

**Contemporary Russian-Serbian Relations:**

Interviews with Youth from Political Parties in Belgrade and Vojvodina

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## Abstract

Serbia and Russia have a long historical relationship that continues to be both important and complicated in the post-Soviet era. This thesis studies how this relationship is viewed in Serbia by younger members of various Serbian political parties. The importance of this topic is that it may provide insights into future relations between the two countries. In fall 2013 I interviewed eleven young people with affiliations to different political parties in Belgrade and Vojvodina on topics such as historical relations with Russia, cultural connections, the role of economics, and geopolitics in order to determine the perception and influence of Russia's role in Serbia today. Published materials and interviews with two experts in the field provided useful tools to analyze the collected data. My working hypothesis was that (1) participants would lack historical knowledge of relations with Russia and their opinions would adhere to those of their political parties; and (2) opinions about Russia were likely to have developed on the basis of emotional reactions to crises such as Kosovo. The interview data showed that several participants' historical knowledge of Serbian-Russian relations was indeed strong, but that this influenced their perceptions of Russia less frequently, and, secondly, there was a wide range of opinions regarding Russia's role and influence in Serbia. Participants tended to have extreme views of the relationship with Russia, signifying the important role that emotion plays in Serbian politics. Most participants recognized a cultural link between the two countries, but many favored a closer relationship with the EU over increased ties with Russia.

## Introduction

*“I would like you to know that Serbia is Russia’s partner in the Balkans...Serbia loves you. And you deserved this love by the manner you rule Russia.”*

-President Nikolić to President Putin (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2013, p. 4).

In a world where everyone is out for him or herself, there are still individuals who believe that brotherhood and fraternity can transcend self-interest. Serbia’s President Nikolić may be one of those people, if you ask him how he feels about Russia, a country that shares Serbia’s Slavic and Orthodox background. Yet for other Serbs, that is all they have in common with Russia, and they view the giant to the north with spiteful suspicion. My task in this paper is not to defend either side but to understand how one comes to such conclusions about Russia, and what Russia means for Serbs today. What knowledge about the history of such relations do Serbs possess as they form these opinions? What about Russia’s own internal problems that may drive its interests in the sphere of international relations? In understanding Russia’s interests, one should have realistic expectations of Russia’s motivations in its involvement in Serbia. Finally, how does Serbia fare when all is said and done: Can Serbia benefit from its relations with Russia or do they interfere with Serbia’s best interests? As Serbia attempts to build an identity following the wars of the 90s, wars shaped by ethnicity and culture, Serbia’s cultural and ethnic affinity with Russia could naturally increase.

I have gained an insight into the future of Serbia by my primary research with Serbia’s political youth. I have also interviewed two experts to provide me with additional information regarding the state of affairs between Serbia and Russia. My hypothesis was that I would

receive a variety of answers on the relationship with Russia, and that many people would know little about the history of Serbian-Russian relations. I also thought that participants' opinions towards Russia would be identical to those represented by their respective parties. In some ways, the interviewees surprised me. Knowledge of history was more extensive than expected, but it lacked depth, and interpretations of history varied wildly. Participants also had different opinions as to how and if this history is important to Serbia's relations with Russia in the modern world. For many, even those with some sympathy towards Russia, it was clear that Russian interests did not always collide with those of Serbia, though there was no consensus or pinpointing Russia's exact interests in Serbia. Finally, there was little grey area when discussing how relations with Russia might harm or benefit Serbia. Most participants had a strong opinion in one direction or another. The least extreme answers I received were those that proposed the strengthening of cultural ties but nothing else. The conclusion of this paper will discuss all of these findings in greater detail, as well as introduce some expert opinions on how Serbs came to these conclusions about Russia.

### Methodology

This research project is primarily based on semi-structured interviews with political youth, both in person and over e-mail, and largely in Belgrade<sup>1</sup>. However, some participants I interviewed via e-mail hailed from different cities in Serbia<sup>2</sup>. Appendix 2 contains brief descriptions of the political parties in Serbia to which my participants belonged. I conducted a total of thirteen interviews, including two with experts on Serbian-Russian relations. Most of

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<sup>1</sup> All participant names have been changed

<sup>2</sup> Two of my interviewees were from the autonomous province of Vojvodina.

my interviews were arranged either through my own contacts or those of my Serbian advisor<sup>3</sup>, although there were also a few that developed from my original contacts through the Belgrade study abroad program<sup>4</sup>. The interviews asked for basic information about education, place of origin, position in a political party, and then proceeded to specific questions about the history of relations with Russia and perceptions about these relationships, and different aspects of Russia generally. I developed these interview questions after completing my background research, and they were revised and augmented by my Serbian advisor.

There were several reasons why I decided to do my research on the complex relationship between Serbia and Russia. Serbia is becoming increasingly involved with Russia in different sectors, such as energy, economics, and the military, and sometimes this involvement is perceived to have adverse consequences for Serbia's prospective EU membership. Since both the EU and Russia are considered two of Serbia's "four pillars of foreign policy<sup>5</sup>," additional research on these complexities is warranted. My target population was political youth, ages 18 to 28<sup>6</sup>. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 1. They include a broad range of questions intended to show how participants' knowledge and interpretation of history and current affairs relating to Russia influenced their narrative on Russia and its relations with Serbia. In my interviews I made sure to ask questions that may elicit both negative and positive comments about the relationship.

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<sup>3</sup> While in Belgrade, I was advised by Igor Novaković, a member of the International and Security Affairs Centre (ISAC) Fund, who oversaw my research and guided the direction of my study.

<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of my study abroad program in Belgrade, I was introduced to several members of different political parties in Belgrade.

<sup>5</sup> Entities with whom Serbia would like to strengthen relations: EU, US, China, and Russia

<sup>6</sup> One participant was 30

There are many areas of my life which affect my positionality in this project. My position as a young American student makes me possibly biased in favor of the West, although my university Russian major may make me more prone to overestimate the influence of Russia and its importance within Serbia. As an outsider and a young person, I did not experience Yugoslavia's position between the East and the West, or understand how it might affect Serbia's difficulty in keeping or breaking from this position vis à vis Europe. Because I am an American, people who are fond of Russia may be less willing to talk to me because of the belief that America and Russia still experience a rocky relationship. For this reason I was very careful not to appear biased in any of my questions. The limitation of English-language interviews prevented me from talking with people who were less influenced by the West and more sympathetic towards Russia. Completing my research in Serbia but writing my thesis in America did not allow me to supplement any further questions I had with additional research. As for my advantages, being of a similar age as my participants may have helped in producing a more natural and comfortable interview atmosphere. Having studied the region's history and the background of my topic, I (hopefully) presented myself as an informed interviewer whom my participants respected.

### Historical Relations between Serbia and Russia

#### *The Middle Ages to 2008*

Relations between Serbia and Russia date back to the Middle Ages. Contacts between Serbs and Russians were first formalized (after the sixth century migration of Serbs to Balkans)

in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Ćić, 2010). During this time, relations were based solely on the exchange of religious materials between the churches of Serbia and Russia, since at the time Moscow was the only independent Slavic Orthodox country. This non-political relationship lasted until about the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or until the Russian Empire began to use the Balkans as leverage in its frequent wars against the Ottoman Empire<sup>7</sup>.

There were many instances in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when the Serbian monarchy appealed to the Russian czar for help to Orthodox brethren (Jovanović, 2010). In 1724 and 1747 there were great migrations to Russia by Serbs, and a treaty in 1774 officially established Russia as the patron of Balkan Orthodoxy. The perception of Russia at this time was one of a “great Orthodox emperor,” and a “third homeland” for Serbian travelers. During the First Serbian Uprising of 1804 to 1813, Serbia unsuccessfully petitioned Russia for aid, and the Turks attacked the Serbs in 1805 (Cox, 2002, p. 40). But shortly thereafter Russia became engaged in the Napoleonic wars, which pitted it against the Turks and secured Russian support for Serbia. This aid was quickly withdrawn when Czar Alexander I made peace with the Ottoman Empire in 1807. Russia again came to Serbia’s aid when Russia renewed its conflict with Turkey in 1809, but only until Russia was forced to withdraw aid to protect its own homeland against the Napoleonic invasion. Finally, the 1812 Treaty of Bucharest between Russia and the Turks granted Serbia amnesty and autonomy. This back and forth and conditional aid from Russia was typical not only during this period but during the entire history of relations between the two

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<sup>7</sup> The Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires shared control over the territory today known as the Balkans.

countries. And many times, when Russia sent support to Serbia in its wars against the Turks, it too was in the midst of preparing for a war with the Ottoman Empire<sup>8</sup>.

