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## **Fostering Dissent: Analyzing Russian Rhetorical Strategies in Fomenting a Negative Image of the EU in Serbia**

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Fostering Dissent: Analyzing Russian Rhetorical Strategies in Fomenting a Negative Image of  
the EU in Serbia

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B.A International Studies, Global Affairs Track

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## Abstract

As authoritarian regimes work to manipulate perceptions of democracy and frame themselves as an alternative, an in-depth analysis of image building is necessary to advance our understanding of world politics. Russia has served as a perpetrator in Serbia's increasingly negative perceptions of the European Union. Through tactics such as political rhetoric, demonstrated through the Russian Foreign Ministry, Russia has carried out an information campaign with the intent to shift public attitudes towards the EU. This thesis evaluates the rhetorical strategies used by the Russian Foreign Ministry to project a negative image of the EU whilst illuminating an ideal image of Russia. By analyzing statements, interviews, conferences, and briefings carried out by the Russian Foreign Ministry regarding Serbia, I uncovered five themes centered on anti-EU rhetoric and pro-Russian image framing. An analysis of rhetoric noted a surge in anti-EU rhetoric following the EU Council's Conclusions on the Enlargement and Stabilization and Association Process. Authoritarian regimes such as Russia have taken advantage of these gaps, in addition to already growing anti-EU sentiment in Serbia, to shift Serbia away from its EU ambitions. These findings have implications for our understanding of political communication and international relations. In order to prevent mass public opinion shift in Serbia that could undermine democracy, the EU and Serbia must foster a cooperative negotiation process. In addition, the EU should assist in initiatives to promote rule of law and democracy in Serbia whilst countering Russian propaganda carried out in the region.

## Introduction

The place between Moscow and the West, and democracy and autocracy, is not a comfortable one. This reality has slowly begun to realize itself in Serbia since the start of its process of attaining EU membership in 2012. An EU accession process marked by miscommunication, lack of cooperation, and unfulfilled promises has diminished a large part of Serbia's ambitions to join the political union. In 2020, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić told the Serbian people, "European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairytale on paper" (Kavalski, 2021). The European task has long since been associated with democratization, stability, and prosperity, but the Serbian reality has been different. Harsh conditions in the EU process, unique to previous EU accession processes, constitute wavering approval of the EU amongst Serbs alike. EU accession has been proven difficult for Serbia. On the one hand, the EU is unsatisfied with Serbia over its noncooperative nature in terms of negotiations and gaps. On the other, Serbs have had to grapple with opposing views on conditions set by the EU for negotiations (Radeljić, 2014).

Serbian support for EU accession is integral to the candidate state's admission into the union. Yet, wavering support, as well as growing negative perceptions of the EU in Serbia, present a large gap in the admission process. Serbia's EU accession process has become a strain on its relationship with the union, but not without additional voices projecting a negative image of the democratic union. These gaps are threatened by authoritarian regimes seeking to turn the tide in the Balkan nation. Coercion, image making, and narrative building constitute the foreign policies of many authoritarian states, including Russia. A broader part of Russia's soft power tactics in Serbia includes advancement of harsh, critical statements of the EU in the Serbian context to project a negative rendering of the union. The Russian Foreign Ministry has

broadcasted the EU as an opponent of Serbia, in addition to projecting a preferred image of Russia. Through public statements, interviews, news conferences, and briefings centered on Serbia, rhetoric on the European Union has soared dramatically following crucial steps in the Serbian-EU dialogue. The most notable demonstration follows the European Council's Conclusions on the Serbia's EU accession, which concluding with urges to the Serbian government to fulfill missing condition requirements whilst scarcely recognizing Serbia's achievements.

In what ways does Russia seek to skew the perception of the European Union in Serbia? An analysis of Russian rhetoric before and after the Council Conclusions reveals a significant shift in its EU image building. The year after the Council Conclusions in 2021 demonstrated a sharp increase in anti-EU rhetoric. Through a deeper exploration of rhetoric, new narratives of the EU were also introduced that harm perceptions of the European Union. Russia's participation in the negative dialogue surrounding the EU in Serbia is a gambit to retain influence in its longstanding partner. This study contributes to political science literature by uncovering the strategic use of rhetorical devices as a soft power tactic by an authoritarian state to maintain and elevate influence in a politically vulnerable state.

These findings have far-reaching policy implications. Potential long-term implications could include a revised geopolitical orientation in Serbia that threaten its neighboring EU. To counter this, the EU and Serbia must reassess its accession negotiations in order to promote cooperation and foster positive relations. In addition, the EU should take initiative in implementing programs and strategies to promote democracy and rule of law in the region so as to prevent Serbia from leaning away from democratic principles into authoritarianism.

## Literature Review

### Soft Power & Authoritarian Regimes

Scholars have sought to understand the ever-changing politics of the global sphere. Joseph Nye's foundational text, "Soft Power," defined a new aspect of power politics in the modern global order. Nye (1990, 2011) coined a new global phenomenon, labeled soft power, as the search by foreign actors for power over outcomes. According to Nye, soft power is how one country persuades another to align its desires with their national interests. The emergence of "new power resources," such as effective communication and multilateral institutions are more relevant in contemporary times. As the restructuring of the political realm after the Cold War meant that the great powers could not utilize traditional tactics to seize power and influence, soft power became a new method for states to enact change across borders. In essence, soft power represents the capacity of one state to persuade another to want what it wants (Nye, 1990). Experts in international relations have turned to authoritarian regimes to understand its strategies of soft power in the modern world. Pioneers in authoritarianism research have raised concerns over contemporary attempts to undermine democracy and democratic institutions (Puddington, 2017; Walker & Wahlers, 2017). According to experts, authoritarian regimes invest in soft power tactics to sway global public opinion and compete with democratic institutions (Walker, 2016). In their research, Puddington contended that modern autocrats seek to defend and propagate themselves through tactics such as media control, propaganda, economic openness, and more. Puddington observed that authoritarian regimes exploit the democratic liberties of other states by infusing propaganda and misinformation campaigns into the general public. Utilizing means of "isolation, confusion, and demoralizing" of its targets influences the public perception and its political choices to align with the regime's interests (Puddington, 2017). Walker and Wahlers

drew similar conclusions, maintaining that authoritarian regimes devote resources to reshape outside public perception through state-backed capabilities, international media outlets, and other methods of outreach. Their analysis largely focused on authoritarian regimes' utilization of media infrastructure to discredit Western societies while projecting the preferred rendering of their own regimes (Walker & Wahlers, 2017).

Scholars have focused on persuasion as a critical aspect of soft power (Brady, 2015; Schatz, 2008). In his study on Kazakhstan, Schatz concluded that authoritarian regimes rely on persuasion through image-making to advance their legitimacy and undermine democracy and the plausibility of alternatives to skeptical publics. He asserted that authoritarian regimes must engage in international perceptions in order to propagate preferred perceptions of the regime and undercut other political bodies. In the matter of authoritarian regimes, Russia has been a leading contender in soft power efforts to undermine democracy beyond its borders.

One study revealed the public relations and political communications tactics in Russia's foreign policy for image building and projection in the West (Feklyunin, 2008). Other experts have focused on the Russian interest in image perception of the West (Ajir & Vaillant, 2018). Ajir and Vaillant, in their observation, categorized three methods of anti-Western image perception both domestically and internationally: state-funded global social media networks, control of Western media, and direct lobbying of Western society. Like Puddington, Ajir and Vaillant credited relative openness of Western media for the surge in Russia's propaganda offensive. These tactics destabilize the West in order to consolidate Russia's power and "lost greatness" abroad (Ajir & Vaillant, 2018). Destabilization has also been studied as a strategic policy that repressive governments utilize to reshape how the world views democracy and democratic institutions. Walker labeled destabilization as a containment effort, backing his



claims with Russia's destabilization of Ukraine through encouraging separatism in the east. In his analysis, he argued that fostering a "spirit of disruption" and "an obstruction" to democratic successes served as a tactic of raising public doubts about democracies (Walker, 2015).

### **Russian Influence Campaigns Beyond its Borders**

Multiple experts observed Russia's soft power strategies to implement image perception in Africa. Experts have observed a shift of Russian public diplomacy from commercial interests to geopolitical interests (Sidiropoulos & Alden, 2019; Siegle, 2021). One scholar, Joseph Siegle, considered Russia's key interests in Africa as a way to counterbalance Western influence. Utilizing asymmetrical tactics, Russia inherently destabilizes the region in order to undermine governments, incentivize social polarization, and advance its own interests. In the cases of Libya, heavy criticism of the West, the UN, and other Western institutions were pushed through social media. Siegle also found that Russia utilized media sites for negative image-building of Mali's former colonial powers such as France. In addition, Russian disinformation campaigns have been detected in Angola, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe (Siegle, 2021). Sidiropoulos and Alden contended that Africa represents "fertile ground" for Russia's need to ensure global influence (Sidiropoulos & Alden, 2019). Matusevich linked Russian foreign policy in Africa to a collective effort to project an image of itself as an alternative to the West (Matusevich, 2019). Other scholars have defined Russian policy in Africa as two pillars: economic access to international markets and promoting Russian hegemony in the geopolitical sphere (Babić, 2022; Pham, 2014).

Through observing Russia's foreign policy incentives in Africa, similarities can be identified with policy approaches in other regions such as the Balkans. There has by no means been an exhaustive study on modern Russian soft power tactics in the Balkans, especially as a tactic to undermine democratic institutions and promote Russia's image. However, recent studies are becoming more prevalent as Russian involvement in the region steadfastly grows (Lynch, 2001; Bieri, 2015). Asya Metodieva studied the utilization of Russian narrative proxies in the Western Balkans to promote and sway public opinion to view Russia as a political, military, and economic alternative to the West. Metodieva also found Russia as a key source of Euro-Atlantic and NATO skepticism in Serbia, as it attempts to build relations with local disinformation actors. In her report, Metodieva found an increase in anti-EU rhetoric in Serbia following the annexation of Crimea (Metodieva, 2019). Arlinda Rrustemi also observed Russia's image building as an alternative to Western dominance through means such as funding paramilitary organizations and disinformation campaigns through mass media (Rrustemi, 2020). Ultimately, there is a growing scholarly recognition of Russia's influencing campaigns and consolidation of soft power in the Balkans to push its national interests and undermine democracy.

