member of the CSTO would automatically mean suspending the EU membership and probably putting off the power of all NATO projects. By abandoning the EU, Serbia would lose the new investment, face a large decline in living standards, and most current investors from Western Europe would withdraw their capital. Serbia would be in a difficult economic situation again and would lose its patiently built partnerships with Western Europe and the USA. Membership in the CSTO would worsen the political-geographical position, new demands for secessionism would emerge, and the far-right forces in the country would be strengthened because of the Western countries' open support to Kosovo, which would likely be supported in its efforts to unite with Albania, a NATO member state. Due to national differences and geostrategic choices, entity relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina would become even more complex. In this way, the Central Balkans would become a place of great risk of new war conflicts and an area of more intense population outflow. Serbia would probably be suspended without a visa regime, economic emigration would be more intense and more extensive, and in the long run, some sanctions would probably be put in place again.

One of the significant problems of Serbia's national orientation is that there is no general social agreement on the development of a long-term geostrategic plan, which would be implemented by all major political

organizations. Instead, *ad hoc* decisions are made depending on the current geopolitical situation, and often the most significant decisions are made by the leader currently in power.

In addition to the aforementioned arguments on military neutrality related to Russia's neglect and NATO aggression in 1999, the arguments such as large material expenditures for adapting weapons and military equipment to NATO standards, cooperation in NATO bodies with countries which recognized the independence of Kosovo and the like, have been also mentioned. The above arguments are not convincing and can be classified into technical and procedural issues. NATO is helping new members standardize the military system, and it is a process that is going on for decades. The main argument why Serbia should join the NATO Alliance is to improve a distinctly negative political-geographical and military-strategic position.

After Northern Macedonia's NATO membership, Serbia, with Bosnia and Herzegovina (membership depends on the Republika Srpska's stance), will be the only Balkan state not part of the North Atlantic Alliance. Serbia is therefore in a complete environment of this military-political alliance, which carries great uncertainty about its territorial integrity and the risk of a new conflict with the most powerful military organization in the history of the world. A possible conflict or appropriate military response to the attack by some of the lesser NATO members would lead to conflict with the entire alliance. In such circumstances, Serbia is led to believe that it must bear provocations and must not enter into the slightest conflict with the members of the alliance. Russia, though declaring itself a friend and protector, would certainly not enter into a conflict with NATO over Serbia, as its interests are more closely related to NATO member states, and during the 1999 war, Russia stayed on sending verbal support to Serbia and condemning NATO.

If Serbia were a member of NATO, all possible disagreements would be resolved by consensus within the Alliance, both politically and expertly. In economic terms, Serbia is dependent on the EU, whose patron is NATO. EU support to the Serbian economy through investment, trade and industrial development, after decades of wandering, has made the national economy compatible with the EU economies. Any conflict would hinder any development and the rapid decay of the economy would start, as large companies employing tens of thousands of workers would withdraw from Serbia and the economy would stop. It is a misconception that in the event of a crisis, NATO would not attack Serbia because member states have their

companies in Serbia. Multinational companies are rapidly transforming depending on labor and cheap energy, and this argument is likely to be wrong.

When it comes to changing the attitude on military neutrality, the Declaration of Military Neutrality should not be dogmatized. Any new convocation of the National Assembly may repeal a resolution already adopted, or a new resolution can be voted to annul a previously adopted document. The new constitution should define military-political orientations.

Serbia-NATO relations have reached the stage where the two sides need to open new talks on further cooperation. By acquiring a series of geostrategic and geopolitical circumstances, perhaps against its interests, NATO has become the protector of Kosovo. Extreme Albanians from Kosovo manage to abuse and use NATO to achieve their century-old goals, while NATO has no greater use of such activity. The question remains how long NATO will support Kosovo as an independent state and how long it will take for Albanians to fake friendship by pointing out NATO and US flags, although we know that friendship is laden with American suspicion if one knows the relationship of influential individuals from the Albanian national corps towards issues of Islamic extremism. There is still misunderstanding in Serbia regarding the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by the USA, given that the USA had a very negative experience of secessionism when, in 1861, 11 federal states initiated the process of forming the Confederation, which led to the beginning of the American Civil War.

Based on the experience of the Western countries with Kosovo and the rejection of the recommendations of the Washington administration and the European Commission regarding trade taxes towards Serbia, it can be assumed that the major powers of the West and NATO will require Kosovo to accept the recommendations or relations with Kosovo will be subject to thorough review. Serbia should pursue a consistent, positive and recognizable policy towards NATO, which is the path to stable partnership and membership.

As the first contractual form of cooperation between Serbia and the most important NATO member, the SOFA agreement was signed as a bilateral document between Serbia and the USA, ratified by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in 2006. This document regulates the presence of military structures of a NATO member state on the territory of Serbia, which establishes military cooperation between Serbia and the USA. This agreement was the forerunner of IPAP, adopted by Serbia in 2014. One of the most

significant results is the continuation of successful cooperation between the Ohio Guard and the Serbian Armed Forces (*Serbia-Ohio State Partnership Program*). In addition to the aforementioned agreements, the NSPO (*NATO Support and Procurement Organization*) Agreement was signed and ratified, and the Law on Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the NATO Support and Cooperation Organization was adopted<sup>15</sup>. It was not until 2014 that the SOFA agreement with other NATO members was ratified in the National Assembly.

The backbone of Serbia-NATO cooperation is the bilateral relations between Serbia and the USA, which are still burdened by the unresolved issue of Kosovo and Metohija. Good relations between Serbia and the USA are not appropriate for the Kosovo Albanians, because in such a constellation they would lose the status of the 'Balkan victim'. Therefore, Serbia should not give up cooperation and enhancement of bilateral relations with the USA due to the Kosovo crisis or relations with Russia. In the case of conditionality by Russia, Serbia should improve military-political and economic relations with the USA. Only by developing these relationships can the US administration be able to adjust its position on the Kosovo issue. Serbia-US military cooperation confirmed through the alliance in the Balkan wars, both world wars, in joint missions and peacetime.

The end of the second decade and the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century is the period when Serbia should make a historically significant decision on NATO membership. A positive decision to join NATO would finally place the country in a modern and economically prosperous part of the world.

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<sup>15</sup> National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, 2016.

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