This leads to an event in 1878 which is still interpreted in different ways in Serbia today. After another war with the Ottoman Empire, Serbia expected to be represented and protected by Russia in the peace treaty of San Stefano. This may have been a reasonable expectation, since Russia intervened in Serbia's war with the Ottoman Empire in 1876 to prevent its likely defeat (Pavlowitch, 2002, p. 64). However, Russia believed that promoting a greater and independent Bulgarian state was more in line with its interests in the Balkans (MacKenzie, 1967, p. 299). Russia was willing to sacrifice Serbia to Austrian influence in exchange for Bulgaria. Although other great powers prevented a Greater Bulgaria from developing at the Congress of Berlin, at this point feelings of skepticism towards Russia began to develop in Serbia (Judah, 2000, p. 59). This is important, as it was the first time a real divide appeared as people became pro-Russian and anti-Russian.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw many vacillations in Serbian relations with Russia. In 1903 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, of which Serbia was a part, was returned to the control of the Karađorđević dynasty, which historically maintained friendly ties with Russia (Petrović, 2010, p. 16). After a slump in relations after 1878, this was an important turning point, and surely influenced the support of Russia for Serbia in the First World War, which many Serbs see as a

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<sup>8</sup> When Russia led a pan-Slav war with Serbia against the Turks in 1876 to "avenge Kosovo," the idea could have easily been to prepare for the war it entered into with Turkey only a year later. "Avenging Kosovo" refers to the highly symbolic Serbian defeat by the Turks in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. The battle was fought between the Turks of the Ottoman Empire and Serbia and its allies. Both the leader of the Turks, Sultan Murad I, and the leader of the Christian Serbs, Prince Lazar, were killed in battle. However, the myth of Prince Lazar's death states that he sacrificed his life and his "earthly kingdom" for Serbia's return to greatness in the future and its ability to inherit the "heavenly kingdom" (Cox, 2002, p. 30).

great sacrifice on the part of Russia. Of course, the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 in Russia changed the game completely, and relations were indifferent and almost absent until the end of World War Two in 1944 and the liberation of Serbia in part by the Red Army. As Yugoslavia transformed into a socialist republic, its leader, Josip Broz Tito, and the USSR's Josef Stalin were on cordial terms. In 1948 Tito decided that a different strategy for Yugoslavia would be more beneficial. Through the later Non-Alignment Movement, he participated in the creation of the European and global "buffer zone" between the West (US) and the East (USSR). This worked very well for Yugoslavia, and its residents began to identify with this in-between and outsider status (Žiković, 2011, p. 68). People in Serbia weren't sure whether Russia represented the true form of socialism or a communist form of despotism (Petrović, 2010, p. 13).

Both the socialist systems of Yugoslavia and the USSR began to break down at the same time. While the USSR disintegrated relatively peacefully, Yugoslavia entered into a series of wars which would rage on throughout most of the 1990s. During the first wars of the 90s in Croatia and Bosnia, the weakened Russian state did not make much of an impact. But by the late 90s, as war was beginning to shape in Kosovo, Serbian president Slobodan Milošević expected Russian leverage against NATO and military assistance (Hosmer, 2001, p. xiii). While Russian public opinion favored Serbia, Boris Yeltsin did not believe that threatening Russia's relationship with the West was in Russia's best interests. Milošević's credibility was weakened when his expectations were not realized. But it was not just Milošević who expected Russian help: only two weeks before war began in Kosovo in 1998, an overwhelming 78% of Serbs believed that Russia would come to Serbia's aid if Serbia were to be bombed (Judah, 2000, p. 119). The fact that Russia did no such thing shows that either Serbs were overly optimistic

about Russian assistance or that they had serious misconceptions about Russian interests in the Balkans. Before the war, Russia made it clear to Serbia that it was not interested in a conflict with NATO and that the best option for Serbia would be to accept Kosovo's fate and avoid war altogether (Vuksic, p. 4). In 1999 Russia vetoed military action against Serbia in the UN Security Council, but did not take action when NATO disregarded the decision of the Security Council and proceeded to act unilaterally against Serbia. Although Yeltsin supported Milošević as leader in the Balkans, he did not wish to become involved in a conflict with NATO over Kosovo (Hosmer, 2001, p. 43). In fact, Russia also cooperated with NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) in 1999 (Vuksic, p. 4); it withdrew troops from Kosovo in 2003.

In 2008 Kosovo declared its independence. Despite immediate recognition from Western powers, Russia has refused to recognize Kosovo, citing Russia's support for Serbia's territorial integrity. Since Kosovo is a key issue in Serbian politics, this Russian support for Serbia created renewed positive perceptions of the Russian state for many people<sup>9</sup>.

### *Political Relations 2008-to the Present*

Since 2008 Belgrade has included Moscow as one of its concerns in foreign policy. Serbia, in turn, may reap many benefits from its relationship with Russia (Petrović, 2010, p. 7). Trade, investment, and Russia's support for Serbia regarding Kosovo largely benefit Serbia more than they do Russia. There is even support for Serbs outside of Serbia, with increased support

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<sup>9</sup> An interesting comparison can be made with another event in 2008, which was Russia's recognition of the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia. There are a few theories about Russia's inconsistency in its idea of "territorial integrity." First, Russia may not recognize Kosovo because the Western powers have refused to recognize Georgia's breakaway provinces (Vuksic, p. 4). Alternatively, Russia's interests in maintaining influence over Georgia may have been more important than abiding by international laws of sovereignty and integrity (ISAC Fund, 2010). Russia often notes that after Georgia attacked these provinces, they were no longer liable to such laws.

for Banja Luka in Bosnia and Bosnian Serb war criminals. The Voice of Russia chronicled Russia's support for Ratko Mladić in a broadcast released in October, 2013. According to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Hague trial of Mladić violates international law and the proceedings are damaging to Mladić's poor health. Further, the ministry has stated that it advocates an early termination of his trial on these grounds. The benefits for Russia come in the form of "hard security," or a counter-measure against NATO expansion<sup>10</sup> (Petrović, 2010, p. 7). As I will explain later, Russia sees NATO expansion as a threat to Russia's national security. In what may be seen as another attempt to gain influence in Serbia over the West, in 2009 Russia and Serbia agreed to what they call a "strategic partnership." For the two countries this means a coordination of their positions in the fields of politics, energy, and economics (Petrović, 2010, p. 7).

How much influence Moscow has on Serbian politics is a matter of contention, but it is clear that both negative and positive opinions of Russia today are fraught with emotion. For one group of people in Serbia, Russia represents more than a "strategic partner." Its role is one of protector, and it is a relationship "formed by the historical closeness of the two peoples (defined by ethnicity, not by citizenship), and the common religious and cultural heritage, which were ... easy to be transferred to the political level" (Petrović, 2010, p. 5). This is how Serbia is represented to the rest of the world, and Serbian president Nikolić embodies it completely in the following statement: "One should strive to get to know Russia in order to love her even more" (Petrović, 2010, p. 12). The other side is often no more logical, and its position reflects Western biases. Russia is perceived as a consistent prospective colonizer of Serbia, and to some

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<sup>10</sup> As in the Balkans, Serbia is one of the only non-NATO members.

Serbia is consciously letting itself be colonized. This point of view is articulated perfectly by the president of the Liberal Democratic Party, Jovanović. The LDP President conceded that Serbia “knelt before Russia for Kosovo” when it sold 51% of NIS (Serbia’s gas company) to Russia. In other words, Serbia sold the majority of its most valuable asset (oil) in exchange for Russian support for Serbia regarding Kosovo. No matter how people resolve to interpret Russia’s presence in Serbian politics, the main point of issue is that they are likely to do so without trying to understand Russia’s true positions, intentions, and interests (Petrović, 2010, p. 5).

### *Cultural Ties*

A common perception of Russia by Serbs is that Russia shares an important Slavic and orthodox history with Serbia. One of their most basic commonalities is the use of the Cyrillic alphabet (although Serbs just as often use the Latin alphabet). This alphabet was created by the orthodox Saints Cyril and Methodius in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Judah, 2000, p. 16). Orthodoxy has always been something that Serbs have identified with, as it was one Slavic marker that Serbs were able to retain during their occupation by various empires in their history. If Serbs have always identified with orthodoxy, then it is little wonder that they developed a bond (real or imaginary) with Russia, which has always been home to the largest number of orthodox believers. Relations between the two orthodox churches have remained strong since their inception in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Russian radio station Voice of Russia reported that even today (2013), the Russian Patriarch is concerned about his Serbian orthodox brethren. In October 2013, the Russian Patriarch Kirill gave encouragement to Kosovar Serbs and congratulated Serb leaders on their moral example and refusal to accommodate “immoral ways

of life in Belgrade.” It is likely that the Patriarch was referring to the decision of Belgrade officials not to allow the Gay Pride Parade in September.

### *Energy and Economics*

Energy and economics, arguably the two main forces propelling the modern world, have an increasingly important role in the relationship between Serbia and Russia. The biggest project is the construction of the Southern Stream pipeline in Serbia, which began in November 2013. Approximately one-third of the pipeline which connects through Serbia lies in Serbian territory, and will supply Europe with gas from the state-run Russian Gazprom (Petrović, 2010, p. 133). This is an attempt by Russia to ensure that Europe maintains its consumption of Russian gas, which accounts for one quarter of all gas imports (Petrović, 2010, p. 133). Europe would like to diversify its gas imports away from Russia, but the construction of this pipeline will be a major deterrent.

Russia chose to construct the pipeline partially through Serbia for a variety of reasons, among them Serbia’s sale of 51% of its national gas industry (NIS) to Russia for a low price. A strategy for Russia was to find a path towards Europe which would bypass Ukraine, a country with which Russia has vexed relations (Petrović, 2010, p. 146). An added bonus for Russia is that the countries in Eastern Europe are likely to comply because of the monetary incentives. And for Russia, a friendly country such as Serbia is the ideal location to place its most valuable assets. The cooperation between Serbia and Russia in the energy industry has resulted in an additional free trade zone for oil and gas (Petrović, 2010, p. 146).

Aside from the oil pipeline, it might be useful to mention briefly Serbia's foreign trade and investment. As of 2005, all of the major foreign companies invested in Serbia hailed from the EU or the US, except for the Russian Lukoil (a large investor) (Heuberger & Vyslonzil, 2006, p. 103). A more recent study (2012) comes from The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia: from 2005 to 2012, 62% to 89% of all Serbia's foreign direct investment came from the EU. Overwhelmingly, Serbia both exports into and imports from the European Union (around 60%). Serbia also has extensive trade with CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement), a group made up of Central European non-EU states<sup>11</sup>. Trade with Russia accounts for about 11% of Serbia's total imports and 8% of total exports<sup>12</sup>.