The literature of Russian soft power and image building is evidently extensive and excellently supported through case studies in Africa, Ukraine, or the Balkans. Scholars have mutually agreed on Russia's attempts to undermine the West and other democratic institutions, as well as alleviate its own perceptions in other states in order to elevate its prestige and present itself as an alternative to the West. However, much of the scholarship on Russian soft power initiatives aimed at undermining the West fails to present the subjugation of the EU in such efforts. The EU, also a democratic body, is not excluded from Russia's influencing campaigns abroad, and is undermined in multiple contexts. Additionally, the role of rhetoric in official

statements and dialogue as a component of Russia's soft power is severely understudied in the context of negative image building. In contrast, the majority of scholarship has covered soft power initiatives such as media propaganda and economic cooperation. Russia's influence campaigns extend beyond the media and retain a presence in its political dialogue with its targeted state. In this study, I aim to reveal the role of political rhetoric in undermining the EU in the Russian Foreign Ministry's public dialogue on Serbia. While Russia is unlikely to implement hard power tactics to prevent EU membership, Russia's anti-EU rhetoric could have implications on the shift of public support for EU membership in Serbia, thus sabotaging its accession process.

## **Historical Overview**

### **Russian Foreign Policy**

The global order following the end of the Cold War saw a democratic transition amongst multiple actors and thus a shift in dynamics amongst the global powers (Chansa-Ngavej & Kim, 2021; Haerpfer et al., 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2005). Amid the world's democratization, Russia seeks to retain status as an influential contender on the geopolitical stage (Macfarlane 2006). While the West still maintains significant influence in world affairs, other contenders, such as Russia, are working diligently to contest the order of influence. Russia is currently the third most powerful country, following behind China and the U.S. (Thibault Spirlet, Sinéad Baker, n.d.) Russia's foreign policy approach has reflected its intention to shift the international order towards a more multipolar reality. While the current label of Russia as a resurgent power is debated, patterns in its foreign policy suggest Russian efforts to maintain influence on the global stage. A rather independent approach in its foreign policy has affirmed its desire to retain

regional influence and protect its political interests beyond the West (Ružić & Mankoff, 2013). In essence, Russian patterns in foreign policy consolidates the prestige it pursues. Russia has turned to methods of soft power to further establish its status abroad. Its neighboring countries have become economically integrated with Russia across multiple sectors. Most notably, Russia is abundant in energy resources that expand its global influence. Notably, it has become Europe's primary gas supplier. Russia has also exploited a sense of "common cultural heritage" with other countries to advance its own interests (Oliker, 2009). Russian efforts to resurge as a prestigious power leaves smaller states vulnerable to influence campaigns that align with Russia's interests.

While the Balkans is not a focal point in Russian foreign policy compared to its post-Soviet neighbors, the region provides strategic advantage in further expanding influence within Europe. Its influence on the Balkan's energy sector is especially significant, granting it economic authority in the region. Gazprom Neft, a Russian oil company, holds assets in multiple Balkan countries including Bulgaria, Serbia, and Croatia. Its subsidiaries establish a presence and foster connections in communities where Russia owns stakes in key local employers. Its investments in Bosnia and its territory Republika Srpska make it the fifth largest investor in the country. Additionally, Russia established a prominent banking presence in the region after Russia's Sberbank purchased the European subsidiary of an Australian Bank, Volksbank International. Moscow-backed media in the region also echo pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, blaming the West for the instability and failures in the region (Himes & Stronski, 2019). Whilst Russia has taken substantial efforts to consolidate soft power in the Balkans, its foreign policy initiatives in the region are most notable in Serbia.

## **Serbia's EU Accession Process**

Serbia, a country locked between East and West, has had an interesting history with the European Union. Until recently, President Vučić and Belgrade have looked towards the West as a means of reforming and stabilizing the state (Petrovic & Wilson, 2021). The multi-leveled governance of the EU calls all member states to be democratic and committed to values of “respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities,” (Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union #TITLE I - COMMON PROVISIONS #Article 2, 2016). The history of the European Union also shows that European integration has become synonymous with peace and prosperity (Dinan, 2014). The EU package is a compelling one that simultaneously offers cooperative sovereignty and autonomy and a single, common market that attracts many nations into membership. In addition, the Union offers easy access to economic prosperity by facilitating the circulation of people, goods, and services between its member states (Magnette, 2005). Amongst a public opinion poll made in December 2022, Serbs have associated EU membership with employment opportunities, free mobility within the Union, as well as a promising endeavor for Serbia's younger generations (Ministry of European Integration, 2022). EU leaders such as Foreign Minister Schallenberg have offered their reassurances for the Serbian-EU path, assuring that, “The future of the Western Balkans lies in the EU,” (Österreich, n.d.). These philosophies have largely sustained Serbia in its EU endeavors.

A detailed investigation of Serbia provides an interesting case to study as Russian influence in the country raises concerns over its EU ambitions. At first glance, it seems that rising negative perceptions of the EU in Serbia could be due to the country's challenging accession conditions unique from previous states' accession processes (Goss, 2012). The

Western Balkans, especially Serbia, have become victims to harsh conditional requirements for EU membership following the democratic failure of Bulgaria and Romania after their accession in 2007, which has sparked enlargement fatigue within the member states. In turn, Western Balkan countries such as Serbia are subject to more onerous requirements to ensure the continuation of democratization post-accession (O'Brennan, 2014). Despite this, Belgrade has diligently responded to these conditions. Serbia has shown improvement in terms of democratization, institution-building, and the economy (*European Council, 2021*). However, the EU's politically charged conditionality created resistance to certain conditions, such as the normalization process and formal recognition of Kosovo (Goss, 2012). The non-recognition of Kosovo is a critical component to Serbia's territorial integrity, as the shadows of its 1999 war resulted in the establishment of the ethnically Albanian state and separated Kosovo from its borders (Cottey, 2009). Other conditions have been met with protest, such as the extradition of Serbian war criminals to The Hague. Serbian compliance with the The Hague trials and the forced normalization and recognition of Kosovo contribute to the further politicization of the Serbian identity as well as its relationship Kosovo's independence, a former territory of Serbia (Stahl, 2011).

Serbia's accession to the EU has also stalled on many occasions. Candidate status for Serbia was only obtained several months after Belgrade reluctantly agreed to cooperate with the Hague tribunal and extradite wanted war criminals (Bazić, 2019). During this time period, the EU paused the Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA) with Serbia, resuming talks only after Serbia cooperated with the arrest of a Bosnian-Serb general (Subotić, 2010). Furthermore, Serbia successfully closed just two out of thirty-five chapters of EU negotiations in eight years. As a comparison, Croatia completed its full accession into the EU in the same amount of time.

(Bechev, 2023). As Serbia and the European Union fail to stably progress in the accession process, the Serbian-EU dynamic is becoming increasingly complex. Serbs have begun to believe that their country has made more compromises towards the EU than vice versa and are struggling to find mutual cooperation in the accession process (Economides, 2020). The European Union's Council Conclusions on the Enlargement and Stabilization and Association Process that took place in December 2021 further diminished the hope of an EU future for Serbs. In its conclusion, the European Council highlighted limited progress in areas such as the rule of law and "continued delays in a number of other areas" (*European Council, 2021*). The European Council emphasized Serbia's stagnation in the domestic handling of war crimes, the need to "step up its efforts in progressively aligning with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy on the promotion of EU values," and "the strong expectation that all past agreements are respected and implemented without delay" (*European Council, 2021*). While the Council did acknowledge Serbia's passion for EU integration, much of the meeting highlighted the gaps in Serbia's progress.

### **EU Support in Serbia**

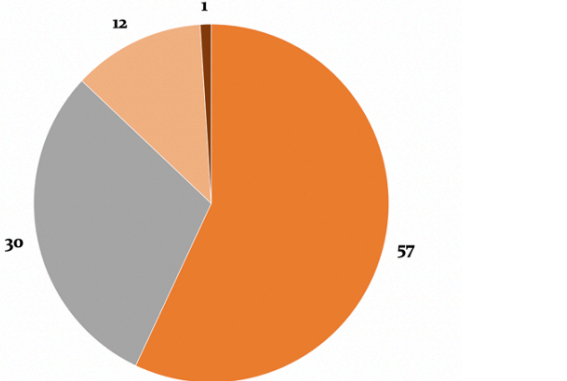
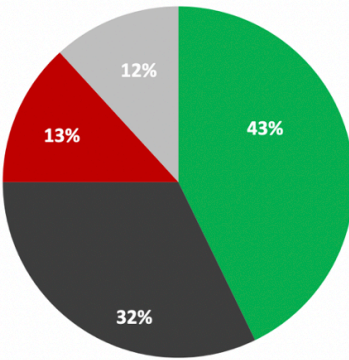
Serbia and the EU are growing increasingly distant as certain conditions are being pushed on Belgrade that misalign with their own integrity. Serbs view the EU conditions as punishment for the crimes of the past Milosevic regime, further delegitimizing the EU in the eyes of the public (Noutcheva, 2009). The complex relationship between the EU's interests and Serbia's own national interests plays a function in dwindling public perceptions of the European Union. The Serbian Ministry of European Integration's public polling of Serbian opinion on the EU further confirms this distortion of the EU's image. Its last two questionnaires included questions

such as how citizens would vote in a referendum for EU succession. A survey conducted in December 2022 reported a decline in those who would vote yes, from 57% to 43%, whilst also revealing a rise in those who said they would vote against it, from 30% to 32% (see Table 1). Respondents overwhelmingly expressed a negative perception of the EU a poll conducted in August 2021: 41% of respondents predicted a problematic future for the EU in which it would “completely close itself off, or even fall apart that it will further expand and grow stronger” (Ministry of European Integration, 2021). The 2022 report also revealed a slight majority in negative perceptions of the EU, where 35% of respondents reported a very negative reaction to the EU compared to 32% who had a very positive reaction. The poll also showed a tie in those who found no personal benefit of the country’s membership and those who did, at 28%. This is a drop from the previous 2021 polling in which a tie was concluded at 37% (Ministry of European Integration, 2022).



