

# Serbia and its foreign policy alignment after the war in Ukraine

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## Summary

*The war in Ukraine has resulted in an increased demand for candidate countries to align with the EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP). Given its special partnership with Russia and internal political dynamics, Serbia's alignment with the EU's foreign policy declarations and restrictive measures significantly decreased in 2022. There is no real incentive for Serbia to harmonize its foreign policy with the EU, however, assistance from the EU to gradually reduce Belgrade's dependency on Russia might be beneficial to trigger a higher degree of alignment in the long-run.*

## Old problem, increased attention

The war in Ukraine has given the enlargement policy new attention, and, what is more visible, heightened already existing problems. One of these issues is the insufficient alignment of Serbia with the EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP), foreign policy declarations, and restrictive measures. The contractual obligation that aspiring member states must align with EU policies, values, and stances also on foreign policy matters is not a novelty; those have always been part of individual negotiating frameworks. The EU thus rightfully expects its candidate countries—Serbia included—to harmonize their foreign policies in accordance with EU common positions if they wish to move ahead with accession. What has changed since February 2022 is that there is an increased awareness—and, to a certain extent, demand—from EU institutions and member states to have Belgrade aligned with the EU CFSP, especially concerning Russia.

Serbia's non-alignment with foreign policy declarations and restrictive measures against Russia (and China) has not created but exacerbated an already existing and well-known problem. In practical terms, it gives an additional reason for some member states (ie. Poland, the Baltics, Finland) to object or at least criticize the country's advancement towards EU membership and to propose the suspension of EU funds (Germany) or visa-free regime (the Netherlands) with Serbia. The policy paper examines the internal and external dynamics, and roots of Serbia's non-alignment stances as well as offers

recommendations through which the country might be incentivized to have a better alignment with the EU CFSP.

## Volatile, but pragmatic: Serbia's alignment with EU CFSP

Alignment with EU CFSP has always been a requirement for candidate countries but has received more political attention since February 2022, especially the foreign policy declarations and restrictive measures against Russia (and Belarus). The EU institutions and member states thus did not shy away from echoing their increased expectations toward Serbia in this field either. The European Commission in its annual Serbia 2022 Report notes that the country must progressively align with EU foreign policy declarations. Although the term “progressively” has not been defined, one can assume that the country must perform better in its alignment year by year, avoiding setbacks. The Council in its most recent conclusions also notes that it “deeply regrets Serbia’s backsliding in alignment (...), notably the non-alignment with EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus” and urged Belgrade that harmonisation of its foreign policy with the EU CFSP must be the “utmost priority” of the country.

Serbia’s alignment with the EU’s foreign policy declarations and restrictive measures has been volatile but pragmatic. The country did—as the Commission’s report expects—progressively (gradually) align with the EU CFSP in the past in terms of ratio; for example, its rate of alignment slightly improved from 56 to 61 percent last year. The reason for Serbia’s (un)willingness to harmonize its foreign policy in accordance with EU is, in fact, highly dependent on the actors—namely Russia and China—that are in the centre of those declarations. In years when the EU did not issue many foreign policy declarations concerning these two Eastern powers, Serbia did improve its alignment ratio. The significant drop (from 64 to 45 percent) in alignment this year can be explained by the fact that the EU issued overwhelmingly Russia-centred declarations.

The foreign policy of Serbia is also driven by pragmatism and a high level of discipline. This consistency characterizes Belgrade’s stances on foreign policy issues related to the so-called strategic partners of Serbia: even before this February, Serbia did not align with EU

declarations that introduced restrictive measures (ie. sanctions) against Moscow or Beijing. On the other hand, in the broader context of Kosovo, Serbia has always condemned Russia's actions against Ukraine's sovereignty and advocated for Kyiv's territorial integrity in international for alike.

It is thus not surprising that Serbia did not align with most Russia-related foreign policy declarations. As the EU heavily focused on condemning Russia since February by issuing foreign policy declarations, the decreased level of Serbia's alignment should not have come as a surprise as it was expected that Belgrade would continue – although more carefully – its multi-vectored foreign policy.