### *Serbia between East and West*

Serbia maintains a unique and troubled position between the East and West in Europe. Serbs would like to retain a similar position to the former non-aligned Yugoslavia, yet they are also attempting to build their own post-war, post-socialist, post-Yugoslav identity. The current world order doesn't make this easy. In a poll featured in "Nation as a Problem or a Solution" (2008, p. 48), Serbs stated that, on a scale of 1 to 100, their closeness to Europe was 54. And in a poll taken by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy in 2012, the results were still split (p. 13). Half of the respondents felt that Serbia should join the EU, but there was also an increase in euroskepticism compared to previous years. When given the choice of what is best for Serbia's security, the majority responded with neutrality (44%), but the two groups that advocated closer ties with Russia or the EU were similar in number (18 and 16% respectively). One of my

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<sup>11</sup> Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNMIK (Kosovo), Moldova, Albania, and Serbia

<sup>12</sup> Reference Appendices 3 and 4 for the respective graphs of Serbia's foreign direct investment, imports and exports. These graphs show the different levels of trade and investment with the EU, Russia, and others.

reasons for interviewing members of political parties comes from a conclusion of the 2012 study, which was that political parties had a significant influence on the participants' views of Russia. And although there was no overwhelming "winner" between the West and the East in the poll, it is interesting to note that the countries which Serbs regarded as "friendly" (Russia, Greece, and China), are "Eastern"<sup>13</sup>. And Serbia's "enemies" (USA, Germany, Albania<sup>14</sup>) fall into the "Western" category.

The territories around Serbia have succeeded in pushing the boundaries of what constitutes the East and the West in order to be included in one of the two categories (Žiković, 2011, p. 89). Serbia has not been so successful in this strategy: it cannot delegate the curse word of "Balkans" any farther East or any farther South than itself, so its positionality is dependent on maintaining strict cooperation with both "sides." There are two problems that arise for Serbia out of this positionality. One is its declared "neutrality," and the other is how this "neutrality" affects Serbia in regard to the EU, NATO, and Russia. When speaking with my interviewees, many of them mentioned Serbia's neutrality, but an expert told me that Serbia is certainly not neutral. But what does it mean to be neutral, and how can we conclude that Serbia is in fact *not* neutral? Serbia's inability to declare a stance, even a neutral stance, can be found in its key security documents (Novaković, 2012, p. 11). The documents lack a statement of the official neutral status of Serbia, and it may be possible to infer from this that Serbia is only using a rhetoric of neutrality as a political tool, that Serbia is really open to taking "sides"

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<sup>13</sup> Greece may be debatable as an eastern country, but it is geographically further east than Serbia and it is an Orthodox nation.

<sup>14</sup> In Albania's case, an eastern country with the good will and support of the Western world.

with the highest bidder. Serbia does not abide by all the formalities of being a neutral state: it allows the presence of foreign troops and bases on its territory.

Serbia's second problem is that "Serbia cannot take a neutral position if the EU and Russia differ" (Petrović, 2010, p. 37). This statement can be attributed to how Serbia is swayed by Russia but has made entry into the EU its top priority. Because Russia would benefit from having a friend in the EU, it does not criticize Serbia's plans as it does in former Soviet states (Timofeev 2010). But where NATO is concerned, Russia takes a different, more complicated stance<sup>15</sup>. The Serbian Minister of Defense only had to suggest joining NATO for Russia to respond with threats of retracting support over Kosovo (Petrović 2010, p. 99). This action relates to how Russia sees its position in the world and how important security is for the Russian state. NATO can be seen as a direct threat to Russian security because "Russia defines security in geopolitical terms" (Petrović 2010, p. 104).

### Two Expert Opinions

On the futility of using emotions in Serbian politics: *It's the old story that we keep playing on: should we join the kingdom of heaven or should we join the kingdom of earth? That's just silly, that's not a choice. The state can't join the kingdom of heaven. That's a personal thing* (Interview with Dragomir Kojić, Belgrade, 19 Nov. 2013).

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<sup>15</sup> The Russian attitude towards NATO is more often than not perceived to be entirely negative. But what we must remember is that Russia has been a major cooperative partner of NATO for many years (Petrović 2010, p. 99). Among other non-NATO members, it sends the most troops on NATO peacekeeping missions, and has even cooperated with NATO in Bosnia (1994 and 1996), on the Dayton Peace Agreement (1996), and with KFOR (Kosovo Force in 1999).

As part of my research, I spoke with two experts in the field of Serbian-Russian relations. Ivan Stankić<sup>16</sup> and Dragomir Kojić<sup>17</sup> provided me with some useful insights into the relationship between Serbia and Russia, and the nature and variance of the answers I received from interview participants. Stankić introduced two overarching themes which are the backbone of the relationship between the two countries. The first is that Serbian politics run on emotions. This is a bold claim and may offend some, but Stankić explained his reasoning thoroughly. Serbian politics fall prey to emotions because there has not been a sufficient development of political culture. Emotions were heavily employed in politics during and before Yugoslav times, and today there are still remnants of this approach. The “multi-party system only arrived 20 years ago. Before 2000 this was a Frankenstein system. So you didn’t have people living in a democratic society in order to have these democratic values. Before that we used a lot of emotions to decide things” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013). Serbia/Yugoslavia’s past leaders, Milošević, Tito, and the kings, are concrete examples. Serbia’s political culture is still in transition to democracy from totalitarianism, and these strong leaders were able to rule over this territory by inciting emotions in their constituents. “We are not rational, [we are] more emotional. When you decide who you’re going to vote for, you don’t take a look at their program, [or] how they’re going to raise taxes or not.” He continued that it’s much easier to gain votes if you mention Kosovo or Serbia’s Slavic ties with Russia. To be rational in politics is a death sentence for your campaign. Stankić relates it to the emotional draw of nationalism in the 90s, explaining that “on emotions you can easily drag people to do something for you. If they sit and think, they will maybe say no.”

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<sup>16</sup> Stankić works for the Diplomatic Forum and wrote his Master’s thesis on Serbian-Russian relations.

<sup>17</sup> Kojić works for the ISAC Fund

Kojić agreed that Serbian politicians manipulated their constituencies through the use of emotions. He was aware that the use of emotions was successful in preventing the societal transformation which is necessary in order for Serbia to modernize and become a functioning European country. As Serbia moves closer to EU membership, Serbs have become afraid of losing their national identity as a consequence of conforming to the EU. The many conflicts and struggles in and around Serbia have created an atmosphere ripe for manipulation of emotions in politics. Kojić states, “it is much easier to play on simple, raw emotions than actually deal with the serious education that you have to go through so you can achieve transformation” (Interview, Belgrade, 19 Nov. 2013). For politicians, he says, taking the hard road is a difficult and unrewarding path.

Instead, Kojić reasons, politicians are willing to enter into deals which benefit their own personal interests and not the Serbian national interest. When asked for examples, Kojić responded with many. Among them were several key figures in Serbia who have enjoyed immense financial benefits from political deals. For example, “the director of Serbian gas [of the] Socialist Party of Serbia is being paid off by the Russians” (Interview, Belgrade, 19 Nov. 2013). Kojić argues that now “he is invincible in this country because the Russians are actually keeping his back.” And that is not all. Boris Tadić and Vuk Jeremić, the former president and the former minister of foreign affairs, “actually made deals...which included their getting huge accounts in Switzerland.” Relating this information to me made Kojić disheartened, and he asked nonchalantly, “You want more? Unfortunately we have loads of these.”

In Russia, Vladimir Putin epitomizes the strong leader who capitalizes on emotions and can bring his country out of the ashes and back into glory. To Stankić, Putin is the leader whom Serbs can only dream of, and his popularity in Serbia indicates this. “If Putin could be a candidate for president in Serbia he would win like that (snap). His voice is well heard here,” he says. “He has big authority in Serbia” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013). So for those who would like to align with Russia, Moscow will have influence. This is not lost on Putin, Stankić argues, and Russia employs emotions as a powerful tool of manipulation in Serbia. “They easily play on our emotions. They always remind us of [the] NATO bombing, of [the] breakup of Yugoslavia, [that the] tribunal in Hague is not fair against Serbia. But nobody asks the question: do they know that Russia was in favor when the tribunal was established?” Russia clearly employs emotions in Serbia because it is a successful tool, one it can use without having to explain itself. Serbia is still a country in transition and has yet to develop a solid national identity or national interest, and Russia will likely take advantage of this in Serbia for as long as possible. According to Stankić, Russia enjoys such relations with Serbia because they require little effort. Any more effort from Russia would harm its national interests, which are located firmly in the former Soviet sphere and outside of the Balkan NATO zone.

Kojić expands upon the reasoning behind Russia’s interests in Serbia as a friendly country outside of the NATO zone. According to Kojić, Serbia’s role in this sphere is worth mentioning. For a non-NATO country in Europe to be on friendly terms with Russia means that “the West doesn’t have a complete victory” (Interview, Belgrade, 19 Nov. 2013). He goes on to say that Russia is still recovering from its Cold War loss, and therefore, “they need Serbia not to join the EU. Not because that is strategically important in any way for Russia. Simply as a flag

that their interests have succeeded in prevailing [over] Western interests.” In other words, Russia’s friendship with Serbia may have more benefits symbolically than in any tangible ways, and Russia is willing to devote a certain amount of time, effort, and resources to preserve this relationship.