**Table 1**

*Charts of Results from Public Opinion Polls on EU Integration Process*

<p>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? (2021)</p>	<p>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? (2022)</p>																				
 <table border="1"> <caption>2021 Referendum Results</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>I would vote for</td> <td>57%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>I would vote against</td> <td>30%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>I would not vote</td> <td>12%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>I do not know / I cannot decide</td> <td>1%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	I would vote for	57%	I would vote against	30%	I would not vote	12%	I do not know / I cannot decide	1%	 <table border="1"> <caption>2022 Referendum Results</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>I would vote for</td> <td>43%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>I would vote against</td> <td>32%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>I would not vote</td> <td>13%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>I do not know / No answer</td> <td>12%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	I would vote for	43%	I would vote against	32%	I would not vote	13%	I do not know / No answer	12%
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Source: Serbian Ministry of European Integration (<https://www.mei.gov.rs/eng/documents/national-documents/public-opinion-poll/>)

**Russian Foreign Policy in Serbia**

Serbia's relations with Russia have been strengthening for decades before the EU accession process began for Serbia. Russia shares both a fraternal and strategic partnership with Serbia. Fraternally, Serbia, and Russia are bonded by a shared Orthodox religion and Slavic culture. Russia has also historically supported Serbia in multiple instances. It unequivocally

backed Serbia during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s (Himes & Stronski, 2019). Following the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, the Kremlin expressed support for the highly controversial Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic. Russia has historically backed the nonrecognition of Kosovo alongside Serbia, which views Kosovo as a self-proclaimed state that belongs to Serbia. Utilizing its veto role in the UN Security Council, Russia prevents UN membership of Kosovo and thus formal recognition. Russia has employed multiple soft power tactics to retain influence in the region. Currently, Russia has significant influence in the country's energy sector. It acquired 51% of Serbia's oil and gas monopolies, the Petroleum Industry of Serbia. Russia's energy diplomacy has given Russia greater leverage in Serbia, as Russia has gained assets in other enterprises in Serbia. Additionally, high-level diplomatic visits and praise from the government have boosted Russia's reputation in the region (Himes & Stronski, 2019).

Popular Serbian discontent has left the nation vulnerable to external influence. Whilst Serbs perceive the EU accession conditions as punishment for its past authoritarian regimes (Noutcheva, 2009), Russia has positioned itself as a longstanding ally of Serbia. Russia seeks to achieve "successful narrative building that serves Russian interests" (Metodieva, 2019). As the EU accession progress shows limited progress, it has allowed Russia to step in to amplify its allyship with Serbia and criticize the EU approach to the country. Russia is swaying EU support by "maximizing the slow EU accession process and displaying itself as a support alternative to the West for Serbia" (Metodieva, 2019). Via diplomatic statements, interviews, conferences, and briefings from the Russian Foreign Ministry, Russian officials aim to present a positive rendering of their country whilst depositing negative perceptions of the EU.

## **Methodology**

In order to explore the influence of Russia on negative perceptions of the European Union in Serbia, I have chosen to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis of Russian official statements on Serbia. All of the statements were retrieved from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, using the coded search engine to search all statements translated into English. I excluded from the analysis statements that did not include descriptive rhetoric on Serbia. For clarity, I determined that all statements that mention Serbia, former Yugoslavia, and the Serbian population of Kosovo (which Serbs view as Serbian territory) counted as descriptive rhetoric of Serbia. Within these statements, I searched for rhetoric about the European Union in relation to Serbia and the Serbian people. Additionally, only statements that specifically stated the “European Union” were counted as rhetoric about the EU, canceling out any mentions of the West, NATO, or the broader “Europe,” which can include both EU and non-EU nations, and are not applicable to the specific institutions and internal functioning of the European Union.

On December 21, 2021, the European Council conducted its Council Conclusions on the EU candidate countries, including Serbia, that communicated an assessment of the progress of Serbia’s EU accession process with additional recommendations from the Council. Due to the results of the Council Conclusions, which included both positive and overwhelmingly negative assessments, I gathered my data in a timeline of Russian statements on Serbia one year before the Council Conclusions and one year after the Conclusions to observe shifts in rhetoric. Through close observations of eleven statements one year prior and fifteen statement following the Council Conclusions to conduct a comparative analysis of Russia's rhetorical framing of the

European Union in the Serbian context in the two timeframes, which reveal both qualitative and quantitative shifts.

Through my research, I uncovered five themes prevalent in the Russian Foreign Ministry's statements regarding Serbia and the EU that suggest if the EU was put in a negative light. Themes were categorized based on word choices that united these statements. A certain category of EU framing was determined by the rhetorical language and the accentuation of a specific narrative of the European Union, as well as how the EU was connected to a certain problem/issue faced by the Serbian people. The five themes encompass an emphasis on historical and fraternal bonds between Russia and Serbia, the EU's failed initiatives, Russia's unconditional support for Serbia, the geopolitical crossroads between Serbia, Russia, and the EU, as well as the EU's role as an authoritative force. I identified three recurring themes in the one-year period prior to the Council Conclusions. The first identifiable theme was the notion of the EU as a "failure." This consisted of statements that highlighted the inadequacy of the EU to normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo, an essential component of the EU accession process in Serbia. Word choices that unified these statements include "unable," "fail," or "inadequate." The second recurring theme was the portrayal of the Serbian-Russian relationship as a spiritual, historical, and fraternal bond. In statements under this theme, Russian officials ameliorated the relationship through consistent referrals to a common history and Orthodox unity that bind the two states. The word choices that unified these statements included references to a "historical" relationship, "historical unity," and "closeness." Lastly, the amplification of Russia's unconditional support was identified throughout multiple statements prior to the Council Conclusions. Statements under the "unconditional support" category generally augmented Russia's unwavering allegiance for Serbia in the absence of EU support. These statements were

unified via word choices such as “consistent support,” “commitment,” and “unwavering position.”

The year following the Council Conclusions saw the reiteration of the three themes introduced in the statement prior to the Council Conclusions, as well as the emergence of two new themes. The first of these themes was the portrayal of the European Union as an authoritative force. Words such as “pressure,” “autocracy,” and “impose” were used to categorize the statements under this theme. The second theme identified the dichotomization of the EU presence and Russian presence in Serbia. These statements depicted a geopolitical crossroad in the region that negatively affected Serbian interests. Words that unified these statements include “spheres of influence,” “neo-colonialism,” and “EU domain.” In my analysis, I compare the themes emphasized in the Russian Foreign Ministry’s rhetoric in the two years. In addition, I utilized qualitative analysis to calculate the difference in salience between the common themes presented both the year prior and the year following the Council Conclusions. Qualitative analysis was conducted towards the end of the project to create tables on the number of instances a certain framing of the EU was pushed by Russian officials to the public. Supplementary materials demonstrate the number of instances, dates, as well as the statements made that were categorized into a certain theme.

## **Findings**

### **Russian Diplomat Statements Pre-Council Conclusions (December 2020-December 2021)**

On December 15, 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Belgrade, Serbia, to attend the Eternal Flame Lighting Cemetery of Belgrade Liberators. During the ceremony, Lavrov praised the military alliance between the nations, linking the two states as a

“brotherhood in arms” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). He read a personal letter from celebrating the completion as well as the “brotherly friendship” and “spiritual closeness” that united Serbia and Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). Following the ceremony, which honored the tomb of the unknown soldier in Moscow in Belgrade, he participated in a joint news conference to discuss his foreign policy collaboration with his Serbian counterpart, Nikola Selakovic. In his open address to the Minister at the news conference, Lavrov revered Russian and Serbian relations all while making multiple references to the European Union. The Foreign Minister stressed the historical bond between Russia and Serbia, conveying their shared struggle against a “common evil” as well as highlight their common values, spiritually affinity, culture and other aspects that define a nation. To the Serb audience, Lavrov celebrated the connection between the two nations, bearing that “this is the best foundation for our cooperation that allows us to hear and support each other at all times” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). Lavrov reaffirmed Russian unconditional support for Serbia but also directed his speech towards the European Union. In referencing Kosovo, Lavrov criticized the European as “unable to ensure Pristina’s compliance with the agreements on the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). Toward the end of his address, urgent calls for action from the EU were made in addition to veneration of Russia’s support for Serbia.

The Russian Foreign Minister convened with President Vucic on the same day to discuss strategic cooperation between the two nations. In his commencement address to the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Lavrov reiterated the military, spiritual, and historical bonds between Serbia & Russia. Additionally, he offered hopeful insight into upcoming economic

development initiatives, as discussed in his meeting with the Serbian Foreign Minister. He praised the two nations' cooperation in transport infrastructure, agriculture, industrial production, and as well as their collaboration in Serbia's technology and energy sectors. Repeating Russia's sentiments in his open address to the Serbian Minister, Lavrov stressed the necessity for the EU to implement mediation efforts and pledge the creation of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo, an essential project for the integrity of Serbia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020).

Lavrov reaffirmed Russia's commitment to supporting the Serbians regarding its stance on the nonrecognition of Kosovo and the demand for the establishment of Serb Municipalities. At a joint news conference with Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selakovic, Lavrov promised to "continue speaking in favor of maintaining this issue as a priority," utilizing its seat on the UN Security Council to advocate for Belgrade's rights in Kosovo (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Lavrov additionally denounced the "illegitimate efforts" to secure membership of Kosovo in the Council of Europe. Lavrov continues to inveigh against the European Union's actions during the Yugoslavian wars. "Let us recall how our Western partners, including the European Union..." Lavrov says, "aggressively demand that post-war borders in Europe not be revised" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). In the interest of the Kosovo-Serbia territorial integrity debate, Lavrov firmly took a stance against the actions of the EU and reiterated, on multiple occasions, Russia's support for a decision in the interest of Serbia. Lavrov proved Russia's devotion to protecting Serbian territorial interests at the General Debate of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, where he addressed Western hypocrisy on self-determination. "...an artificially created entity of Kosovo, earlier forcefully seized from a European country, Serbia, is recognized as an independent state

in violation of the Security Council resolution and without any referendums,” Lavrov criticized (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Maria Zakharova reaffirmed this at a briefing in Moscow, upholding the Russian commitment to advocate for the solution that would suit the people of Serbia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021).