### Can internal dynamics be changed (by the EU)?

Dependency on Russia in internal politics greatly impacts Serbia's willingness to align with foreign policy declarations that condemn or introduce restrictive measures against Moscow. Belgrade is dependent on Russia mainly in two important fields: energy security (being almost 90 percent dependent on Russian gas) and Kosovo. Moreover, a significant part of the Serbian electorate sympathises with Russia (54 percent considers Moscow an ally to their country); this is heightened by the rhetoric of political elites and the widespread Russian discourse in (government-affiliated) media. Although these pro-Russian sentiments could rather be explained as strong criticisms toward the West, one cannot expect the society to change their mind-set overnight.

At the same time, as the EU is losing its normative power and leverage in the Western Balkans and is not able to offer a credible enlargement policy either. In these circumstances, we cannot expect Serbia to strive for foreign policy alignment in a speedy manner, especially given its above-mentioned dependency on Russia. Even if fully aligned with the EU's foreign policy directions, that does not mean that the country would be closer to EU membership. Alignment is just one policy field where Serbia is underperforming and now subjected to stronger criticism as the result of the war in Ukraine. Having complete harmonisation with the EU CFSP, however, would not solve Serbia's ongoing political and structural problems.

Under these circumstances, this is difficult to expect a better foreign policy alignment from Serbia in the near future. The lack of EU leverage, however, could be “compensated” by placing a greater emphasis on the fields that are exposed to Russian influence/dependency. By supporting Serbia’s energy diversification—i.e. providing financial assistance to the Serbian-Bulgarian natural gas interconnector—could positively impact the country’s efforts to not be that heavily reliant on Russian fossil fuels. Secondly, being a credible mediator to the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue and brokering an agreement could potentially decrease Moscow’s leverage over Belgrade. Thirdly, countering Russian discourses in local media by strengthening the EU’s own visibility in the public can help citizens to be better informed about the role of the EU in Serbia. The largest obstacle in this idyllic scenario remains, however, the Serbian leadership’s willingness (or reluctance) to embrace and engage with the EU agenda, not only on a superficial level. It does not seem that even such watershed moment like the war in Ukraine was able to trigger a comprehensive change in the foreign policy discourse of Belgrade.

## Conclusions

Harmonisation with EU CFSP will remain a crucial element of the accession process while non-alignment will serve as a well-grounded reason for some member states to block accession path of candidate countries. Until the EU can offer a visible enlargement path (not just to Serbia but in overall to the Western Balkans), there would be little to no incentives to trigger changes in foreign policy discourse either. The EU can, on the other hand, proactively support Serbia in decreasing its dependency on Russia in the energy sector and by making tangible steps towards a comprehensive agreement between Belgrade and Pristina—if the Serbian leadership is willing to go down this road.

The main problem, however, remains unresolved: even if fully aligned with the EU CFSP, Serbia cannot expect speedier integration, and non-alignment is only one of the (structural) issues the country is being criticised for. Understanding the rationale behind Belgrade’s actions (both in internal and external politics) ought to be the first step in triggering change.

## Recommendations

- 1) Take the interests of (potential) candidate countries into account in EU foreign policy matters alike. Consultations prior issuing foreign policy declarations should include the Western Balkan states; this would also give Serbia a platform to rationalize its foreign policy directions.
- 2) Understand the foreign policy strategy of Serbia and internal political dynamics. Member states (and the EU) cannot expect a 180-degree shift overnight. Impatiently repeating the need for complete harmonisation (and embracing the possibility of restrictive measures because of Serbia's non-alignment) will be counterproductive and would be in favour of external powers.
- 2) Better alignment requires a credible enlargement policy. Even if fully aligned, Serbia – given its additional problems – would not get closer to the EU. The incentive to trigger in-depth changes must be (re)created first.
- 4) Reduce factors that enable Russian influence, including energy dependency, the question of Kosovo and media landscape. As for the later, political elites and government-affiliated media must showcase the EU and its (financial, technical) assistance in a better light.

## About EUROPEUM

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