The extent of Russia’s interests in Serbia represents the second major theme outlined by Stankić when trying to understand relations between Russia and Serbia. On the surface, it appears that Russia has a solid interest in Serbia. Gazprom bought NIS, the construction of the Southern Stream pipeline has officially begun, and Russia supports Serbia’s territorial integrity regarding Kosovo. However, Stankić was able to affirm each of these points as conditionally within Russian interest. Russia bought NIS on the eve of Kosovo’s declaration of independence, heavily pressuring Serbia. Russia easily gained from this: NIS was sold cheaply, and there was a surge in interest in Russia after its support for Kosovo (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013). The construction of the pipeline, for Stankić, is directly correlated to Russia’s problems within its own sphere of interest, namely Ukraine. Russia has recently had problems maintaining control over Ukraine, the country through which most of Russian oil flows into Europe. Russia’s power and strength are concentrated in its resources, such as energy, and if Ukraine cannot be a reliable transit route for Russia’s most valuable assets, Russia must find a suitable alternative. Serbia happened to be that willing alternative<sup>18</sup>. It is not an ideal location for Russia, and “if Russia keeps Ukraine under control, there won’t be South Stream...it’s too

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<sup>18</sup> Kojić agrees that the Southern Stream pipeline is only being constructed because of problems with Ukraine, and he is concerned that it may interfere with Serbia’s application for EU membership. During our interview, he said that “just yesterday we received information from [a] European agency for energy that our contract with Russia is not in accordance [with] EU regulations. So if we want to keep going towards [the] EU we have to adjust it. Of course the Russians do not like that” (Interview, Belgrade, 19 Nov. 2013).

expensive...80% of [Russia's] oil exports go through Ukraine" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013). So, does Russia really care about Serbia, or is Serbia's current usefulness for Russia inspiring a kind of fabricated interest<sup>19</sup>?

This is of course a theory, but if it is true, what kind of effect has it had on Serbia? The biggest effect is that it has sustained Serbia's indecision about its place in the world. Many Serbs feel as though they must choose between following Russia and following the EU. Others, aware they are being courted by both the East and the West see Serbia as an important successor to Tito's non-aligned Yugoslavia. Stankić mentions how these ideas have been floating around Serbia since the time of Milošević: "Milošević wanted to inherit this image of Yugoslavia. He failed. But people's mindset is still, we still think we are very important...We are not even [a] regional power" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013). Those who have graduated from this perspective have chosen to belong to one of two extreme camps: Russophiles and Russophobes. In Stankić's own research, he found it difficult to obtain an objective opinion on Russia. Depending on what questions he asked, he would be labeled immediately as a lover of Russia or the contrary. "None of the extremes like the middle part. The Russophiles don't like it because it represents Russia as a normal state with its own national interests...All sides want to emphasize one side of the story."

Kojić also noticed that the discourse surrounding Russia was mainly split between two extreme positions, but he claimed that using Serbia's historical ties with Russia to develop an

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<sup>19</sup> Stankić gave me another interesting idea about Russia's interest in Serbia: "If Russia really loved to help Serbia, they would accept this offer to Serbs in Kosovo to become citizens of Russia" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013). Apparently, Kosovar Serbs sent this request to Moscow a couple years ago but have as of yet not received a positive answer. Stankić believes this is because it would require Russia actually to be invested in the safety and security of Serbs in Kosovo.

opinion regarding Russia's interests in Serbia is unfounded. Both extreme positions are probably incorrect, as "the truth lies somewhere in between. The truth of what Russia did is not really important anymore. Especially in history that goes further than the Second World War. We live in a post-Second World War system" (Interview, Belgrade, 19 Nov. 2013). Since the world order has changed so drastically in recent times, it is only contemporary history and issues which have any real effect on current relations. As I found out in my interviews, this position was not held by all of my participants.

### Data Collection and Results

*"They [Russia] are even better than us. We drink more than they drink. We have more violence than they have"* (Bojan, Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 16 Nov. 2013).

#### *The History of Russian and Serbian Relations*

Many of my participants did not have a solid grasp of Serbia's history with Russia much before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although it was suggested during a few of my interviews, such as with individuals from the Social Democratic Union, that history going back further than that is irrelevant to modern politics. To some, Russia and Serbia have a very limited history of natural alliance. According to Julijana of the New Party, "the last Russian emperor was Nicolai who entered the First World War because of Serbia and that was, I believe, the last time that Russia will do anything for Serbia just because they are natural allies" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18

Nov. 2013). As most of my responses were either extremely in favor or against Russia's involvement in Serbia's history, one of the only other moderate answers came from the Democratic Party. Đorđe still wasn't convinced that Russia provided much help: "Russia has never provided adequate support to Serbia, except during the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 by NATO" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013).

The respondents who provided critical perceptions of Russia throughout history did so fervently. Pavle, from the URS, started with explaining how liberation efforts from the Red Army were not very helpful during World War Two. After WWII, the "USSR had planned to control Yugoslavia like all other Eastern European countries behind Iron Curtain. That plan didn't work," he says (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 27 Nov. 2013). He goes on to mention how Russia's support of Slobodan Milošević was harmful to the people of Serbia in the 90s. Others, like Goran from the Liberal Democratic Party, had heard stories of disappointment about the lack of Russian help in the 90s. "From stories of that time...people expected that Russia will intervene and defend us. There were stories that they would help our military" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia 18 Nov. 2013). Although his knowledge of history was limited, it seemed to me that his historical perceptions of Russia consisted of unmet expectations.

Some interviewees had no complaint about any historical interaction between Serbia and Russia. One of these people was from the Democratic Party of Serbia. Aleksandar recognized that Russia's and Serbia's interests did not always collide, and didn't blame Russia for any of its actions that may have had a negative effect Serbia. To him, Russia helped sufficiently in WWI, the First Serbian Uprising, and more. So when asked about Russia's

behavior in 1878, he remained positive. “The main Russian interests in that time would serve Bulgaria...Perhaps the Serbs did feel betrayed, but in international politics, it’s all about interests” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013). And although Russia in the 90s was weak, things changed when Putin came to power. Aleksandar says, “Russia was strong and Russia is capable of protecting Serbia far more than it used to in the 90s” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013). Bojan, from the Progressive Party, pushed this even further, blaming any Russian “failings” to support Serbia on Serbia itself. In his opinion, even the best allies will not support a wayward country. He explains: “We have such help from Russia, but we didn’t have it in 1999 because we were in a problem...no country will help you if you are a bad country” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 16 Nov. 2013). In the future, though, almost every Serb is aware that Russia will be there to protect and serve Serbia’s interests, explains Bojan. “You will not hear from any Serbian, he will not say that we do not believe that Russia can save us and Russia will always help us, you can hear that from every side” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 16 Nov. 2013). Although this was not the case with other answers I received, the SNS (Bojan’s party) is the current ruling party, so answers such as this may have more prominence in Serbia than was reflected in my interviews.

### *Russia as an International Actor in the World and in the Balkans*

Views of the interests of Russia in the world and in the Balkans today varied somewhat among my interviewees, though many people agreed that Russia today is concerned with the economy and with geopolitics. The LDP’s Mirjam thinks that today it is all about Russian power.

“I think they want to be the strongest country, and the most independent country...They want to be a lone strong country...like Putin; he is a lone strong man” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013). Andrej of the New Party agrees when it comes to Russia’s relations with Serbia today: “In my opinion, the relations between Serbia and Russia are now based on Russia’s profit rather than on historical bonds” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 24 Nov. 2013). This is in stark contrast to Aleksandar’s (DSS) opinion, that “protection today is influenced by historical ties” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013). Still, he remains convinced that Russia is just following its own interests. One of these ways is through the energy sector, as Russia is a major player in the energy industry. “Russia is using its [energy] potentials in Europe in order to influence the European point of view on certain issues,” Aleksandar says.

Almost all of my respondents, both from the left and the right, agreed that Russia believed Serbia to be of geostrategic importance. Teodor from the Progressive Party: “Politicians from Russia need Serbia because they want to have influence as much as they can on the Balkans,” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 21 Nov. 2013). Goran (LDP): “[Russia] needs a partner in Europe who will spread [the] influence of Russia,” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013). Julijana (NP): “[Russia has] to position themselves on the Balkans,” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013). Đorđe (DS): “The main interest of Russia is Serbia’s strategic location...Serbia is located exactly in the middle between East and West,” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013). And so on. Some interviewees alluded to the fact that Serbia is not a member of NATO but is an EU candidate country and saw this as a viable reason for Serbia’s geostrategic significance to Russia.

Russia's power in the international arena was threatening to some respondents, but inviting to others. To Bojan (SNS), it was almost a unique Russian characteristic. "Russia has something that most countries in the world don't have and that's authority in the country and also in the world," he said (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 16 Nov. 2013). Most people did not believe that Russia, despite its strength and perceived connection with Serbia, had much influence in Serbian politics. Aleksandar (DSS), who had mentioned earlier in his interview that Russia intended to influence other countries in the world, did not believe that this pertained to Serbia. When I asked him if this influence was present in Serbia, he replied, "not that much. The first major cooperation between Serbia and Russia in the past two decades was regarding Kosovo, [and]...it was just mutual cooperation, mutual interest" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013). Still there were those who did think that Russia had influence in Serbian politics. Andrej (NP) was one: "There is [a] big influence of Russia in Serbia because people here believe in [the] friendship and [the] historical bonds of our nations. Our politicians believe in that too, so that has [a] big influence on domestic policy," (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 24 Nov. 2013). He goes on to detail that Serbs may have unreal expectations of Russian support, stating, "I strongly believe that Serbs believe in Russia more than Russia is willing to help and contribute."

On the issue of human rights in Russia, no one denied that Russia had problems, but only a few interviewees thought that these problems were not serious. Bojan (SNS) believed that although human rights problems existed in Russia, the problem was raised and exaggerated by the media to an unrealistic level. For Bojan, human rights are "not a problem...in general, but...a problem with certain individuals in Russia [who] just want to take all [the] media attention with them" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 16 Nov. 2013). He continued

to make an example of one publicized issue, LGBT rights. “In general I think that Russia doesn’t have so many problems in LGBT, just in [the] media. Like in Serbia,” he said. He summed it up in one sentence: “You just have a media problem, not a real problem.”