In a separate joint news conference following talks with President Aleksandar Vučić in Belgrade on October 10, 2021, Lavrov condemned the EU for its handling of Kosovo, maintaining that “conniving with the Kosovars’ attempts to drag out this decision [creating Serbian municipalities], which is vital for the Serbian population of Kosovo,” reflected poorly on the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Once more, Lavrov focused on Russia’s position on the EU’s mediation efforts between Belgrade and Kosovo, urging the EU to improve their operation in the region. In his reply to a Serbian journalist’s question on European accusations of Russian involvement in the Balkans, Lavrov raised speculations against the EU, claiming that “The European Union believes that it has the right to carry out its policy, which is often from constructive, in far-away regions...” and maligns the EU as a “neo-colonial” entity that strictly disapproved of Russian activities in the Balkans. Lavrov criticized the EU’s involvement in the Balkan region as anti-Russian. He concluded the conference by insisting on the formulation of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. Further, he established a promise to aid in the implementation of an agreement mutually decided Pristina and Belgrade (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021).

The Permanent Representative of Russia to the EU and Euratom Ambassador Vladimir Chizhov focused on Russian, EU, and Balkan relations in his address at the 6th Thessaloniki Summit on November 4, 2021. In his statement, he responded to recent EU rhetoric regarding the Balkans, noting that the EU intended for “no room for any alternative” in the region (Ministry of



Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Chizhov blamed instability in Balkans nations such as Serbia on the EU and spoke against the “pressure that has been and continues to be exerted on the Balkan countries to force them to join EU sanctions against Russia” an indirect jab at recent pressures on Serbia by the Union to impose sanctions on Russia. Chizhov, like Lavrov, referenced Serbian-Kosovan tensions and urged the necessity of resolutions based on UNSCR 1244.

### **Russian Diplomat Statements Post Council Conclusions (December 2021-December 2022)**

Following the Council Conclusions on December 14, 2021, Lavrov continued to take Russia’s support for Serbia internationally. On December 24, 2021, in Bosnia & Herzegovina, just three days after the Council’s Conclusions, Lavrov responded to an imposed “artificial choice” on the Balkans to side with either Russia or the European Union, deeming it “counterproductive” and provoking “new dividing lines in the region.” He countered the dichotomy by emphasizing Serbia as a “key partner in the Balkans” whom Russia strives to “promote our ties across the board” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). A few days later, Lavrov adopted a more critical tone, recalling to his audience the EU’s partnership with NATO, which he iterated destroyed “Serbia with cassette bombs and ammunition with depleted uranium... in 1999” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). He ended his note urging the EU to direct its efforts towards ensuring security in Europe instead. This notion of a forced dichotomy imposed by the European Union is referenced once again in a separate briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova just six days after Lavrov’s comments. “Brussels imposed on the EU countries demands of unconditional anti-Russia solidarity and put the West Balkans ... on the horns of an artificial

geopolitical dilemma,” Lavrov continued, “side either with Russia or with the EU” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Zakharova reiterates Lavrov’s previous statements, criticizing the EU’s condemnation of building Balkan-Russian relations. Zakharova references this on multiple occasions, including a joint news conference following talks with the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi di Maio, in which Lavrov recalls statements by EU leaders encouraging this division in the Western Balkans (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021).

During an interview with Serbian media on March 28, 2022, Lavrov referred to the EU as a “self-reproducing bureaucracy” with a flawed policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). He speculated EU’s pressures on Serbia to join anti-Russian sanctions, which cover economic, cultural, political, and other activities. Lavrov goes as far as to refer to the EU as a project seeking to “strengthen autocracy.” In response to a Serbian journalist’s question about Serbia’s possible political prevarication between Russia and the EU, Lavrov reiterated the notion of fraternity between Russia and Serbia and dictates that Russia “never imposes anything by force.” He once again compared this to the EU, which utilizes economic pressure, blackmail, and ultimatums to force Serbia to “oppose Russia if it wants to join the EU.” In a separate news conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mali, Lavrov referenced EU opposition in Russia’s close contacts with Serbia, speculating the EU’s fears of Russia infiltrating the Western Balkans “because they are the EU’s domain” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022).

Lavrov sustained much of his anti-EU rhetoric in the presence of Serbian media. One of the most prominent examples comes from his interview with the Bosnian Serbian TV and radio company Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, in which most of his responses to media questions

were accompanied by criticism of the EU. Lavrov utilized historical examples of the EU beyond its relations to Serbia. For example, he backs his claim of the EU's inadequacy and impotence by utilizing examples of its military operations in Crimea, its failure to implement the Minsk agreements that granted special status to Donbas, and its shortcomings in convincing Pristina to implement its commitment to the creation of the Community of Serb Municipalities of Kosovo (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). Another example of Lavrov's strongest and most potent criticism of the EU followed in a separate news conference two days later, accusing the EU of using "the most low-grade methods of influencing" in pressuring Serbia and accusing Brussels as not being a place "for the equal sovereignty of states" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). Lavrov concluded his statements by making accusations of the EU's intention to create a "Closed Balkans" project, destroying Russian relations with the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2022). In response to a separate question about a meeting with the EU, Lavrov calls into question the worth of EU status. "...Brussels is going to decide the destinies of all European countries by itself... This shows once again the worth of the status sought by the EU applicants," Lavrov emphasized, "... the applicants must fully and unquestionably follow the European policy on security and defense" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). In addition, he chastised the EU policy in the Balkans, claiming the EU "favors those who impinge on the Serbian interests." Lavrov once again calls into question the worth of EU status, claiming no economic benefits to admission but rather "submission to geopolitical ambitions." The Foreign Minister references the EU's geopolitical ambitions on a separate news conference, criticizing the EU for leaving no room in the Balkans, in particular Serbia, for other foreign relations to develop (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022).

His words are reiterated on June 24, 2022, singling out the Serbian experience with the EU's demands to support every EU foreign policy. He speculated of Serbia "losing its independence," and reminded his audience of Russia's defense of Serbia during NATO bombing campaign of Yugoslavia in 1999. In his conclusion, he compared the EU candidacy path as "reminiscent of World War II early days," calling attention to tracking the situation closely (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). In later briefings, Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova also alludes to the EU countering Serbian interests, whilst speculating that the EU "is not even trying to conceal the fact that Serbia will not become an EU member until it 'settles' its relations with Pristina," undermining the EU admission process for Serbs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). The Foreign Ministry also criticized EU-Serbian relations at an international forum in Moscow, in which Lavrov stated that Serbia is being "duped" by the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022).

## **An Analysis of Russian Rhetoric Pre-Council Conclusions**

### **The EU's Failed Initiatives**

In a plethora of political statements, Lavrov recounted the multiple failures of the EU in mediating relations between Serbia and Kosovo. The normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina is a standard EU accession condition that both nations have tackled achieving (Economides, 2020). The Serbia-Kosovo dialogue is exceptionally critical to Serbia in the EU context and the context of territorial integrity. Normalization, which is required by the EU for the candidate countries, is both complex and problematic for Kosovo and Serbia. A seemingly main topic for Russian officials' pre-Council, the EU is painted as a failing mediator

in the region. Lavrov draws attention to the lack of progress in EU mediation operations, emphasizing the EU's bias for fulfilling Kosovo's needs over Serbia's. This is especially evident in his multiple references to the EU's failure to implement the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. Lavrov criticized the EU as unable to ensure Pristina's compliance with the agreement. On behalf of Russia, he claims to "view this as helplessness against Pristina's approaches" and believes that "it does no credit to our European colleagues" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). Lavrov highlighted the EU's compliance with Pristina's failed part in implementing the Serbian municipalities. In a separate news conference in Serbia, Lavrov designates the EU's mediation efforts as "conniving" with Kosovo, applying an immoral and discreet tone to the EU's mediation efforts. Lavrov also undermined the EU's mediation efforts, reflecting that Russia would "like to see the EU's role as mediator lead to practical results" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). Lavrov maximizes the lack of progress in normalization by implying the EU's non-practical solutions. This reflects poorly on Serbia's EU admission progress, as normalized relations are decisive in Serbia's admission to the Union.

A limited number of statements on Belgrade and Pristina's normalization efforts have also taken a more neutral tone. Russian officials have strayed away from criticizing the EU in some statements and have instead chosen to encourage progress in implementing initiatives for normalization. For example, in response to a question about the future of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, Lavrov underlined Russia's belief that the EU had "special responsibility" and encouraged the EU to carry out agreements, including that of the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Despite this, neutrality was only identified in one instance out eleven closely

observed statements, briefings, and interviews, indicating the saliency of EU criticism amongst the Russian Foreign Ministry.

### **Spiritual & Historical Fraternity**

Foreign Minister Lavrov's visit to Belgrade on December 15, 2020 was marked by multiple accounts of the spiritual and historical fraternity shared between the two nations. In a visit to Belgrade's Eternal Flame lighting, which brought the eternal flame from the tomb of the unknown soldier in Moscow to Belgrade, Lavrov praised the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia and regarded the ceremony as "a reminder of our brotherhood in arms" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). Following another meeting at Serbia's Church of Saint Sava, Lavrov read a personal letter from Putin to the people in the ceremony celebrating the completion of the Orthodox Church of St. Sava. The letter did not shy away from a fraternal tone, calling the ceremony as "important and symbolic," and referring to the "brotherly friendship" and "spiritual closeness" that united Serbia and Russia. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020).

Following his meeting with Vucic, Lavrov gave an opening remark and held a joint news conference answering to Serbian news media outlets. In his opening remarks, Lavrov alluded to the military, spiritual, and historically friendly cooperation between Serbia and Russia. He offers hopeful insight into upcoming economic development initiatives discussed between Vucic and Lavrov. He spoke of new efforts in energy transport infrastructure, agriculture, industrial production, and cooperation in technology and digitalization (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). Notably, Lavrov's visit to Belgrade followed just one day after the Council Conclusions. In total, there were five instances within a two day period that Lavrov

praised the unity between Serbia and Russia. Lavrov credited the occasion to the bond shared between Serbia and Russia. The Foreign Minister addresses the public with adoration, and statements of Russian and Serbian cooperation are defined by acclamations.