The general consensus was that human rights abuses in Russia, however severe, were not likely to have any impact on human rights practices in Serbia. Jovan of the Social Democratic Union disagreed: “When Russia adopted the anti-gay propaganda law, that inspired right-oriented movement in Serbia, so now they are collecting those signatures for that same law in Serbia,” he said passionately (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013). In Serbian politics, as in most politics around the world, there will always be dissenting voices.

#### *Russia and Serbia: 200 million*

Only two participants did not recognize any shared cultural heritage with Russia. One of them was Petar from the Alliance for Vojvodina Hungarians, who did not even mention a cultural connection, although he viewed Russia as an important Serbian ally. As a Hungarian, this response may be understandable (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 21 Nov. 2013). But Pavle (URS) explicitly negated any similar culture with Russia, or the importance of any: “I don’t see any more importance with Russia than with other European nations” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 27 Nov. 2013). Julijana (NP) agreed that culture is important when considering Russia, but notes that cultural ties with Russia were likely to be exaggerated. “They are important, but we can say that we have cultural ties with France or some other country...our ties with Russia

are made to seem much more important than they really are,” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013).

For a few others, cultural ties with Russia represented the backbone of Serbia and Russia’s relationship. For example Teodor (SNS) thought he would be rebuked for denying such ties. “In Serbia people will tell me I am a fool if I say no. Serbia has [a] big tradition with Russia, considering its history, culture, religion and let’s say politics” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 21 Nov. 2013). Teodor’s colleague in the SNS, Bojan, argues that a cultural connection might be putting it lightly. Bojan’s perspective likened Serbs and Russians to one people united in history and culture: “We have [a] strong Slavic heritage and we have a strong background since all time because basically we are one people. We have the same connections and the same origin,” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 16 Nov. 2013). A couple of times during the interviews, an old Serbian joke was highlighted that reflected this very opinion: Serbia and Russia = 200 million. The populations of both countries are combined because the people are one and the same (the population of Serbia and Russia together is actually less, around 155 million).

The Orthodox religion was often cited as the fundamental shared cultural characteristic, which may be so important in Serbia because of the value of tradition. Serbian traditionalism is reflected in the church’s political support for Russia on many occasions. Goran (LDP) doesn’t like it, but admits that it is true: “when you look at the constitution, we are a secular state, but the Serbian Orthodox Church has a big influence on the population,” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013).

Even those who disliked most of Serbia's relations with Russia, like Jovan (SDU), acknowledged the significance of a shared Slavic heritage: "I don't see anything bad in those cultural relations. I think that that's the part I would like to see more than the political part," (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013). In a growing world, perhaps Serbs take comfort in knowing that there is another big country out there in which they can find similarities. Đorđe (DS) articulates this well: "It is always good to know that you are not alone, that there are people around who have the same customs, and who believe in the same way" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013).

#### *Southern Stream Pipeline: A gift or a scam?*

November 24, 2013 marked the beginning of a major Russian project in Serbia, one that is mired in controversy and produced conflicting opinions among people I interviewed. This was the beginning of construction of the Southern Stream pipeline, which will bring Russian gas to Europe via Serbia. Like a few others, Aleksandar (DSS) was firm in his belief that Serbia benefited not only from this construction, but also from the sale of Serbia's gas company, NIS, to Russia's Gazprom. "[NIS]," he says, "is pretty much the biggest investment and is a good investment." He thinks that perhaps this investment will jumpstart even more much needed investment in Serbia by Russia. "[The] pipeline brings stability and a bigger presence of Russia in Serbia, and actually the whole region. And we are hoping for more Russian investments in [the] Serbian economy," (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013). There were, however, more people who thought Serbia had been somewhat duped in the selling of its valuable asset, NIS. Mirjam (LDP) said that selling NIS to Gazprom was an activity almost criminal in nature, but a

crime allowed by Serbian politicians. “NIS, the gas, [was] very cheap selling, like they are stealing from us. But it is not a thing for Russia, it is our politicians” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013). This sort of response was unique in that it did not blame Russia or praise Russia, but suggested that Serbian politicians were perhaps manipulated by Russia.

Although energy was the main topic of discussion, Russian trade and investment were often mentioned in passing during the interviews. All of my participants were aware that Russia was not Serbia’s top investor, and many of them stated that they expect more investment by Russia in the future. Jovan (SDU) pointed out that not only did Russia invest little in Serbia, but that economic relations with Russia were actually costing Serbia money. “[Russia pays] lower taxes for using our resources than other countries do. We don’t get anything from them. Except losing money. And it’s billions,” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013).

### *Serbia: Caught in the middle?*

In deciding where Serbia falls in relation to the “East versus West” binary, one must ask who is Serbia’s most important ally. Overwhelmingly, the European Union was an immediate answer for the majority. Julijana (NP) stresses that this is so because “Serbia is traditionally a part of Europe and will always be a part of Europe,” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013). Andrej (also NP), is somewhat skeptical of naming anyone as an ally of Serbia. His view is that there are no true allies. The EU may be called an ally at times, but you “can’t count on anyone because they all work out of interest” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 24 Nov. 2013). Mirjam (LDP) again had an opinion unlike the rest of my interviewees when I asked her who Serbia’s most

important ally was. To her, America's democratic and liberal values represented the ideal that Serbia should try to achieve. She knew that her opinion was unlike that of others, but "it is the most democratic country in the world ...and we need to be something like that" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013).

Right-oriented parties were more likely to see Russia as an ally than left-oriented ones. For Petar (AVH), this alliance will benefit Serbia by giving it a powerful friend who can help in issues such as Kosovo. "Serbia needs [a] strong ally country in the UN, connected to the Kosovo problem," (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 21 Nov. 2013). Aleksandar (DSS) agreed that Russia was Serbia's main ally, but was quick to correct himself, and mention that "every cooperating state is an ally" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013). Aleksandar was the only one who was completely against Serbia joining the EU, and he related this to how much Serbia attempts to "bridge the gap" between East and West: "Serbia wants so much to enter the EU, it forgot its own interests." While both members of the Progressive Party also stressed cooperation between eastern and western countries, it was Bojan who declared that Serbia's partnership with Russia was more than an alliance.

Politically, an ally has its own certain interests, and they protect their own interests. But Russia didn't just protect its own interests, they protected even Serbian interests, when Serbia was a normal country, and didn't have problems...So I think Russia is not our ally, it is even more than an ally...The common oil company in the Balkans was [Putin's] favor to Serbia. A loan for Serbia, cheap money for Serbia, was his favor to Serbia. Military agreement was his favor to Serbia. Gazprom in football clubs was his favor to Serbia.

Paying debt to other countries from [the] Balkans was his favor to Serbia. And so on and so on,” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 16 Nov. 2013).

For no one else was the devotion to Russia as strong as it was for Bojan.

In Eastern Europe, it is an unwritten rule that if one wishes to enter the EU, one must first enter NATO. Because Serbia has [a] tense relationship with NATO following the bombs that fell on the country in 1999, entering NATO is not a particularly desirable prerequisite for Serbia. This feeling has been encouraged by Russia, a country traditionally threatened by NATO expansion, and one which reminds Serbia of the 1999 bombing whenever a discussion about NATO membership for Serbia arises. So it is no wonder that Jovan (SDU) did not expect a positive reaction from Russia if Serbia makes the move towards NATO. “If we join NATO, they actually have official threats...they will look at it as an attack” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013). This might be related to the already strong NATO presence in the Balkans, explains Bojan. “In the Balkans, every country is a member of NATO and just Serbia is not. It is neutral, and that is important for Russia” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 16 Nov. 2013).

This neutrality was alluded to in many of my interviews, when participants were hesitant to label Serbia as an eastern or a western country. So when asked what Serbia’s position was in Europe, the overwhelming answer was that Serbia was somewhere in the middle. Petar (AVH) said that Serbia shared common ground with both “sides”: “Serbia belongs to Western economic aspects; in turn it belongs to the East ideologically and culturally” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 21 Nov. 2013). It is possible that the answers I received referring to cooperation and middle-ground were holdovers from Yugoslav times. Bojan (SNS), at least,

thought that Serbia had inherited Yugoslavia's strength as a non-aligned country. "[Non-alignment] is an idea from the past which we have today," and a little later, "in the Balkans Serbia has the most influence. Even [Albania] cannot imagine a Balkan community without Serbia" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 16 Nov. 2013). Jovan was one of the only ones who was adamant in his declaration of Serbia's western identity. "Serbia belongs to the west in the 21<sup>st</sup> century," he proclaimed. "And that's the only reasonable and logical thing as a country of Europe" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013).

#### *Vladimir Putin and the Kosovo Question*

A specific reason why many Serbs consider Russia to be an invaluable ally is that it has refused to recognize Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence. This refusal is seen by some to be the main reason why Serbia has not relinquished the last of its sovereignty over Kosovo. However the respondents did not agree on whether Russia was successful or not in preventing Kosovo's independence. For some, like Aleksandar (DSS), "Kosovo was that dispute where Russia showed its muscles in international relations" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 17 Nov. 2013)<sup>20</sup>. Bojan (SNS) agreed, and noted that although Serbia will probably have to recognize Kosovo in the future, "we are the last country who will recognize Kosovo, and Russia will be the first country before us" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 16 Nov. 2013).

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<sup>20</sup> When subsequently asked about how this relates to Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Aleksandar mentioned that it was a problem of international law. Recognizing Kosovo's independence is against international law (as it is to recognize the Georgian provinces), but that the case of Georgia was different because Georgia attacked these provinces and Russia only came to their aid.

Members of the LDP weren't so sure that Russia supported Serbia's claim on Kosovo for completely disinterested reasons. For Mirjam, this support hinged on the NIS deal with Russia, and for this "we are really hoping for them to be on our side in that 'Kosovo is Serbia' story" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013). And Goran believed that although Russia supports Serbia now, it may not be a reliable source of support. He suggests that Russia will support Serbia in this issue when it benefits Russia's position on the world stage. "Russia is an important player in the world scene, but I don't think Russia will sacrifice its relations with other key players like the US, EU and others just to defend [the] Serbian position in [the] Kosovo issue. For now that goes quite correct because Russia does not lose anything from defending [the] Kosovo position, just gaining" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013). Basically, he believes that supporting Kosovo falls within Russia's interests now, but in the future this is not a guaranteed.

Vladimir Putin's popularity in Serbia can be explained by his support in regard to Kosovo, but when I asked my interviewees to explain this phenomenon to me, they mentioned additional reasons for his Serbian following. The most frequently expressed explanation for his popularity was his ability to return Russia to the forefront of international relations and reestablish Russia as a formidable power in the world. According to Goran (LDP), "if Yeltsin was a symbol of Russian weakness, [Putin] is a symbol of Russian power" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013). It may even be a weakness of people in Serbia to be attracted to strong leaders like Putin, explained Julijana (NP). "People like strong people, like dictators, who will be capable of bringing greatness to its nation" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 18 Nov. 2013).

Perhaps, for Serbs, Putin's transformation of Russia represents what they can only hope for in Serbia.

### Conclusions

*"Does Russia want to be seriously examined in Serbia? Or do they want to remain this distant unknown mystery? If we put aside all emotions, Russia will remain naked. Pure national interest and pragmatic"* (Stankić, Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013).

Although there were many questions asked in my interviews, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the results, as well as point out the inconsistencies between the answers I received and the information I gathered in the literature and in my expert interviews. My most consistent finding was that, as Stankić and Kojić predicted, interviewee's answers were at times fraught with emotion and represented one of the two extremes (either pro-Russia or anti-Russia). Questions about the history of relations between Serbia and Russia were simple to analyze in this way. My hypothesis, that interviewees would be uninformed about historical details, was only partially true. Knowledge of pre-19<sup>th</sup> century history was acceptable, but not too detailed. It was often also interpreted differently by different people, even when they presented the same facts. I found that conservatives were likely to know more history about relations with Russia than liberals. This should not be surprising, given my interview with Stankić, when he mentioned that new historical details in relations were "discovered" when Serbia wished to acknowledge Russia's benevolence. Stankić specifically mentioned an occasion

when Dmitri Medvedev came to visit Serbia: “Suddenly Dačić<sup>21</sup> is talking about 500 years of history. We are discovering some Russian figures in history who helped Serbs” (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013). Conservatives were also more likely to forgive Russia’s past when its actions did not benefit Serbia. The fact that liberals were generally less informed about history is not surprising either, as they were more inclined towards the EU and were therefore less likely to think that historical relations between Russia and Serbia were important. Unless, of course, the respondents were fiercely anti-Russian, and then it seemed that their knowledge of history was sufficient in order to be able to pinpoint Russia’s failings.

When discussing Russia today, including its interests, politics, and position, Stankić expected that people would be too overcome with some sort of emotional reaction about Russia to possess any objective data about the reality. Although I asked some questions about modern Russian politics, the answers were vague and, in retrospect, I should have delved deeper into my questioning on this point. However, I did ask extensively about Russian interests and positionality, and that produced some very interesting results. The expert hypothesis about emotional influence was both true and false in some respects. It was false because many of my participants were well aware that Russian interests were based on economy, geopolitics, and regional power. However, some of the more conservative participants were likely to think that these interests didn’t apply where Serbia was considered. Other ways in which Stankić’s hypothesis was true was represented in the lack of depth of some of the answers that I received. For instance, most of my interviewees did not think that Serbia may fall outside of Russia’s sphere of interest (as Stankić reasoned). Instead, a few of them felt, like Kojić, that

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<sup>21</sup> Serbian Prime Minister

Russia may be glad to have a friend outside of the NATO zone. None of them recognized, at least explicitly, Stankić's reasoning that Russia's main interests were focused on the former Soviet states crowded around its massive borders. Likewise, the idea that Russia could be using emotional triggers as political manipulation was an idea that wasn't mentioned. However, respondents were aware that Serbs have a traditional mindset in regards to how they respect their leaders. This came across when questioned about Putin's popularity. Nearly all of my interviewees gave similar answers for why Putin has such a following in Serbia. Mostly, it was because he was a symbol of strength and of glorious rebirth. In Serbia, participants answered, people like strong leaders, leaders who are able to produce strong nations.

As for the motivations behind Serbian and Russian relations today, answers varied, even among liberal and conservative participants. Some people believed that relations today, no matter which form they took, have fundamentally developed as a result of cultural ties between the two countries. This is the rhetoric that Russia would like Serbs to believe, according to the interview with Stankić, because it relies more heavily on emotion. The other portion of respondents appeared more objective, believing that Russian interests in Serbia may be influenced by culture, but are motivated by economics. Stankić agreed with this motivation when he asked, "what is the rebirth of the Russian state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" He answered his own question: "Pragmatism and economy" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013). The fact

that political party did not determine which answers would be given shows the strength of this Russian rhetoric<sup>22</sup>.

Since Kosovo is a political issue in Serbia that is almost entirely controlled by emotion, the analysis of responses I received is very important in supporting Stankić's hypothesis. Indeed, there were only a few respondents who were objective when referring to Russia's role in Kosovo. These were the answers from the LDP: that Russia's support for Kosovo directly correlates to the sale of NIS, and that Russia isn't willing to jeopardize its relations with the West over support for Kosovo. The remainder of the answers from interviewees was largely split among extreme lines. Conservatives believed that Russia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence bid was invaluable for Serbia. Liberals were more likely to believe that this action by Russia either carried little weight or had done nothing to prevent Kosovo's independence. When asked about how Kosovo is similar or different to Russia's actions regarding the Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, opinion was again split on whether Russia was inconsistent or that the contexts of the cases were different. Interestingly, it was not a common response to liken Russia's response in Georgia to its sphere of influence over the post-Soviet sphere.

Extreme perspectives again dominated in the discussion of economics. Russia is either robbing Serbia or it is the Serbian godsend. There was very little in between, although it is interesting to note that both sides realized that Russia is a strong investor in Serbia, although not the top investor. This mirrors Kojić's analysis and the statistics I found in the literature.

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<sup>22</sup> An interesting side note is that none of the respondents explicitly acknowledged that Serbian politicians are involved in profitable yet shady deals with Russians, and that this economic motivation may be an underlying cause for the success of the relations between the two countries. This was a point strongly emphasized by Kojić.

Conservatives even mentioned that a major critique of Russia would be the lack of investment in Serbia, although most were hopeful that this was changing due to the construction of the Southern Stream pipeline. Only one participant mentioned that the pipeline was being built in Serbia as a response to Russia's ongoing conflicts with Ukraine, an issue that Stankić emphasized heavily.

There were not as many extreme opinions pertaining to the subject of culture. Almost all, except for two, of my interviewees believed that not only were there cultural ties between Serbia and Russia, but that they were important, and should be maintained and improved. The way that this idea permeated both "sides" is an idea that is valuable for further research, because it could mean that those who are anti-Russia do not think that culture is affecting politics. This is in stark contrast to the ideas proposed by Stankić<sup>23</sup>. The strange thing is that some of my interviewees were grateful to Russia because it meant that they were not alone. Although this may be true in terms of Orthodoxy, Stankić believes that Serbs have much more in common with regional territories in the Balkans than with Russia: "People believe that we are more similar to Russians than to people in Bosnia. I used to live in Russia, my best friend was a Croat. This mindset is a bit different. I have friends in Russia but we don't share much in common" (Interview, Belgrade, Serbia, 28 Nov. 2013). When examining this perceived likeness of Serbs and Russians, I can hypothesize that this idea may be related to Serbia's search for its own national identity as a relatively new state in the Balkans. Serbia, trying to differentiate itself from its neighbors, looks to Russia as a guiding light for its development.

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<sup>23</sup> The data I collected is not specific enough to warrant a concrete conclusion

The final area that warrants analysis is the discussion of Serbia's positionality in the world, especially between East and West. The answers I received during interviews were very similar to conclusions in the literature I reviewed on the subject. Most participants, on the "left" and on the "right," believed that it was Serbia's prerogative to remain neutral and straddle the borders of the East and the West. The remaining answers, as in the poll reviewed in the literature, were split between moving closer to the EU or to Russia. Of those who valued Serbia's declared neutrality, few likened it to the position developed in Tito's non-aligned Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, as Stankić mentioned in my interview with him, the idea that Serbia is the successor to non-aligned Yugoslavia, and that it is capable of possessing the same power and influence, is a normal and typical perception of Serbia's position in the world today.

We can develop several broad conclusions about the perceptions and knowledge of the political party youth interviewed. As frequently mentioned, I received highly polarized responses from participants. This could be the result of a further conclusion, that Serbian politics are heavily influenced by emotion. It would be inaccurate to conclude that the perceptions of participants were not based on facts and knowledge, but it is clear that the same knowledge was frequently interpreted differently by different people. As for the overall conclusion about whether Russian influence is positive or negative in Serbia, the fact that my participants were largely liberal does not allow me to make such concrete conclusions, though I can say confidently that cultural ties with Russia are perceived positively and have an effect on politics. It is clear that the increase in relations between Serbia and Russia has produced a generation of politically minded youth with some sort of opinion towards Russia. It is important for Serbia's well-being that citizens perceive these relations objectively.