### **Unconditional Support**

Russian officials have maximized EU conditionality in their comparisons to the multiple statements regarding Russia's unconditional support for Serbia. In the year before the Council's Conclusions, there was a total of five instances in which Russia communicated its unconditional support for Serbia. Most of the statements are regarding Kosovo, a difficult condition for Serbia to accept in order to gain EU membership. Lavrov declared Russia's unconditional support twice on his trip to Serbia on December 15, 2020, maintaining a pro-Serbian stance on the issue. In one statement, Lavrov reaffirmed Russia's consistent policy in regard to its support of Belgrade's position on Kosovo (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). A few hours later, in his opening remarks to the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Lavrov once again called on the EU to implement the Community of Serb Municipalities and reasserted Russia's position only to support "a decision that will satisfy the Serbs themselves" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). Russia clearly indicated its bias towards Serbia, an important strategy used to complement its statements regarding the EU's bias for Kosovo in the issue. Russian officials have dichotomized the Kosovo condition, creating two opposing forces for Serbia to choose. Russia has illustrated the EU as a pro-Kosovo, pro-Albanian force that Serbia is subjected to follow in order to achieve its long-term goals of EU membership. In contrast, Russian officials maximize Russia's unreserved, pro-Serbian stance on the Kosovo issue. Lavrov reaffirmed this in a news conference with the Foreign Minister of the Republic of

Serbia, laying to Russia's "commitment to continue helping our Serbian friends defend Belgrade's legitimate rights with respect to Kosovo" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Zakharova reiterated Lavrov's statements six months later in a briefing, asserting Russia's support for a normalization solution "that would suit the people of Serbia" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). The same language is used in Lavrov's answer to media questions in Serbia, in which he draws on Putin's position on the Kosovo issue, saying, "President Putin has repeatedly underscored, and this remains our unwavering position, that we will accept any decision that suits Serbia and the Serbian people" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Lavrov specifically points out Russia's "unwavering" support, consolidating the notion of Russia as a reliable partner of Serbia's. In contrast, the Russian Foreign Ministry foment an image of the EU as a deceptive partner, "conniving" with Kosovars and acting as "Pristina's patrons," which in turn goes against Serbian interests. Lavrov and Zakharova use recent developments in the normalization of Kosovo to elevate Russia's status in Serbia whilst simultaneously undermining the European Union to the Serbian people.

## **An Analysis of Russian Rhetoric Post-Council Conclusions**

### **Geopolitical Crossroads**

Of the new themes introduced the year following the post-Council Conclusions is Russia's emphasis on the geopolitical crossroads between Europe and the Russian Federation in the Balkan nation. Trends in statements regarding the EU's discontent with Russian diplomacy in Serbia reveal clashing forces of interest in the region. On several occasions, the Russian Foreign Ministry dichotomizes Serbia between the EU and Russia, implying a battle for spheres of



influence initiated by the European Union. This dichotomization appears just over one week after the Council Conclusions are made, with Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova warning of the EU's "artificial geopolitical dilemma: 'side either with Russia or with the EU'" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Zakharova, like many Russian officials, accentuate the necessity for choice by the Serbian people. Whilst reiterating this dichotomy, they impose the blame of the European whilst elevating Russian lack of malice in their interests in the region. Zakharova labels the EU's geopolitical dilemma as Russophobic, implying the EU's stance against Russian involvement in the region, which supports much of Serbia's gas, infrastructure, and technology sectors. Lavrov also takes part in the dichotomy between the EU and Russia in Serbia, portraying a forced discharge of Russian interests in the region. Further references to a European "sphere of influence" are made by Lavrov two months later (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). In both cases, Zakharova and Lavrov polarized the EU and Russian interests in Serbia. Lavrov and Zakharova emphasize the idea of an ultimatum proposed by the EU. Lavrov and Zakharova utilize claims of an EU sphere of influence as a threat, especially as Serbs struggle to fulfill EU conditions that threaten their deemed territorial integrity. Through these statements, Russian officials are able to highlight the sharp dissimilarity between EU and Russian interests in Serbia. Russian foreign policy in Serbia is marked by cooperation and innovation, whereas EU foreign policy is defined more selfishly, enacting a more authoritarian frame of the Union. Other rhetoric, such as statements on the EU leaving "no room" nor choice for other foreign interests in the region, present an ultimatum to the Serbs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). Yet, Russian officials attribute this dichotomy in the Western Balkans to the EU. To back their claims, they point to EU calls for the discontinuation of Russian contact in Serbia.

### **The EU as an Authoritative Force**

A second theme that emerges through the rhetoric of Russian statements post Council Conclusions is the portrayal of the European Union as an authoritative force, demanding Serbia to fulfill its requirements and needs that oppose their own interests. In one statement released on March 28, 2022, nearly three months after the Council Conclusions, there are four instances in which Lavrov mentions the imposition of EU policies in Serbia. Lavrov utilized extreme language to portray this message, such as “economic pressure,” “threats,” “blackmail,” and “ultimatums,” which cast a dark shadow on the European Union (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). Lavrov confidently asserts that the EU demands Serbia join their foreign policy initiatives. In addition, he undermines the EU’s democratic values by referring to them as an autocracy. In the Kosovo context, Lavrov maintains that the EU “forces new decisions on a new concept for the agreement on Belgrade,” in which Serbia is “duped” by the EU to accept Kosovo’s admission to international organizations and indirect recognition of Kosovo (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). Lavrov demonstrates how EU interests oppose Serbian interests whilst simultaneously locking Serbia in a position where they are being pressured to pursue the EU’s interests over their own for the sake of EU membership. Lavrov’s statements undermine the democratic values of the European Union, a promising aspect for candidate countries. It also illuminates the sacrifices Serbia is forced to make for the Union.

This rhetorical pattern is especially significant as it did not exist in the year prior to the Council Conclusions. The Council's Conclusions drew many concerns over Serbia’s functioning democracy. As Lavrov portrays the European Union as an autocracy, it contradicts the

statements in the Council Conclusions that call for Serbia to implement further democratic initiatives. The EU as an authoritative force, pushing Serbia to accept its terms and conditions in an aggressive matter, is hypocritical to the conclusions the European Council drew on Serbia's accession process. Lavrov maximized the pressure previously felt by Serbs to accept conditions that oppose Serbian interests, stating the EU's intent to dupe the Serbs. Lavrov's statements show a lack of consideration from the EU for Serbian interests. Instead, he portrays the EU as an aggressive force succumbing Serbia to its own demands.

### **Recurring Themes**

Emphasis on the European Union's failures and inadequacy in its initiatives in Serbia reoccurs in the statements following the Council Conclusions. However, the salience of this theme in the Russian Foreign Ministry's statements is increasingly prevalent than the year prior. Like its previous statements, the Foreign Ministry draws attention to the lack of progress in EU mediation operations, iterating the EU has "failed in its mission" as a mediator between Belgrade and Pristina. Statements regarding the EU's mediator role have taken a less neutral stance compared to the year prior. Lavrov, in his comments on the EU's operations in Pristina and Belgrade, utilizes protrusive language to describe the EU. Negative phrasing of the EU such as claiming the EU is "embarrassed" and having "discredited itself" as a guarantor adversely impact the credibility of the European Union Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). In the year following the Council Conclusions, the Russian Foreign Ministry rhetoric shifts to imply the complete failure of the European Union, eliminating prospects for change or improvement. One of the most prominent examples is Lavrov's interview with a Bosnian Serbian TV company, Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, to which Lavrov underscored

the EU's "complete inadequacy, intractability, and lack of any desire" to enforce past agreements between Belgrade and Pristina (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022).

Lavrov's statements insert a limit into the EU's mediation efforts, signaling that the EU has passed this threshold and cannot correct the mistakes it has made. Lavrov also erases any intent by the EU to mediate dialogue between the two nations, stating a "lack of desire," to convince Pristina to implement its commitments (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022).

This differentiates from the statements in the year before the Council Conclusions, where Russia advocated for practical EU mediation. Prior to the Council Conclusions, Russia does not diminish hope for a future successful mediation campaign. Yet, in the statements following, the Russian Foreign Ministry undermines Serbia's prospects of success in EU mediation efforts. In multiple instances, phrases suggesting the EU's failure are paired by "complete," erasing potential successes that may have resulted from its role. The EU is assigned to play a significant role in normalizing relations between the two. To highlight the EU's failures in mediation as well as imply a total failure in the process diminishes prospects for a successful admission process for Serbia. This is especially significant as the recent Council Conclusions on Serbia's progress overwhelmingly drew negative conclusions on Serbia's progress. Russia's narrative building is crucial to the EU admission process for Serbia. Its repetitive criticisms of the EU's reluctance to aid in normalization dialogue posit the EU as an opponent to Serbia's admission.

In comparison to the statements that were categorized under the "EU as a failed mediator" theme in the year before the Council Conclusions, Russia aggressively reaffirmed this framing in much larger numbers following the conclusions. From December 2020 to December 2021, I identified only three statements that emphasized the failures of the EU in mediation. The

year following saw a sharp increase to seven instances in which Russia refer to the EU's failures. The agenda is pushed far more frequently than in previous years. In addition, the Russian Foreign Ministry halted its calls on the EU to adopt its mediation agreements, but rather deliberate an ultimate failure to the EU mediation mission in Belgrade and Pristina. The Russian Foreign Ministry also utilizes much more extreme rhetoric such as "sabotage," "major failure," "inability," and "reluctance." The statements in the year prior largely counter these extreme terms, adopting both critical and neutral tones. In between December 21, 2021, and December 26, 2022, there were no neutral statements detected in regard to the EU's mediator role in Belgrade. What is observed is rather a heightened concentration on the opposition of the EU in Belgrade's normalization initiatives. Much of Russian dialogue on EU mediation indicated an end to hopeful ambitions of normalization. The data in the year prior constituted of both criticisms as well as Russian calls for action from the EU. Yet, the year following implied a total collapse of mediation from the EU. No instances calling for nor implying the possibility of mediation solutions were detected in the dataset from December 21, 2021 to December 26, 2023.