### Limitations of Study

Aside from my own personal biases, there are other limitations to the data I was able to collect and analyze in my studies. The first limitation concerns my target population. Clearly, age parameters influenced my results and increasing my age range would likely have broadened and diversified my data. Conducting my interviews in English also limited my population to people who already had some kind of connection, even if only literary, with the West. Talking with members of political parties ensured that I received more informed answers, but it is also possible that these answers were more likely to be influenced by the leaders of political parties. My location was also a limitation. It is likely that people in Belgrade have different perceptions than people living in more suburban or rural areas of Serbia (although I did get a few interviews with people based in Vojvodina). Finally, because it was difficult to arrange all of my interviews in person; I had to collect my data for many interviews over e-mail. Allowing people to think more about their answers and use the internet makes the information collected from these interviews less credible than desired. However, the alternative was having no data from some of the major political parties.

### Recommendations for Further Study

Because my research was largely concerned with general and broad perceptions, the opportunity to continue research into a more specific field is large. I am interested in the areas of economics and energy, as they are largely the drivers behind the relations between Serbia and Russia both now and in the future. It would be useful to look more specifically into

investment in the Serbian economy by different international entities, and see how that investment correlates with the political relations between the relevant countries. In the area of energy, a problem with the Southern Stream oil pipeline that recently surfaced is that it does not meet all of the EU requirements. As Serbia intends to join the EU, it is important to follow EU regulations. Studying this and how it relates to the geopolitical importance of energy in international relations would be important and timely. I am also very interested in the connection between xenophobia and post-socialism, and how Serbia's connection with Russia might be a side effect of such tendencies; how Russia is safe and glorified because it is "the same."

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## Appendices

### **Appendix 1: Interview Questions**

1. Age, education, gender, place of birth and place of current residence, position in political party.
2. Who is Serbia's most important ally?
3. Is there a connection with Russia? Why?
4. What is your knowledge about Serbia's history with Russia? During the Ottoman period? The 19<sup>th</sup> century (1878, first Serbian uprising)? Between socialist Yugoslavia and the USSR? During the Yugoslav wars of the 90s? What is modern Russia like? What is Serbia's biggest criticism of Russia?
5. What is the importance (if any) of the cultural and religious ties between Serbia and Russia? In the past? Now?
6. Is this connection beneficial to Serbia? To Russia? Why?
7. What are Russia's interests in Serbia?
8. What is Serbia's position in Europe? What is Serbia's function between East or the West?
9. How do you view Serbia's entry into the EU or NATO? How does this compare to Russia's view of EU and NATO? How will Russia respond if Serbia joins the EU or NATO?
10. How does Serbia and Russia's relationship affect the issue of Kosovo? Does Russia have a consistent attitude towards Kosovo? I then mentioned the Georgian Republics.
11. (How) Does Serbia's relationship with Russia influence Serbia's foreign and domestic policy? What are the benefits of the economic ties with Russia?
12. How does Russia operate in the area of international relations?
13. How do you view Russia's position on human rights? How does the Serbian government view Russia's position on human rights?
14. How is Russia presented to the public? Do you think that there is a strong Russian presence in Serbia?
15. What does Russia represent for the average Serbian citizen?
16. What is the reason for Vladimir Putin's popularity in Serbia?

## Appendix 2: Political Parties in Serbia

In this section I will provide information on the major political parties, as well as some of the minor parties whose members I interviewed. This information provides insights into the influence of each party in the country and how their stated ideologies matched with the answers I received.

The *Serbian Progressive Party*, or in Serbian, the Srpska napredna stranka (SNS), is the political party of the current Serbian president, Tomislav Nikolić<sup>24</sup>. A conservative party, it split from the more conservative Radical Party to take a stance that was pro-EU integration. The party has many seats in the National Assembly<sup>25</sup>, as well as a solid showing in the Assembly of Vojvodina<sup>26</sup>. Many of Serbia's political parties are parts of coalitions, and the SNS shares one with the right-wing New Serbia. The membership of the SNS, as of 2012, was 300,000, and the party is known to cooperate with the Russian party United Russia<sup>27</sup>.

The *Socialist Party of Serbia*<sup>28</sup> (Socijalistička partija Srbije, SPS) is represented by current Prime Minister Ivica Dačić and is the party of Slobodan Milošević.<sup>29</sup> It holds seats in the National and Vojvodina assemblies<sup>30</sup>. It grew from the League of Communists of Serbia, and represents ideas of Serbian nationalism, socialism, and post-communism. In 2012 its members numbered 120,000. This party is traditionally and officially more sympathetic to Russia than the other parties.

Serbia's previous president, Boris Tadić<sup>31</sup>, was also president of the *Democratic Party*, or Demokratska stranka (DS). It is now the main opposition party, and holds half the seats in the Assembly of Vojvodina and a number of seats in the National Assembly.<sup>32</sup> As a center-left party,

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<sup>24</sup> Elected in 2012

<sup>25</sup> Serbian parliament, with 53 of 250 members

<sup>26</sup> Separate parliament for the autonomous province of Vojvodina, with 23 of 120 members

<sup>27</sup> Conservative party of Russia's current president Vladimir Putin

<sup>28</sup> Despite multiple efforts with multiple contacts, I was unable to have an interview with this party

<sup>29</sup> Serbian leader during the wars of the 90s until 2000

<sup>30</sup> 25 of 250, 12 of 120, respectively.

<sup>31</sup> 2004-2012

<sup>32</sup> 57 of 120, 41 of 250, respectively

its platforms are pro-Europe, social democracy, and liberalism<sup>33</sup>. In 2013 the party had a membership approaching 200,000. Their attitude towards Russia is ambiguous: they are more pro-European, however they do not renounce the ties with Russia.

The *Liberal Democratic Party*, or the Liberalno-demokratska partija (LDP), split from the Democratic Party after criticizing then-president Tadić. It declares itself to be central, but is a strong supporter of Serbia joining the EU and NATO, Kosovo's independence, and the improvement of LGBT rights in Serbia. However, in 2012 membership was just 90,000 and the party has weak representation in both the National and Vojvodina assemblies<sup>34</sup>. This party is one of the main opponents of increased ties with Russia.

Not to be confused with the Democratic Party from which it split, the *Democratic Party of Serbia* (Demokratska stranka Srbije, DSS) espouses nationalism, conservatism, Christian democracy, and Euroscepticism, with the firm belief that Kosovo should remain a part of Serbia. The party is led by former Prime Minister (2004-08) Vojislav Kostunica, has a membership of 100,000, and has seats in the National and Vojvodina assemblies.<sup>35</sup> This party is the most fervent supporter of a pro-Russian course in Serbia. It is actively advocating cooperation as an alternative to EU integration.

A party with a similar ideology is the center-right *United Regions of Serbia* (Ujedinjeni regioni Srbije, URS). With sixteen seats in the National Assembly, the party is based on regionalism, liberal conservatism, and Christian democracy. Its membership in 2012 was 220,000. This party is a descendent of the G17 plus, one of the most fervent proponents of the EU in Serbia. However, it does not express a negative attitude towards Russia.

The *Social Democratic Union* (Socijaldemokratska unija, SDU) is a small party which split from the Social Democratic Party in 2003. Their main ideology is social democracy and modernization of Serbia through integration to the EU. It holds just one seat in the National Assembly.

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<sup>33</sup> The party is also associated with the reform-minded Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić who was assassinated in 2003.

<sup>34</sup> 12 of 250 and 1 of 120, respectively

<sup>35</sup> 21 of 250, 4 of 120, respectively

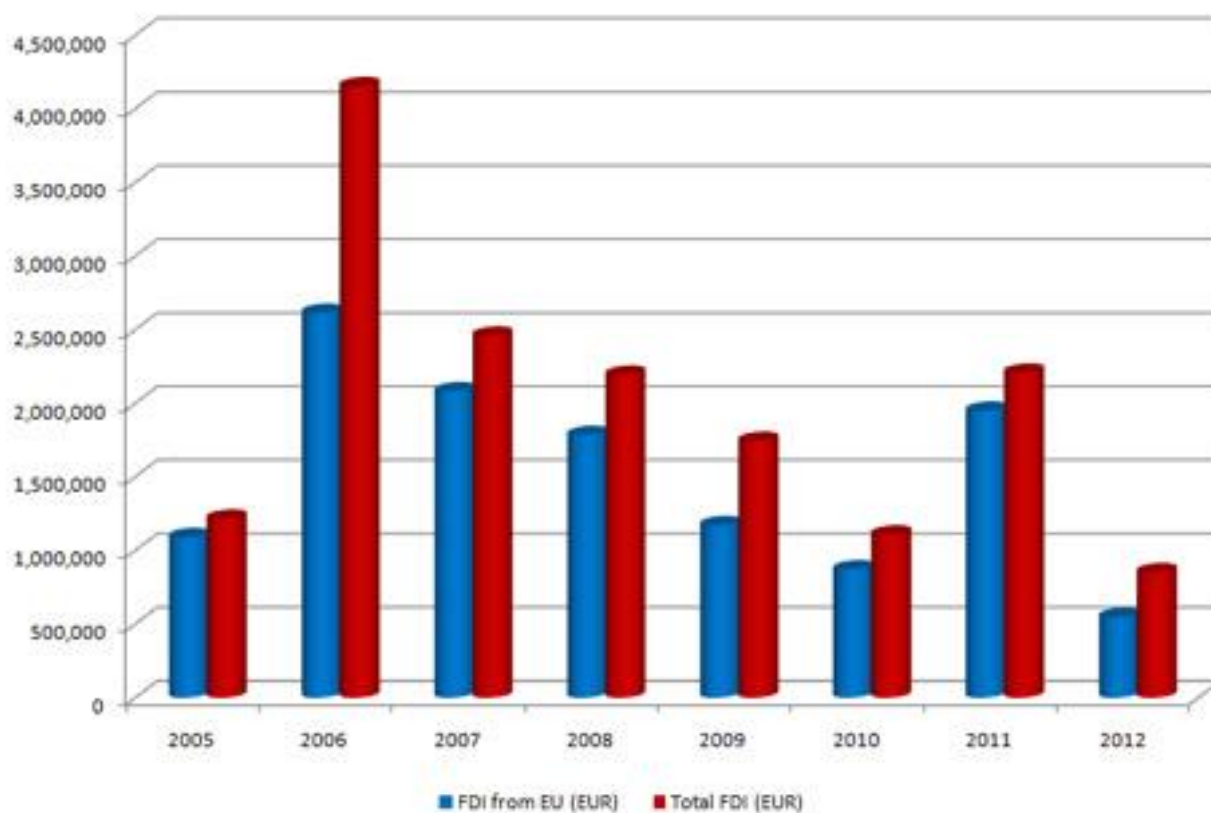
Serbia has a minority Hungarian population in its province of Vojvodina, and one of the parties representing them is the *Alliance of Vojvodinian Hungarians* (Savez vojvodjanskih madjara, VMSZ). The main ideology relates to regionalism, minority rights, and liberal conservatism. VMSZ is represented with five seats in the National Assembly and 8 seats in the Assembly of Vojvodina.