Other themes presented in the year prior to the Council Conclusions significantly waver in the following year. There is a notable divergence between Russia's references to fraternity and spiritual closeness between nations in the year prior to the Council Conclusions and the year following. In the time between December 2020 and the Council Conclusions in December 2021, I observed five different statements that glorified the historical and fraternal bonds between Russia and Serbia. However, these statements did not include any additional references to the European Union within them. Instead, the focus of the statements was to venerate the relationship and common history between Russia and Serbia, as well as highlight political and social achievements between the two nations. Instances in which Russia venerated Russo-

Serbian fraternity sharply declined following the Council Conclusions, from five instances to two instances detected. Thus, it ceased to be a significant recurring pattern within Russian rhetoric following the Council Conclusions. There, however, lies a significance in Russia praising and venerating the fraternal and historical bond between the two nations, as these statements only occurs in relation to criticism of the EU. In his interview with Serbian media on March 28, 2022, Lavrov spoke of the unification of Russia and Serbia through “common history and victories against common enemies” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). This followed a question from a Serbian journalist about Serbia being forced to “harmonize its foreign policy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). Subsequent to his statement, Lavrov followed up with claims that Russia never used force on Serbia’s foreign policy. Importantly, he compares this to the European Union, stating that Serbia is pressured by the EU to oppose Russia in order to gain membership. Even though the question did not specifically address the European Union, Lavrov followed his praises for Russo-Serbian relations with criticisms of the European Union. In his response, Lavrov makes Russia a point of comparison for Serbia's relations with the EU. He utilizes Serbia’s relationship with Russia in order to draw attention to the mistreatment Serbia has been subjected to by the European Union. Russia is made into a reference point for a supportive, mutually beneficial relationship for the Serbian people.

As Lavrov reiterates the amicable relationship between the two countries, he condemns the EU-Serbian relationship, placing blame on the EU for their strained relations. Lavrov, in his comparison of the Russian spiritual and historical relationship with Serbia, proves that rhetoric following the Council Conclusions becomes increasingly more concerned with the EU’s relationship with Serbia and in highlighting the misfortunes the admission process has bestowed

upon the Serbia people. In the year prior to the Council Conclusions, all the statements regarding the historical and spiritual closeness of Russia and Serbia had no further mentions of the EU but were rather focused on praising both Serbia and Russia.

The last recurring theme is the emphasis on unconditional support from Russia to Serbia. The Russian Foreign Ministry's recounts of Russian support largely reiterate its previous statements from December 2020 to December 2021. The difference in the presentation of Russia's support is not as prevalent as other themes, but a deeper observation reveals a slight shift in Russia's intentions. First, the number of statements reiterating Russia's unconditional support dropped two between the prior year and the following the Council Conclusions, showing a stable emphasis on Russia's unwavering and fully committed position on Serbia. Second, only one out of the five statements on Russia's position on Serbia do not specifically reference the European Union in the period between December 2020 and December 2021. In the timeframe of the following year, all statements of unconditional support were accompanied by specific references to EU failures in Belgrade and in the Serbian-majority regions of Kosovo. Both periods disclose the importance for the Russian Foreign Ministry to assert Russia once again as a focal point for strong relations, a deficiency the Foreign Ministry repeatedly reveals in the EU. Russia's accounts of its unwavering commitment to Serbia force one to compare Serbia's relationship with the EU, which has been stained with distrust, conditionality, and unfulfilled promises.

### **Conclusion**

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of Russia's influencing campaign in Serbia that seeks to negatively influence its popular support for the European Union. I demonstrated that the Russian Foreign Ministry is making strategic measures in shaping a

negative image of the European Union and a positive image of Russia through rhetorical tactics. An investigation of Russia's Foreign Ministry's statements and interviews regarding Serbia overwhelmingly consisted of harsh criticisms of the European Union. Five crucial themes were revealed: Serbian-Russian historical and spiritual fraternity, the EU's failed initiatives, Russia's unconditional support, the EU as an authoritative force, and the geopolitical crossroads between Russia, Serbia, and the EU. Its rhetoric has centered on polarizing Serbia between the EU and Russia. Rhetoric post and pre-Council Conclusions reveal a central characteristic in Russia's public diplomacy; it is inconsistent and respondent to Serbia's EU accession progress. The rhetorical strategies a year prior to the Council Conclusions, which highlighted Serbia's lack of progress in multiple accession conditions, sharply contrast the themes presented the year following the Council Conclusions. An analysis of the data found that following the Council Conclusions, the Russian Foreign Ministry introduced harsher, more critical criticism of the EU in the Serbian accession context. Lavrov and Zakharova adapted their rhetoric to introduce the additional themes of geopolitical crossroads and the EU's authoritarian nature. In addition, the statements regarding Serbia and the EU grew exponentially following the release of the EU's conclusions on Serbia's progress. Russia's incentive is clear: to partition EU support in Serbia as a means to serve its own political interests. As previously demonstrated in public polls, mass support for the EU amongst Serbs is already diminishing, especially following the Council Conclusions. Russia is taking measures to further project a negative image of the European Union and weaken public support. This study contributes to international relations literature by illuminating the use of soft power in today's world through the case of Russia's political rhetoric. While this research focuses on rhetorical strategies of Russia's negative EU image



making in Serbia, further studies could benefit from a closer observation of Russia's direct anti-EU influence through Russian backed proxies and media within Serbia.

A relationship must be mutually understanding, mutually cooperative, and mutually beneficial. Nowhere should these dynamics be more applicable than in the field of international relations. Cooperation has led our world to the globalized form we know today. Through the cooperation of multiple states, the relations we shared have pursued national interests, protected national security, and formed alliances crucial for prosperity. In the in-between spaces where states falter, authoritarian regimes seek out the gaps to retain power and influence. Despite their ambitions, the European Union and Serbia's dynamic is growing more distant. Clashing interests have setback initial aspirations for the future of Serbia and the EU. This should be a cause of concern for the European Union and beyond. Allyship and enlargement is especially critical in the case of Serbia, which lies at the border of the European Union. As Russia continuously highlights its own successes in Serbia whilst diminishing the EU, Serbs find themselves less aligned with the European Union. The image of EU accession, as presented in the polls, is straying away from a positive prospect to a negative one.

Russia's increasingly critical and anti-EU rhetoric to the Serbian people, as well as its multiple attempts to polarize EU and Serb relations through its statements should be a call to action for the EU and Serbia to reassess its negotiations dialogue. Normalization processes between the Serbia and Kosovo, a crucial condition for membership for both states, must be prioritized in order to assist in attaining Serbia's recognition of Kosovo. In addition, the EU should affectively monitor Russian dialogue in the region and assist in the implementation of democratic initiatives in order to promote democracy and rule of law in the region. Russia's mechanisms to stray the Serbia from the EU reflects the EU's involvement in Serbia itself. In

turn, a reassessment of the accession process and mediation efforts on behalf of the EU is crucial to counter Russia's claims and improve the image of EU in Serbia.

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## Supplementary Materials

Table 2

## Pre-Council Themes

Theme	# of Instances	Quote(s)	Date
Historical & Spiritual Fraternity	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Owing to the consistent position of Serbian leadership on preserving the <b>historical</b> truth and cherishing the memory of the achievements of <b>our predecessors</b>...”</li> </ul> <p>“...shedding their blood for the freedom and independence of the Slavic brothers. We consider this new memorial in honour of the liberators to be a symbol of spiritual and <b>historical unity</b> between the Russians and the Serbs and a reminder of our brotherhood in arms that helped us crush evil and uphold the eternal values of peace and justice.”</p>	12/15/20
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “This interaction appears to be important and symbolic, especially in the context of brotherly friendship and the spiritual <b>closeness</b> that have <b>united</b> our peoples for a <b>long time</b>.”</li> </ul>	12/15/20
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Common history is a very important part of the foundation of our friendship.”</li> </ul>	12/15/20
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We highly value the traditionally deep and friendly dialogue between the Russian and Serbian orthodox churches, which is based on the protection of the integrity of the <b>orthodox</b> world and the <b>age-old spiritual canons</b>.”</li> </ul>	12/15/20
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The lighting of the first Eternal Flame in Belgrade highlights the <b>continuation</b> of military <b>brotherhood</b> traditions by Russia and Serbia.”</li> </ul>	12/16/20
The EU’s Inadequacy	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We regret that the EU, which offered to <b>mediate</b> the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina many years ago and was granted this right, which has been formalised in a UN General Assembly resolution, <b>proved unable</b> to ensure Pristina’s compliance with the agreements on the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. We view this as helplessness against Pristina’s approaches and believe that this does no credit to our European colleagues.”</li> </ul>	12/15/20
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “ We pointed out that we would like to see the EU’s role as <b>mediator</b> lead to <b>practical</b> results. The EU mediation has been approved by the UN General Assembly. This mission must be implemented objectively to put an end to Pristina’s open sabotage of the agreements reached years ago, including the pledge to create the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo”</li> </ul>	12/15/20
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “In our contacts with the European Union, we invariably talk about Brussels’ responsibility for the intermediary functions initiated by it, which the EU received by the resolution of the UN General Assembly. It is time to act upon the agreements that were reached long time ago in particular, back in 2013, on creating Serbian municipalities in Kosovo. <b>Conniving with the Kosovars</b>’ attempts to “drag out” this decision, which is vital for the Serbian population of Kosovo, does not reflect well on the EU”</li> </ul>	10/10/21
		<p>“...As for dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, we believe that the European Union has special responsibility, since the UN General Assembly has designated the EU as a mediator. At the very least, the agreements that have already been reached, including on the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo, <b>must be carried out without delay</b>.”</p>	
Unconditional Support	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We talked about the Balkans and our delegation’s visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina held before our trip to Belgrade. We reaffirmed our <b>consistent</b> and principled policy <b>in support</b> of Belgrade’s position regarding Kosovo.”</li> </ul>	12/15/20

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Our position has not changed. We call for a search for compromises based on UN Security Council Resolution 1244, and we will only <b>support</b> a decision that will <b>satisfy the Serbs themselves.</b>”</li> </ul>	12/15/20
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We reaffirmed our <b>commitment</b> to <b>continue</b> helping our <b>Serbian friends</b> defend Belgrade’s legitimate rights with respect to Kosovo.”</li> </ul>	4/16/21
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “You personally and the Serbian media are well aware of the Russian position which <b>has not changed in</b> any way over the past years. We would like Belgrade and Pristina to attain a viable and mutually acceptable solution on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 1244. This solution should conform to international law and should also be approved by the UN Security Council because this implies efforts to maintain international peace and security. Indeed, we have repeatedly noted at all levels that <b>we will agree with a solution that would suit the people of Serbia.</b>”</li> </ul>	6/10/21
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We also covered regional affairs and the Kosovo problem. Russia remains invariably in favour of resolving this matter based solely on UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and it be found as part of a direct dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, and this final decision be submitted to the UN Security Council for approval. President Putin has repeatedly underscored, and this remains <b>our unwavering position</b>, that we will accept any decision that <b>suits Serbia and the Serbian people.</b>”</li> </ul>	10/10/21

Table 3

### Post-Council Themes

Themes	# Of Instances	Quote(s)	Date
<b>Geopolitical Crossroads</b>	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “On top of all that, Brussels imposed on the EU countries demands of unconditional anti-Russia solidarity and put the West Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries on the horns of an artificial <b>geopolitical</b> dilemma: “side either with Russia or with the EU.” They did not try to analyse or predict what would happen in the future with the countries, economies and nations if they had to make this choice to the detriment of the integration processes that supplemented rather than contradicted each other.”</li> </ul>	12/30/21
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “As for the <b>spheres of influence</b>, we have recalled today statements by EU leaders who said that it is up to them to “decide” on everything in the Balkans, while Russia “has nothing to do there.” Only recently, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell reiterated his position by saying that Moscow stands in Brussels’ way in Africa. Does this mean that the European Union can have spheres of influence? The EU and NATO have even tried gaining a foothold in Russia’s immediate neighbourhood. “</li> </ul>	2/17/22
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I have the following to say. We understand, but do not really like France or other EU countries’ attempts to claim dominance in a particular region, including Europe. When Russia was developing – as it continues to develop – close contacts with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other countries in the Western Balkans, already then High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini stated rather categorically that the EU was concerned about Russia’s attempts to “infiltrate” the Western Balkans, because they are the <b>EU’s domain.</b>”</li> </ul>	5/20/22
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “But Brussels’ line in the Balkans and in Ukraine is the same. The only <b>difference</b> is that in the Balkans the EU favours those who impinge on the Serbian interests, while in Ukraine, NATO and the EU support the regime that has long declared a war on all things Russian. This</li> </ul>	6/6/22

		<p>is an interesting observation. I mentioned it during my interview with the media of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is the gist of the EU's mediation.”</p> <p>• “...the EU leaders mince no words saying that a candidate country has <b>no choice</b> but to support every EU policy in the international arena, including its every action against the Russian Federation (this is almost verbatim). This is how EU officials express their demands, in particular, to Serbia. That country is an EU candidate, but like every other country, it is strongly against losing its independence and supporting decisions that flatly contradict its fundamental interests, in this case, its relations with Russia.”</p> <p>• “<b>Question:</b> EU Ambassador to Serbia Emanuele Giaufret called on Belgrade to agree upon the sanctions policy towards Russia with the EU. What can you say about the unconcealed political pressure exerted by Brussels on Belgrade?”</p> <p><b>Maria Zakharova:</b> Unilateral restrictive measures adopted by the EU in circumvention of the UN Security Council are illegitimate from the international legal point of view. Many are talking about compliance/non-compliance with international law, and Westerners are running from the UN General Assembly to the Security Council (and back). They'd better look at themselves and ask themselves to what extent their actions, in particular, the adoption of unilateral sanctions, correspond to international law. They can sit down and put decisions on the table, open the UN Charter, Security Council resolutions and clarifications to them and they will realise that unilateral sanctions are illegitimate. If they engage in illegal actions of this kind, they have no right discussing legitimacy/illegitimacy of other people's actions. By continuing this policy, the EU, which pays lip service to the rule of law, not only violates these principles, but literally forces other countries to go down the same road. Pressing anyone to take part in illegal activities is illegal to begin with. We consider the EU practice of imposing on other states the decisions in developing which they were not involved to be offensive and downright unacceptable. These actions can be subjected to legal and even criminal assessment. In the case of Serbia, such confrontational steps are at <b>odds with its national interests</b>, and the leadership of that country has repeatedly stated so.</p> <p>These EU actions violate the principles of the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe of 1975 on the sovereign equality of states and respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty and then it proceeds to pontificate about sovereignty as an international legal norm. It has a consumer attitude towards accession candidates, treats individual regions as its “backyard” and uses neo-colonialist policies in dealing with them. With a calculator in hand, the EU tallies the number of EU statements or decisions which the candidate countries have not joined, has no scruples about using blackmail or coercion, and shamelessly uses these countries as markets and labour sources. This transcends politics. This is <b>neo-colonialism</b> of the 21st century. They patched it up and repackaged it, but the methods remained unchanged. They are adopting old proven colonial superiority concepts using innovative technology this time.</p> <p>The EU is not even trying to conceal the fact that Serbia will not become an EU member until it “settles” its relations with Pristina. We must call things for what they are and rephrase it to reflect the original message: “until Belgrade does what the West wants it to do.” The way the EU sees it, this means recognition of the unilaterally proclaimed independence of the province in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1244.”</p> <p>• “In 2018, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Frederica Mogherini said that when the EU is in the region (meaning in the Balkans) there is <b>no room for anyone else</b>. She implied that the Russians had nothing to offer in the Balkans and that their contacts with Serbia and other Balkan countries must be discontinued.”</p>	<p>6/24/22</p> <p>10/6/22</p> <p>12/1/22</p>
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<p><b>The EU as an Authoritative Force</b></p>	<p>4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "... the European Union, in its relations with the countries seeking to join it, has been <b>demanding</b> – the Serbs know this well – that they join all their foreign policy initiatives that of late have been increasingly anti-Russia in character...</li> </ul> <p>... We are seeing this <b>pressure</b> being exerted on the Balkan countries, including Serbia, to have them join the anti-Russia sanctions, which cover almost all economic, cultural, humanitarian, political and other activities. President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic has spoken about this in detail in public several times, emphasising that Serbia will be guided by its own interests...</p> <p>...As for democracies and <b>autocracies</b>, this "community of democracies" represented by the US, NATO and the EU has become an integral whole (under US command). It is an overt <b>autocracy</b> if not a dictatorship as regards other members of the international community...</p> <p>... The West is trying to <b>impose</b> on Serbia its own policy and interests by <b>force of economic pressure, threats, blackmail and ultimatums</b>. It is telling Serbia that it must oppose Russia if it wants to join the EU."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Colleagues, Last night and this morning, we received multiple questions from the media regarding our response to the unprecedented decisions made by a number of NATO members who blocked the Russian Foreign Minister's visit to the Republic of Serbia.</li> </ul> <p>An unthinkable thing has happened. I understand the interest in our assessment of these outrageous actions. A sovereign state has been deprived of the right to carry out its foreign policy. At the moment, Serbia's international activities, at least on the Russian track, are blocked.</p> <p>Let's not beat around the bush. This is another clear and cautionary demonstration of how far NATO and the EU can go in using the most low-grade methods of influencing those whose actions are grounded in national interests and who are against sacrificing their principles and dignity for the sake of the "rules" imposed by the West instead of international law. If the West sees a visit by the Russian Foreign Minister to Serbia almost as a threat on a universal scale, then, apparently, things are not so good there.</p> <p>Lately, we've heard vociferous calls to the effect that Serbia needs to "make a <b>final choice</b>." Yesterday, former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Sweden Carl Bildt made a splashy statement saying that hosting the Russian Foreign Minister in Belgrade was the worst thing Serbia could do to advance its EU prospects. How do you like that? Several days ago (when my visit was announced), US Ambassador to Serbia Christopher Hill published a big article titled "East or West: There is no third way," where he used precisely these terms and logic with regard to Serbia's future relations with the United States, the EU and the Russian Federation. Even an unsophisticated observer will understand that Brussels is not a place for the sovereign equality of states, as enshrined in the UN Charter, and even less so for the notorious freedom of choice, which Brussels constantly talks about."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "As for the humiliations showered on the EU, not only Ukraine acted insolently (the Kiev regime did this under the benevolent eye of its American handlers), but also less significant players such as the Kosovo Albanians. [Prime Minister] Albin Kurti said that he was not interested in reviving the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue. Back in 2013, when the Maidan movement was rising in Ukraine, the EU mediated a Pristina-Belgrade agreement on the creation of the Community of Serb Municipalities of Kosovo. The idea seems to have been buried. Germany and France, which co-authored that momentous decision, as it was described, no longer want to promote it and are trying to <b>force new decisions and a new concept for the agreement on Belgrade</b>, under which Serbia does not have to recognise Kosovo as an independent state but should accept its admission to any international organisation. A simple combination designed to <b>dupe</b> simple-minded people."</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The constant <b>pressure</b> on the part of the EU and leading EU member states on the Kosovo Serbs is in stark contrast with their deathly silence on Pristina disregarding its commitment to create a Community of Serbian Municipalities in the province. The EU is deliberately destroying the relevant Brussels agreements achieved in 2013, turning a blind eye to the many years of the Kosovars sabotaging these agreements and receiving all kinds of benefits whether in the form of liberalising visa regulations or a favourable acceptance for consideration of an application for EU membership submitted by the self-proclaimed Republic of Kosovo."</li> </ul>	<p>3/28/22</p> <p>6/6/22</p> <p>12/7/22</p> <p>12/26/22</p>
<p><b>The EU's Inadequacy</b></p>	<p>9</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The Western silence you have mentioned is no longer surprising. It is a symptom that Pristina's outside patrons blindly pander to the Kosovar Albanian radicals. Mandated by the UN General Assembly to act as a mediator in the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, the European Union has clearly <b>failed in this mission</b>. It has been unable to overcome Kosovo's efforts to sabotage its obligations to establish the Community of Serb Municipalities in the region in almost nine years since the conclusion of an agreement to this effect."</li> </ul>	<p>1/21/22</p>

		<p>• "In 2013, the EU convinced Pristina and Belgrade to sign an agreement on the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. It guaranteed the Serbs' language and cultural rights, as well as their rights in local governments and their special relations with Serbia. However, the Community has not been established. When we remind our Western colleagues about this, they are embarrassed and say that "the matter is still on the table" and that efforts should continue to be taken to implement the decision. I believe that the EU has <b>discredited itself as the guarantor</b> of any agreements...</p> <p>...[Prime Minister of Kosovo] Albin Kurti has said that he would not implement the agreements on the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo</p> <p>The EU, which guaranteed the implementation of all of the above documents, has <b>failed completely</b>. I am sure that it will not do anything to force Pristina to implement the documents co-signed by Europe. The EU and the United States will not place any pressure on Pristina on the issue of mercenaries."</p>	3/28/22
		<p>• "Just recall the developments around Kosovo. In 2013, even before the Minsk agreements on Ukraine were signed, the EU declared that it had achieved yet another success by inducing Belgrade and Pristina to reach an agreement on creating the Community of Serb Municipalities of Kosovo. This implied the right to use the native language, local self-government autonomy, and special economic, social and cultural ties with Serbia. In fact, it was one and the same thing. The EU was a mediator in both cases and it proved its <b>complete inadequacy, intractability, and the lack of any desire to convince Pristina</b> (in the case of Serbia) and Kiev (in the case of Donbass) to implement their commitments."</p>	6/4/22
		<p>• "The EU announced that it had succeeded in both cases. But it shamefully <b>failed</b> in both cases and had to admit it later on by saying it could not persuade Kiev to fulfil the Minsk agreements or make Pristina abide by its agreements with Belgrade."</p>	6/6/22
		<p>• "Something like Republika Srpska in Bosnia has with Serbia, something like what was promised to the Serbs in Kosovo – the deal was reached in 2013 with the help of the European Union. The deal is still <b>not being implemented to the shame of the European Union.</b>"</p>	7/24/22
		<p>• "In 2013, the EU acted as a mediator between Belgrade and Pristina. Their leaders were invited to Brussels where they signed a document on creating a Community of Serb Municipalities of Kosovo. The point is that there are many Serb enclaves in Kosovo. In addition to the region's northern districts with a predominantly Serbian population, there are also a number of enclaves in the rest of it. They were subjected to serious discrimination and harassment by the Albanian majority as regards their language, education in the Serbian language, the mass media and the religious rituals in Serbian Orthodox churches. The sides agreed to establish the afore-mentioned community. But nobody did or wants to do anything about it. To be more exact, the EU has already understood that the Albanians in Pristina are not going to fulfil this agreement (they have announced this in public). <b>The EU acknowledged its complete inability to achieve anything...</b></p> <p>...The EU acknowledged its <b>complete inability</b> to negotiate and to achieve anything. It is growing weaker and this trend is encouraged by the Americans in the financial and economic areas."</p>	12/1/22
		<p>• "This is yet another <b>major failure</b> of the EU's mediation in the stalled Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. The last <b>illusions</b> about the EU's ability to bring to reason the Kosovar Albanian leaders have been dispelled. They are openly brushing away any advice and are actually dictating their own rules to everyone else. Brussels' <b>inability and reluctance</b> to encourage them to fulfil the adopted agreements and the pernicious practice of stamping dubious compromises on Kosovo at Serbia's expense are becoming increasingly obvious. The EU bureaucrats and the most zealous European leaders find it much more convenient to blame all failures on Serbs rather than deal with Pristina radicals.</p> <p>We have repeatedly drawn the attention of the US and EU to the destructive course of the Pristina leaders. Against the backdrop of the <b>failed domestic policy</b>, they are ready to play with fire, fanning Serbophobic hysteria, engage in de facto war preparations and escalate tensions up to an armed conflict. It is necessary to curtail resolutely these subversive activities and return the Kosovars to the Brussels agreements, primarily to their key commitment – to</p>	12/12/22

		<p>establish a Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. They have <b>impudently sabotaged</b> it for almost a decade now.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“Question:</b> On June 9, 2000, 22 and a half years ago, the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed concern over disregard for UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and related problems, from “certain activities in the UN mission’s leadership” to “returning a limited Yugoslavian army and police force to the province.” Belgrade is citing that resolution and waiting for the permission of the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) to deploy its police force in Kosovo. Is the West playing for time there, like with the Minsk agreements?</li> </ul> <p><b>Maria Zakharova:</b> This is a multidimensional question. I replied to part of it today. The events that took place in Kosovo in the wake of NATO’s aggression against Yugoslavia in 1999 and the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1244, especially since 2008 when the Kosovo Albanian leadership unilaterally declared the independence of that Serbian province, are a story of cynical disregard by the West and the Kosovo Albanians, who enjoyed foreign support, of the international framework and the terms of settlement set out in the abovementioned UNSC resolution.</p> <p>As for the main irritant – the potential return of a limited Serbian military and police force to the province, the West and its Kosovo wards immediately rejected this variant as unacceptable. They seem to be at odds with international law. They clearly fear a direct confrontation, which could bury their plans for Kosovo’s illegal sovereignisation, and will do everything in their power to prevent the deployment of a Serbian military and police force there. At the same time, they are not going to lift a finger to remove the root cause of the problem, which is the deliberate suppression of Kosovo Serbs.</p> <p>In this context, it could be said that the opponents of a fair settlement are playing for time and trying to erode and sweep under the rug the fundamental provisions of Resolution 1244, including the possibility of returning a Serbian military and police force to the province. However, this cannot eliminate the relevance and validity of that UNSC decision. You can see what Western and EU mediation has led to. It has provoked a collapse. And despite that, the West has the nerve to offer its mediation in other conflicts. <b>They cannot cite a single instance when they have normalised a situation.”</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The Russian ambassador in Belgrade has already commented on the situation. But there are a lot of questions.</li> </ul> <p>The developments in the Serb-populated north of Kosovo, where Pristina’s authorities took a high-handed decision to make it mandatory, as of August 1, for Kosovo Serbs to replace their identification documents and number plates, which nearly led to armed clashes with dire consequences, are a cause for major concern.</p> <p>Tensions that flared up again were quickly defused. And it was, curiously enough, Western diplomats that had to intervene by persuading the Kosovo leadership to postpone their plans for a month. It is all obvious. It is not about some “merit” of the United States and EU, but about the fact that they have to correct the misdeeds of their own charges, who have long felt impunity, generate dangerous discriminatory initiatives and are not going to seek compromises.</p> <p>The EU and Kosovo diligently pretend to be independent actors, to make decisions and act accordingly. Let us look at what is actually happening. Brussels has a sufficient mandate to resolve contentious issues between the parties. However, there is a strong impression that the EU cannot do without “prompting” from Washington, even when the head of European diplomacy, Josep Borrell, calls for dismantling the barricades. The impression is that this is a purely intra-European conflict. True, Serbia is not an EU member, but it is surrounded by EU members. It is has a regular dialogue with the EU, both on EU engagement and on the situation around Kosovo. The impression is that <b>Brussels cannot resolve even its own internal European conflict</b>, despite it having all the tools to do so without being on a short leash with Washington. This leads to the question often asked by Western journalists: to what extent can Europe, in the form of the EU, do anything and act as an independent player?”</p>	<p>12/15/22</p> <p>8/2/22</p>
<p><b>Historical &amp; Spiritual Fraternity</b></p>	<p>2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“Question:</b> I know Russia now has more important things to worry about, but “everyone is out for himself.” Now Serbia has to harmonise its foreign policy. It has not introduced sanctions against Russia. For us Russia is the most important foreign policy partner when it comes to upholding our sovereignty in international organisations. How do you visualise Serbia’s possible political prevarication between the two geopolitical poles, and does this phenomenon have time limits?</li> </ul> <p><b>Sergey Lavrov:</b> It’s not up to us to be responsible for decisions made by Serbia, the Serbian leadership or the Serbian people. We are fraternal nations. We are <b>united by common history</b></p>	<p>3/28/22</p>

		<p>and victories against common enemies. We feel how deeply these feelings are rooted in the soul of the Serbian people, in their <b>historical</b> memory. And now we are seeing this. We never impose anything by force. The West is trying to impose on Serbia its own policy and interests by force of economic pressure, threats, blackmail and ultimatums. It is telling Serbia that it must oppose Russia if it wants to join the EU. This is unseemly. This is not how one should behave in society, at home, with friends or in the world arena. This is an example of their policy of arm-twisting. President Aleksandar Vucic has mentioned this more than once. He said honestly that Serbia is a small country but it has its own pride and its own interests. Attempts are being made now to simply forget these interests and turn you into an instrument of Western policy. This is what happened with North Macedonia and Montenegro. This is what the West is now trying to do with Bosnia and Herzegovina. – in relation to the EU.”</p> <p>• “Regrettably, my June visit to Belgrade failed to materialise. Those who have scuttled this visit at the bidding of their “higher-ups” should know that their nasty tricks will not shake Russia-Serbia relations, which are based on the foundation of firm friendship between our people, and have <b>deep historical, spiritual, and civilisational roots.</b>”</p>	8/22/22
<b>Unconditional Support</b>	<b>3</b>	<p>• “As for Russia’s attitude to the negotiations on Kosovo’s future, which are continuing and should be based on UN Security Council Resolution 1244, President Putin repeatedly emphasised both during meetings with President Vucic and in his public remarks that Russia was <b>fully in support of the Serbian</b> position. We will support the decision that will be acceptable for the Serbian people.”</p> <p>• “I know they will come up with multiple explanations (we haven’t heard any so far). The countries that didn’t allow a flyover for the Russian aircraft will say that they received orders from the European Union or NATO. Those, in turn, will say that these countries were independent in their decision-making. You are well aware of all that. However, most importantly <b>no one will be able to destroy our relations with Serbia.</b>”</p> <p>• “As for Kosovo, Russia’s position <b>remains unchanged.</b> It has been repeatedly reiterated by President Vladimir Putin. We are in favour of Belgrade and Pristina reaching a viable and mutually acceptable solution based on UN Security Council Resolution 1244. There is no doubt that it should first and foremost conform to international law and receive an obligatory approval from the UN Security Council. We will only accept a solution that will suit the Serbs. We will give our Serbian friends <b>all-out support</b> in reaching this result.</p> <p>We stand in <b>solidary</b> with the Serbian leaders that justifiably say it is pointless to continue the talks in a situation where the Kosovo Albanians and the US-led Western players are cynically ignoring the fundamental UN Security Council Resolution 1244.”</p>	<p>6/4/22</p> <p>6/6/22</p> <p>12/22/22</p>