I have also talked with people from one of the newest political parties in Serbia, the *New Party*, formed early in 2013 by former Prime Minister Zoran Živković (formerly a member of the Democratic Party). The party seeks to keep reforming and modernizing Serbia. The party has yet to take part in any elections, but is set to compete in the next set of regional elections that will take place in Belgrade<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> I was not able to interview anyone from the super-conservative *Serbian Radical Party* (Srpska radikalna stranka, SRS) because my advisor stated categorically that no one from that group would talk to me. Current president Nikolić is a former member (and with current Deputy Prime Minister Vučić formed the Serbian Progressive Party), and the party is led by Vojislav Šešelj, a man convicted of war crimes in Bosnia and sent to the ICTY in 2003. The party emphasizes nationalism, social conservatism, right-wing populism, anti-globalism, Russophilia, and Eurosceptism. I would have been very intrigued to interview someone from this far-right party but, unfortunately, it was not possible. The party holds no seats in the National Assembly, and five in the Vojvodina assembly.

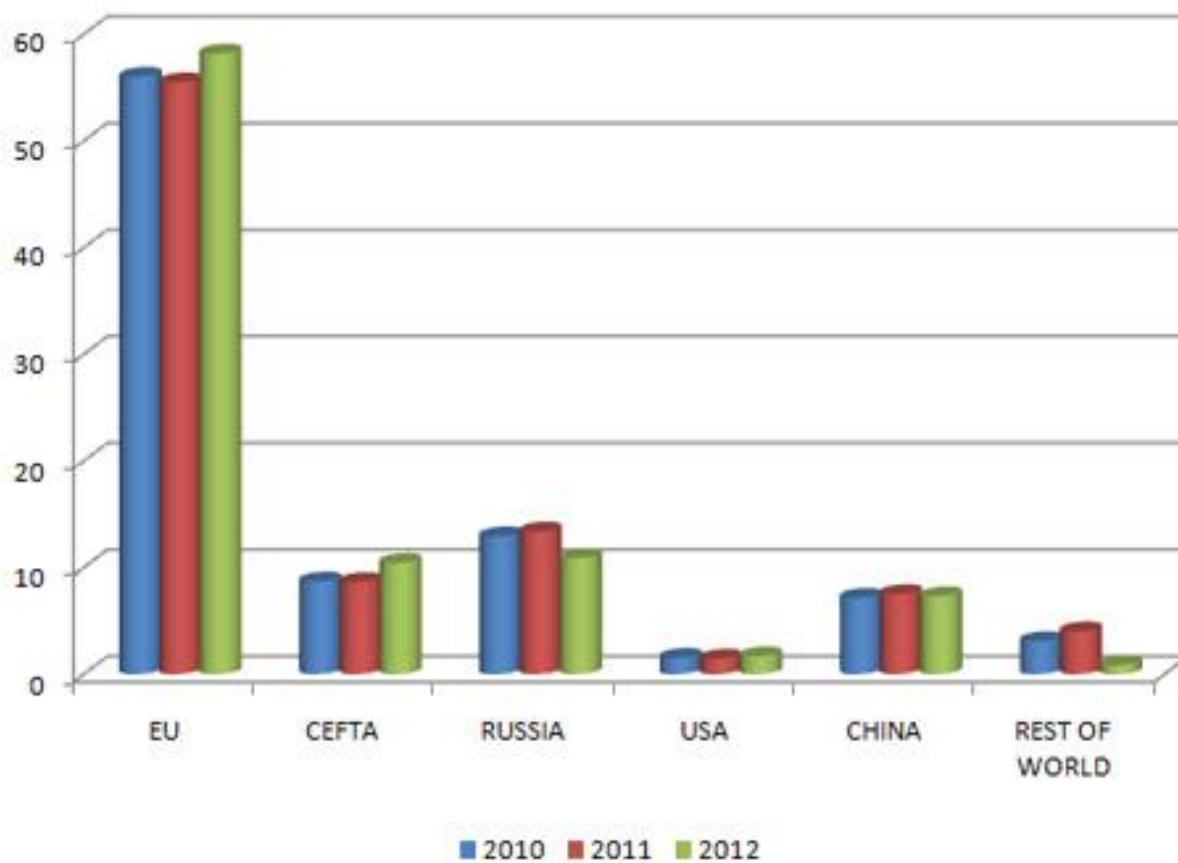
### Appendix 3: Foreign Direct Investment in Serbia



Source: The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia

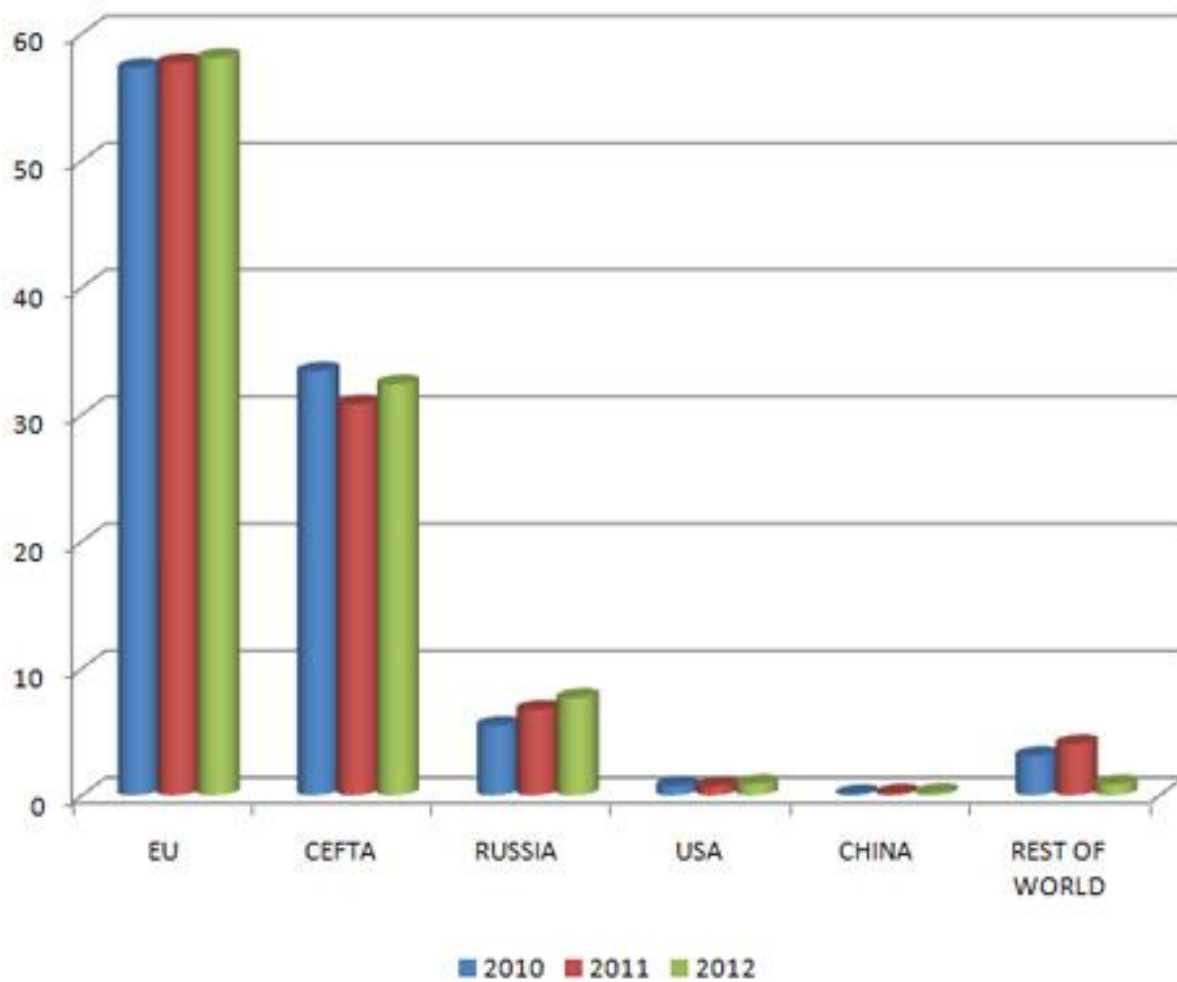
## Appendix 4: Serbia's Imports and Exports

### Imports



CEFTA: Central European Free Trade Agreement

Source: The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia

*Exports*

Source: The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia