

## **Aleksandar Vučić's Stabilocracy**

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### **Abstract**

Stabilocracy is a term increasingly used by political scientists to describe the form of government in the Western Balkans. Generally speaking, a stabilocracy means the rule of autocratic leaders legitimizing power with slogans about the stability they are supposed to guarantee. This article shows the mechanisms of functioning of stabilocracies on the example of Serbia under the rule of Aleksandar Vučić.

### **Keywords**

Serbia, stabilocracy, Aleksandar Vučić, Western Balkans, Belgrade Waterfront

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the term “stabilocracy” has appeared more and more frequently, both in the West and in the Balkans, in political science studies and in numerous analyses of the condition of Balkan democracies, their deepening crises, and pathologies. Generally speaking, stabilocracy is understood as the specific nature of hybrid regimes ruled by autocrats with authoritarian tendencies, who legitimize their power through widely publicized stabilization and vague promises of prosperity and progress. Such slogans easily reach the electorate when the media are subordinated to those in power and when they are also given credit by Western leaders, who treat the Balkan satraps as guarantors of stability in the region, even if they openly violate democratic procedures.

It is assumed that the word stabilocracy was first used by Antoinette Primatarova and Johanna Deimel in a study on Albania. They defined it as a neologism intended to “describe a system that provides stability externally but that oscillates between democracy and autocratic tendencies internally.”<sup>1</sup> Over time, experts on the region began to use this term to refer to Kosovo, Montenegro ruled by the DPS (Demokratska partija socijalista Crne Gore) headed by Milo Đukanović, Macedonia under the rule of Nikola Gruevski, and more recently Serbia under the rule of Aleksandar Vučić. Florian Bieber explains the mechanism of operation of such systems: those in power assure that they guarantee stability and declare that they want their country to join the European Union, but in reality, their power is based on informal clientelistic practices, full control of the media, and the permanent triggering of crises that undermine the principles of democracy and the rule of law.<sup>2</sup> According to the researcher, it was the authoritarian governments of the 1990s that paved the way for similar practices in the 21st century.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this article is to examine a Serbian case study in order to show the authoritarian-populist tendencies of its leader, as well as the public's reaction to such a style of governance. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of Serbian official discourse and the author's fieldwork in Serbia. Serbia serves as a representative case that can illustrate the nature of stabilocracy.

Most of the topics discussed here find analogies in the other countries in the region. Analysts agree that the stability of stabilocracies is an illusion, as at some point, the long-accumulated social frustration is manifested. This is well illustrated by the example of Macedonia where, after Nikola Gruevski was removed from power in 2016, a new cabinet could not be elected for more than a year, as the former team continued to control key state institutions, including the Constitutional Court.

### **Establishing a Stabilocracy in Serbia**

Aleksandar Vučić, Minister of Information in Mirko Marjanović's government between 1998 and 2000, i.e., during the declining phase of the Slobodan Milošević era, and later one of the leaders of the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS), was appointed Prime Minister of Serbia in 2014 and has held the office of the President since 2017. This skillful politician has successively consolidated his power, aided in large part by taking control of the media and thus limiting the dissemination of alternative messages, which now reach only a few people, usually better-educated

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<sup>1</sup> Antoinette Primatarova, Johanna Deimel, *Bridge Over Troubled Waters? The Role of the Internationals in Albania*, Sofia: Centre for Liberal Strategies, 2012, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Florian Bieber, “The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies,” *Horizons* 10 (2018), <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2018-issue-no-10/the-rise-and-fall-of-balkan-stabilitocracies> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *Uspon autoritarizma na Zapadnom Balkanu*, transl. Đorđe Tomić, Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2020, 18.

inhabitants of large cities. It is telling that even the B92 platform, an independent communications channel under Milošević's regime that supported protests against the dictator, has been subordinated to Vučić. N1 TV (the Balkan branch of CNN) or the *Danas* newspaper reach only a small audience.

In a situation where the media are almost fully controlled, the average Serb is surrounded by an unambiguous message loudly proclaiming the president's achievements and praising his economic successes and visionary foreign policy based on a skillful balancing between Russia and the European Union and on an increasingly visible (especially during the pandemic) cooperation with China.

It is worth mentioning that Serbian society is not a monolith. As in all societies undergoing a transformation – but also in Western countries – there is a clear division into those who support pluralism, tolerance for otherness, and democratic and civic values and those oriented toward national defenders of tradition. While the former, a minority, express their opposition to the president's autocratic policy, the latter believe or want to believe Vučić's populist promises, after long years of continuous crisis. They hope for the consolidation of a "little stability" and the development of the country, especially thanks to the "steel friendship with China," which will be discussed later.

Although the Serbian constitution provides for a parliamentary-cabinet system of government, with highly limited powers of the head of state, in practice Vučić remains the main decision-maker, whereas Prime Minister Ana Brnabić plays a minor role. One can even find here an analogy to the period of the 1990s when Milošević's strong position resulted "not so much from systemic premises as from personality and contextual premises."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it seems that Brnabić's nomination was an excellent political play made by Vučić because Brnabić, who openly declares her homosexual orientation, on the one hand, supports the promotion of the positive image of Serbia as a modern and tolerant country in the West, while on the other hand, her lack of political experience and political base helps strengthen the president's position.<sup>5</sup>

It is Vučić who is the most important hero of the subordinate mass media, which constantly reproduce materials about the president's achievements, ceremonial openings of new investments, or new "gifts" from Chinese brothers. Because of this, most Serbs, deprived of access to alternative media, are inundated with information about a continuous streak of successes, progressive expansion, state-of-the-art investments,<sup>6</sup> and "the region's greatest economic growth,"<sup>7</sup> although independent

<sup>4</sup> Przemysław Żukiewicz, *Pozycja ustrojowa rządu w państwach postjugosłowiańskich. Analiza prawnoporównawcza*, Wrocław: Instytut Politologii Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2017, 42.

<sup>5</sup> Dejan Anastasijević, *Hard Days Ahead for Serbia's Gay PM*, June 19, 2017, <https://euobserver.com/beyond-brussels/138265> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>6</sup> *Predsednik Vučić obišao radove na delu brze pruge Beograd – Budimpešta*, May 30, 2020, <https://www.predsednik.rs/lat/pres-centar/vesti/predsednik-vucic-obisao-radove-na-delu-brze-pruge-beograd-budimpesta> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>7</sup> See *Vučić: Srbija je na dobrom putu i napreduje*, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/2531888/vucic-srbija-je-stabilna-napreduje-i-bezbednosno-je-stabilna.html> [accessed March 10,

experts talk about stagnation.<sup>8</sup> The alleged progress (*napredak*) is possible thanks to controversial foreign investments by China or the United Arab Emirates.

What is more, social inequalities are growing in Serbia (as in other stabilocracies), as entrepreneurs with ties to the authorities gradually increase their wealth, while the rest of the society does not feel any improvement in their situation. Serbian income disparities are said to be among the highest in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Not only is the government doing nothing to counter this phenomenon, it is actually helping to strengthen the oligarchic system. As noted earlier, strong clientelistic relations emerge in stabilocracies. Such relations are typical of scarcity economies,<sup>10</sup> and we encounter such economies in Southeastern Europe. Writing about clientelism in sub-Saharan Africa, Anna Radłowska argues that it increases existing inequalities and that we can speak of a “vicious circle” since the phenomenon caused by disparities deepens them more and more.<sup>11</sup> It is no different in Serbia where, on the one hand, there is an increase in the offer of luxury goods, which only 10% of the country’s population can afford,<sup>12</sup> and on the other hand, a significant part of the society lives below the poverty level, which also affects people who have a job.<sup>13</sup> According to the popular view, Chinese investments and aid helped reduce the negative effects of the coronavirus pandemic,<sup>14</sup> although one may wonder about the transparency of these subsidies.<sup>15</sup> For example, the famous shipment of Chinese medicines and medical equipment to fight the pandemic in March 2020, described at

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2023]; Anica Telesković, *Najveći rast u regionu*, June 22, 2018, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/406017/Najveci-rast-u-regionu> [accessed March 10, 2023]; Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Mit o najvećem ekonomskom rastu na Balkanu*, February 27, 2019, [https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=424422364766175&\\_rdr](https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=424422364766175&_rdr) [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>8</sup> Slađana Gluščević, *Srbija ekonomski stagnira – Od standarda EU udaljena najmanje 50 godina*, August 5, 2018, <http://voice.org.rs/srbija-ekonomski-stagnira-od-standarda-eu-udaljena-najmanje-50-godina/> [accessed March 10, 2023]; Radio Slobodna Evropa, *Mit...*

<sup>9</sup> Mihail Arandarenko, Gorana Krstić, Jelena Žarković Rakić, *Analysing Income Inequality in Serbia. From Data to Policy*, Belgrade: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2017, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/14010.pdf> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>10</sup> Krzysztof Nowakowski, “Klientelizm jako forma korupcji,” *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny* 1 (2007), 214–5, 219–23.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Radłowska, “Klientelizm jako czynnik wpływający na wzrost rozwarstwienia ekonomicznego w państwach Afryki Subsaharyjskiej,” *Forum Politologiczne* 12 (2011), 509.

<sup>12</sup> *Jaz između bogatih i siromašnih u Srbiji najveći u Evropi*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/179810/Jaz-izmedju-bogatih-i-siromasnih-u-Srbiji-najveci-u-Evropi.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>13</sup> *Stopa rizika od siromastva u Srbiji viša nego u svim EU državama*, February 18, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200222085241/http://rs.n1info.com:80/Vesti/a461423/Siromastvo-zaposlenih-u-Srbiji.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>14</sup> Andreas Mihm, „*Wir sind die Nummer eins in Europa*“, February 4, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/warum-serbien-so-gut-durch-die-corona-krise-gekommen-ist-17176274.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>15</sup> Mijat Lakićević, *Srbija i Kina: Koliko nas košta čelično prijateljstvo*, May 1, 2019, <https://pescanik.net/srbija-i-kina-koliko-nas-kosta-celieno-prijateljstvo/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

the time by the Prime Minister as a “purchase and donation,” turned out to be more of an EU-funded purchase.<sup>16</sup>

### The Illusion of Stability

The concept of stabilocracy refers to the stabilization supposedly guaranteed by such regimes. These are however merely slogans, because, as Bieber rightly pointed out, stabilocracies do not bring stabilization at all, and even lead to destabilization.<sup>17</sup> Primatarova and Deimel in the above-mentioned article on Albania explain that Albania joined NATO in 2009 and applied for EU membership, which can be seen as a success in international politics and a strengthening of stability in the region. At the same time, however, since 2009, the country has witnessed a growing internal impasse, stagnation, and violation of democratic standards.<sup>18</sup> Bieber emphasizes that stabilocracies cyclically create tensions with their neighbors because crises suit them, making it easy to justify ruling with a strong hand.<sup>19</sup> The observation of the researcher from Luxembourg explains to a large extent why politicians in the Western Balkans periodically generate tensions that, while quickly defused, result in the constant accumulation of further layers of negative emotions, which at some point may lead to various forms of destabilization in the region.

The abovementioned strategy is effectively used by Vučić, who provokes diplomatic crises from time to time, mainly with Croatia and Kosovo. There is no room to describe subsequent episodes from the long chain of minor and major disagreements and misunderstandings, but it is worth emphasizing that this populist politician in his cynical games instrumentally uses the Serb minority in neighboring countries, although he officially proclaims the need to protect it. The tactic of permanently arousing antagonisms between neighbors was vividly depicted by former Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić (commenting in 2018 on one of the installments in a series of tensions on the Belgrade-Zagreb line, this time caused by the recognition of Serbian and Croatian defense ministers as *persona non grata*) when he spoke of a farce carefully directed by both countries.<sup>20</sup> He warned that at some point, these orchestrated tensions, triggered by

<sup>16</sup> Iva Martinović, *Zašto opada uverenje građana Srbije da je Kina najveći donator?*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zasto-opada-uverenje-gradjana-srbije-da-je-kina-najveci-donator/31205609.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>17</sup> Bieber, “The Rise...”

<sup>18</sup> Primatarova, Deimel, *Bridge...*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Bieber, “The Rise...”; idem, *Uspom autoritarizma...*, 139–40.

<sup>20</sup> *Kriza u odnosima Hrvatske i Srbije je režirana farsa, ali postoji opasnost da se neka vatra i zapali*, April 29, 2018, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/svijet/bivsi-srbijanski-ministar-vanjskih-poslova-jeremic-novu-krizu-izmedju-srbije-i-hrvatske-nazvao-reziranom-farsom---515445.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

public support, could get out of hand,<sup>21</sup> which once again confirms that stabilocracies do not guarantee stability in the Balkans.

Returning to the topic of Vučić's Serbia, it should be noted that the incumbent president repeats the slogans of stability not only in relation to the economic situation but also domestic politics and the country's position in the international arena. Tales of a stable exchange rate dominated the 2017 election campaign when the then prime minister, running for the position of head of state, asserted that only his victory would guarantee the continuation of Serbia's previous stable course. He argued that his election would mean stabilization, while the victory of the opposition would lead to chaos and paralysis of the state, much like in neighboring Macedonia. Such arguments sounded logical because, at that time, the political crisis in Skopje was prolonged after VMRO-DPMNE was removed from power in 2016.

In an aggressive, dirty campaign, in which he pretended to be a statesman, Vučić called his opponents thieves, ridiculed them, and accused them of not caring about the good of the state.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, journalists working for the state media openly supported him and favored him over other candidates. One of the campaign ads, showing a plane in which two pilots fiercely argued about which direction of flight to choose, seems very symptomatic. Vučić explained to the audience from aboard the plane that a similar situation would occur in Serbia should the president and prime minister come from different political camps and that the country would then lose the stable course it had maintained so far.<sup>23</sup>

Such a campaign strategy, completely different from Western standards, devoid of elementary principles of fair play and disavowing the idea of cohabitation, turned out to be very effective, as Vučić won in the first round, gaining over 55% of the votes. Such a high result was determined by many factors, including the weakness and fragmentation of the opposition, full control over the media market, and fears among state sector employees about losing their jobs as a result of the change in power. It is worth emphasizing the reference to the specifically understood stability coupled with a lack of respect for democratic rules, insulting political opponents, and a low level of political culture and public debate.<sup>24</sup> It is significant that the Serbs, like other societies in the region, do not trust the political class and state institutions.<sup>25</sup> Disappointed with the attitude of those in power and aware of their lack of respect, they prove willing to vote for them again, believing that they are choosing the lesser of two evils.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Omer Karabeg, *Zašto Vučić potcenjuje inteligenciju građana Srbije?*, March 19 2017, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/most-vucic-izbori-gradjani-inteligencija/28377656.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9zohYKzpZI> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Veljković, *Stabilocracy and Political Crisis*, November 14, 2017, <https://pescanik.net/stabilocracy-and-political-crisis/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>25</sup> Vesna Pešić, *Divlje društvo. Kako smo stigli dovdje*, Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 2012, 215–9.

An average person, deprived of access to alternative sources of information, surrounded only by those controlled by the authorities, even if they do not fully trust them and criticize them, eventually succumbs to the propaganda about stability and the threat of destabilization once the opposition seizes power; the opposition that, by the way, is weak, divided, and lacks a concrete program of action. This was evident during the elections in June 2020 when the “Aleksandar Vučić – For Our Children” (“Aleksandar Vučić – Za našu decu”) coalition won as much as 60.65% of the votes, also as a result of the boycott of voting by some of the opposition parties. It should be added that the successive victories of the ruling camp are due to many reasons, such as, for example, the practice of forming broad coalitions consisting of small groups, thanks to which various social groups (e.g., pensioners) feel they are voting for their representatives; or organizing several elections at the same time (for example, in June 2020, in addition to deputies to Skupština, representatives to the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and politicians at the local level were also elected).<sup>26</sup> This procedure increases the likelihood that a voter will vote for the same party, which suits the party in power. Another popular strategy for winning elections – not only in Serbia but throughout the Balkans – is the so-called Bulgarian vote-buying train. Activists distribute filled-out ballots among voters, who use them instead of the blank ones, which they pass on to the activists to be filled out and given to the next voter.<sup>27</sup> This practice was recorded in Serbia in the 2016 and 2020 parliamentary elections. Even if one admits that it is not a widespread phenomenon, it does not reflect well on Vučić’s regime.

The president seems to realize that appealing to the fear of the chaos that would allegedly follow the opposition’s victory is not enough because a society frustrated by the prolonged economic crisis (even if the media claim that the situation is improving) may nevertheless trust the opposition. Therefore, in addition to the threat of a worsening of the situation in the event of his opponents taking power or the narrative about stable growth, Vučić’s rhetoric also includes hope for future development. And so, during the campaign accompanying the local elections in March 2018 in the capital, where the so-called “second Serbia” – i.e., liberal, anti-nationalist, and anti-populist Serbia – is relatively strong (compared to the rest of the country), those in power seemed to be aware that promises of a better tomorrow were needed for success. Therefore, it was assured that under the rule of politicians from Vučić’s group, the city would develop impressively, which was additionally supported by the song *Prestonica nade* (Capital of hope), which celebrated the charms of Belgrade as a city friendly to its inhabitants, full of happiness and prospects for young people.<sup>28</sup> Although these were vague promises, not supported by concrete action plans, the “Aleksandar Vučić – Because We Love

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<sup>26</sup> *Izbori 2020: Raspisani izbori u Srbiji – ko može da glasa i za koga*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-51733902> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>27</sup> Bieber, *Uspón autoritarizma...*, 169.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5p-bjNUz1Y> [accessed September 25, 2021].

Belgrade!” (“Aleksandar Vučić – zato što volimo Beograd!”) won 44.99% of the votes, which gave it an absolute majority in the local parliament.<sup>29</sup>

The same strategy was used in the 2020 elections. The Serbian Progressive Party formed a bloc with its coalition partners. Their slogan, “Aleksandar Vučić – For Our Children,” clearly indicated that the country would have a great future under this party’s rule. The campaign ad spread a meaningful message, showing the president, together with a little girl, building a town out of Lego blocks, which was to be a metaphor for Serbia under his leadership.<sup>30</sup> Once again, Serbian voters saw no clear success agenda or a concrete plan of action; instead, they were offered another string of populist slogans. The fact that Vučić himself played a central role in these elections, even though they were not presidential elections, was not rationalized. Yet again, appealing to voters’ collective emotions had the desired effect, as the coalition emerged as the clear winner, even if the results were not entirely fair.

### Belgrade Waterfront

The reflection on the topic of Serbia under Vučić’s rule must include a reference to the Belgrade Waterfront project, a promise he made before the elections in 2012. The project, which is planned to be completed in 30 years and is estimated to cost USD 3.5 billion, is financed with investor money from the United Arab Emirates, which is flowing in under non-transparent circumstances.<sup>31</sup> The promised transformation of the capital appears surreal in the visualizations, which envisage a large business and service center with luxury apartments that poor Serbs can only dream of or the Belgrade Tower, modeled on Dubai’s Burj al-Arab skyscraper.<sup>32</sup>

As Marek Matyjanka writes, this initiative is a grotesque mixture of corruption, megalomania, wild privatization, and social harm.<sup>33</sup> It should be added that the Belgrade Waterfront project contradicts the city’s development plans and can be treated as one of the many proofs of the arrogance of politicians, who do not heed the strong opposition of experts. The Serbian Academy of Architecture has been protesting against the project from the very beginning, along with the intellectual, cultural, and

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<sup>29</sup> *Konačni rezultati: SNS-u 44,99 odsto, lista oko Đilasa 18,93*, March 5, 2018, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a369485-konacni-rezultati-beogradskih-izbora-2018/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKhXbM4uN9w> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>31</sup> Barbara Surk, “To Build Dubai of the Balkans, Serbia Deploys Bulldozers and Baseball Bats,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/29/world/europe/serbia-belgrade-waterfront-uae-aleksandar-vucic.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>32</sup> Guy Delauney, *Controversy Surrounds Belgrade Waterfront Development*, June 21, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-36576420> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>33</sup> Marek Matyjanka, *Belgrad na wodzie*, June 27, 2017, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/swiat/belgrad-na-wodzie/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

artistic elites who oppose the government, and many residents who refuse to accept the autocratic and arrogant policies of Vučić or the demolition of old buildings and the eviction of their inhabitants.

It is often emphasized that the project was not consulted with the public or specialists, and that building permits were not issued in the traditional, legal way. Moreover, the implementation of the controversial investment entails the demolition of the historic Savamala district, which in recent years has been transformed into an alternative space that attracts artists, including Western ones, leading some to predict that Belgrade would become a second Berlin. Recently, another metaphor describing the Serbian capital as the Dubai of the Balkans can be heard more and more often, which aptly captures the nature of the whole idea. Tana Prelec, a Balkanist from the London School of Economics, notes that the political cultures of Serbia and the UAE are in some ways compatible, that Arab sultanism meets Balkan authoritarianism.<sup>34</sup> Even if this is a far-reaching comparison, it is hard not to agree that the behavior of most Serbian (and other post-Yugoslav) politicians is – unfortunately – far from Western standards.

The revitalization of the Savamala district, modeled on European trends, collided with a megalomaniacal vision of peculiarly understood development and progress, laced with corruption. The most striking example of the latter was the incident in April 2016 when under the cover of darkness, a group of masked men demolished, without prior notice, buildings next to Hercegovačka Street, located in the immediate vicinity of the juggernaut under construction. The circumstances of the incident have not been clarified to this day, nor has anyone been found responsible for the destruction of private property, which clearly shows the functioning of the justice system in the state ruled by Vučić.<sup>35</sup> One can only guess that the authorities wanted the buildings to be removed quickly because the legal process of resettling the residents could have dragged on for many years.<sup>36</sup>

This event mobilized many Belgrade residents to take to the streets, but several demonstrations were unable to stop the gigantic venture. A spontaneously formed election committee of the opponents of the “flooding” of Belgrade failed to reach the 5% electoral threshold.<sup>37</sup> It is worth mentioning that the Serbian capital is inhabited by the majority of the supporters of the so-called “second Serbia,” i.e., a democratic, civic Serbia opposed to nationalist populism. Accordingly, the polarization of political positions is most evident in this city.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Surk, “To Build Dubai...”

<sup>35</sup> Marija Ignjatijević, *The Collapse of the Rule of Law in Serbia: the “Savamala” Case*, May 17, 2016, <https://pointpulse.bezbednost.org/magazine/collapse-rule-law-serbia-savamala-case/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>36</sup> *Slučaj Hercegovačka: Ko je odlučio da bude srušena*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.koreni.rs/slucaj-hercegovačka-ko-je-odlucio-da-bude-srusena/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>37</sup> *Konačni rezultati...*

<sup>38</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *Agorafilia. Sztuka i demokracja w postkomunistycznej Europie*, Poznań: Rebis, 2010, 286.

It is hard not to get the impression that the concept of the Belgrade Waterfront, aside from the financial benefits for a narrow class of decision-makers, was perfectly in line with the hopes and expectations of the majority of Serbs disappointed with their indefinitely prolonged existence on the periphery of Europe. The disintegration of Yugoslavia hurt Belgrade, once viewed as a local metropolis or the Paris of the Balkans. Hyperinflation, sanctions, and isolation in the international arena, and later the NATO bombing and the prolonged economic crisis, had significantly impoverished the city, whose inhabitants were envious of the changes taking place in Warsaw, Bratislava, and Bucharest. A BBC correspondent seems to be right in claiming that the Belgrade Waterfront is meeting public expectations for an influx of investments and infrastructure development.<sup>39</sup> Visualizations of the planned facilities along the long strip from Kalemegdan to the Belgrade Fair headquarters give the impression of progress, feed illusions of development and catching up with the West, and respond to the demand for foreign investments. All the more so since those in power constantly emphasize that thanks to the project, Belgrade will become a “world metropolis.”<sup>40</sup>

People who draw their knowledge from the media controlled by Vučić are unwilling to see that the much-publicized initiative is not designed for their benefit; that the average Serb will never be able to afford an apartment or rent a unit in the new skyscrapers; that only exclusive apartments are being built when what Belgrade lacks is low-cost housing.

The sad detail that the “world metropolis” will serve only the rich is evidenced by the fact that the historic main train station located in the vicinity of the Belgrade Waterfront was closed in 2018 and that there are plans to relocate the main bus station too. Belgrade authorities say that the new transport hubs will be modern, clean, and more efficient. The alternative locations contradict the plans for the expansion of transport in the capital, created since the 1970s.<sup>41</sup> As a result of this peculiar policy, the city of 1.5 million inhabitants does not have a subway, a train station in the historic center, and the still existing bus station looks as if it has not changed since 1966 when it was first put into operation.

Vučić and his entourage seem to have begun to realize that there is growing disappointment among Serbs over the lack of well-thought-out transportation solutions in the city, especially since many of them have seen the infrastructure in Western metropolises, either with their own eyes or on the Internet or the mass media. This feeling is exacerbated by the fact that there is currently a lot of talk in the world about smart cities, i.e., cities that take care of sustainable development, the environment, public transport, or human resources using IT technology. Also, in this case, the

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<sup>39</sup> Delauney, *Controversy...*

<sup>40</sup> *Beograd će postati svetska metropola, tvrdi gradonačelnik Siniša Mali*, April 10, 2016, <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/beograd/2106671-beograd-ce-postati-svetska-metropola-tvrđi-gradonačelnik-sinisa-mali> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>41</sup> Karlo Polak, *Glavnoj železničkoj stanici je mesto u centru grada*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.danas.rs/beograd/glavnoj-zeleznickoj-stanici-je-mesto-u-centru-grada/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

politicians' response to the expectations of the public was the much-debated plan to build a gondola lift connecting Belgrade's Kalemegdan Fortress with the other side of the river, which, according to the authorities, would become a tourist attraction of the city, as well as help to relieve traffic jams in the center of the capital.

This project raises a lot of controversies and faces unequivocal opposition from expert and scientific circles, which emphasize that the construction will destroy the cultural heritage of the historic building. Besides, the manner in which the building permit for the lift was issued is also controversial.<sup>42</sup> As in the case of the Belgrade Waterfront, it is not only the elites who are protesting against the construction of the "air tram" but also ordinary residents, who do not agree with Vučić's autocratic policy. The felling of trees in the park in Ušće and Kalemegdan (located on the route of the planned gondola lift), which was carried out "quietly," was strongly criticized, as was the demolition of houses in the Savamala district in 2016. This time, too, public opposition faded quickly, and the protests were continued only by a small group of activists.<sup>43</sup>

In April 2019, an administrative court ordered the archaeological works in the area of the planned railway to be stopped, which will probably delay its construction, especially since the Serbian authorities have a new idea for modernizing the city's public transport – building a subway. This concept is not new, as it first appeared in 1958 and has been revisited many times.<sup>44</sup> The problem is that the plans for the new lines are contrary to the old ones and raise a lot of controversies since more stations are planned around the Belgrade Waterfront than in the center, to which many Belgrade people travel every day.<sup>45</sup>

### Aleksandar Vučić's Foreign Policy

The incumbent president's success in securing support is also due to his deftly conducted foreign policy. Without going into an in-depth reflection on this subject, it

<sup>42</sup> *Vučić o gondoli: Biće to najlepša atrakcija Beograda, opozicija ne zna gde je Beograd-ska tvrđava*, May 3, 2019, [https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/14317/Vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-o-gondoli-Bi%C4%87e-to-najlep%C5%A1a-atrakcija-Beograda-opozicija-ne-zna-gde-je-Beogradskat-vr%C4%91ava.htm?fbclid=IwAR2JUx\\_EaJILBUUoCXhzAo4Eeq4JPRKWwLOQ9Wi3R1c\\_2KKR-gI6m3-eC3cIo](https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/14317/Vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-o-gondoli-Bi%C4%87e-to-najlep%C5%A1a-atrakcija-Beograda-opozicija-ne-zna-gde-je-Beogradskat-vr%C4%91ava.htm?fbclid=IwAR2JUx_EaJILBUUoCXhzAo4Eeq4JPRKWwLOQ9Wi3R1c_2KKR-gI6m3-eC3cIo) [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>43</sup> *Građani sadili drveće na mestu posećenog u parku Ušće*, March 16, 2019, <https://novimagazin.rs/vesti/194390-gradjani-sadili-drvece-na-mestu-posecenog-u-parku-use> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>44</sup> *Beogradski metro i obećanja: „Prva linija od 2028. godine“ – koliko je puta do sada Beograd trebalo da dobije metro*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.danas.rs/bbc-news-serbian/beogradski-metro-i-obećanja-prva-linija-od-2028-godine-koliko-je-puta-do-sada-beograd-trebalo-da-dobije-metro/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>45</sup> *Svi problemi zamišljenih trasa metroa u Beogradu*, February 13, 2020, <https://direktno.rs/beograd/252758/svi-problemi-zamisljenih-trasa-metroa-u-beogradu.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

should only be pointed out that Vučić has skillfully maneuvered between the European Union and Russia from the very beginning. The belief that Serbia's value lies in its specific geopolitical position between the East and the West, which should be used in diplomatic salons, has been exploited by Serbian political elites (of various options). No wonder that most Serbs like it when Vučić is one day received in European salons as a guarantor of stability in the Balkans, and soon after, goes to Moscow to watch the parade on the anniversary of the end of World War II alongside Vladimir Putin.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the two vectors of foreign policy mentioned above, there are also more oriental partners, such as China or the United Arab Emirates. More than one separate article could be devoted to the developing cooperation between Belgrade and Beijing. Let us just note that this asymmetrical relationship, which intensified in the era of the coronavirus pandemic, further strengthens the position of the president, who emphasizes that thanks to Chinese aid (not only medical), the country has come through this difficult period in a relatively steady way.<sup>47</sup>

The president's international activity may be pleasing, especially when it is shown in the media that is completely subordinate to the government. Ivan Čolović, analyzing years ago the phenomenon of public support for Slobodan Milošević, noticed that he perfectly sensed the yearning for a strong leader, just as Josip Broz Tito had been portraying himself.<sup>48</sup> It is hard not to get the impression that a similar strategy has been adopted by Vučić, especially since not only Serbs but all post-Yugoslav societies fondly recall the days of the SFRY "empire," which counted on the international arena and whose head of state was seen as one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement and also as one of the great world leaders.<sup>49</sup> Today, Vučić plays on these tendencies by promoting himself as a leader with whom key non-European actors meet and negotiate. An important element of such narratives was the celebration in Belgrade of the 60th anniversary of the Movement's founding, planned for October 2021.

The incumbent president is able to take advantage of the mixture of national pride and peripherality complex with regard to the West that is present among Serbs; he knows what rhetoric to adopt in order to fit Serbian collective representations and, at the same time, gain the trust of the outside world, for example, by recognizing the crime in Srebrenica as genocide or appointing an openly homosexual person as prime minister.

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<sup>46</sup> *Vučić otkrio šta mu je Putin šapnuo tokom parade u Moskvi*, May 5, 2018, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-otkrio-sta-mu-je-putin-sapnuo-tokom-parade-u-moskvi/1n9jr0f> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yJDZuVDHtY> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>48</sup> Ivan Čolović, *Dubina. Članci i intervjui 1991–2001*, Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2001, 28–31; idem, *Bordel ratnika. Folklor, politika, rat*, Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2007, 34–6.

<sup>49</sup> Davor Džalto, "Jugoslavija. Snovi i strvarnost," in Noam Čomski, *Jugoslavija. Mir, rat i raspad*, Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2019, 24–5; Magdalena Reksć, *Wyobrażenia zbiorowe społeczeństw bylej Jugosławii w XXI wieku. Perspektywa politologiczna*, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2019, 374–5.

The pro-government media create the image of a dynamic, decisive leader who talks “as an equal” with other leaders in diplomatic salons, which results in the strengthening of Belgrade’s international position.<sup>50</sup> In practice, however, nothing has changed under Vučić’s rule. Small, poor Serbia is perceived externally as a market and a key player in the remote, “peripheral,” “adventurous,” but geopolitically important Balkans, hence it is worth talking to it and trying to bring it under one’s influence while pursuing one’s own interests.

### Between Official Propaganda and Reality

Little has changed in terms of the country’s development and infrastructure modernization. As explained earlier, megalomaniacal projects are not intended for ordinary people but are primarily meant to serve those in power and the financial elite associated with them. Besides, they are located in the capital, while little is happening in other cities, and the province is sinking into apathy. For years, experts and analysts have been complaining about Belgrade’s hegemony and lack of well-thought-out concepts of sustainable development, introducing the notions of “Belgradeization of Serbia” (*beogradizacija Srbije*) or “Belgrade narcissism” (*beonarcizam*).<sup>51</sup> The pro-government media talk a lot about Chinese investments as a hope for a rapid modernization of the country, especially since Beijing’s aid is not subject to any conditions. And although independent experts warn that China is not helping selflessly, that it is also trying to play up its geopolitical interests, and point out the dangers and pitfalls of debt diplomacy,<sup>52</sup> Chinese investments are welcomed by the poorer part of the society, and thanks to them, politicians can claim that the country is changing for the better.

Meanwhile, as has already been emphasized, Serbia has one of the largest disparities in Europe, and Vučić’s rule is further widening the gap between the rich and the poor. The aforementioned contrasts also apply to infrastructure, water supply networks, sewage systems, etc.<sup>53</sup> It is significant that every year, there are local floods, during which the surrounding towns are evacuated and their inhabitants lose their property. Disasters of this type are evidence of a weak flood protection system. It is hard not to get the impression that Belgrade has not learned its lesson from the tragic events

<sup>50</sup> See *Doček za Vučića u Pekingu uz gardu kineske vojske*, April 24, 2019, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/ci/story/1/politika/3500158/docek-za-vucica-u-pekingu-uz-gardu-kineske-vojske.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>51</sup> Tanja Petrović, *Srbija i njen jug. „Južnjački dijalekti” između jezika, kulture i politike*, Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2015, 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Kineske investicije i balkanske glavobolje*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kineske-investicije-i-doma%C4%87e-glavobolje/29874983.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>53</sup> Jelena Žarković, *Mapa podeljene Srbije*, April 1, 2019, <https://pescanik.net/mapa-podeljene-srbije/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

of 2014 when water caused enormous damage throughout the region, even though it received funds from the European Union for the modernization of the flood protection infrastructure.<sup>54</sup> Given the high level of corruption and the widespread practice of stealing public money, it can be assumed that much of the funds provided by Brussels have not been spent as intended.

No wonder the Serbs do not hide their disappointment at the prolonged stagnation, even if many of them want to believe the state propaganda of successes and economic growth. The reality brutally shows the weakness of the state, its economy, and institutions. It is significant that Vučić, although enjoying the support of nearly two-thirds of the population according to official data,<sup>55</sup> is sometimes widely criticized, together with the entire political class. The problem is that these negative opinions do not translate into electoral decisions because, as has already been explained, the mastery of the incumbent president lies in creating the belief that the taking of power by the opposition will significantly worsen the current situation. However, such a tactic seems short-sighted, as the public's faith has its limits, and at some point, a deep crisis and progressive disappointment will have to erupt, as was the case in Macedonia after the outbreak of the wiretapping scandal in 2015.

For a moment, it seemed that the Vučić regime was nearing its end when, at the turn of 2018 and 2019, Serbs began to take to the streets *en masse* to protest against the assault on opposition politician Borko Stefanović. Although the perpetrators of the attack were arrested, the opponents of the incumbent president had no doubts about who was behind the brutal beating. People spoke explicitly about an assassination attempt. The leader of the People's Party (Narodna stranka), Vuk Jeremić, even called on EU politicians not to ignore the incident, directly suggesting that the behavior of those in power did not meet the standards of a democratic state of law.<sup>56</sup> A large part of the public seemed to be of the same opinion since it regularly took part in demonstrations under the slogan "Against Violence – Stop Bloody Shirts" ("Protiv nasilja – Stop krvavim košuljama"). The outrage of the protesters intensified after Vučić's declaration that he would not meet any of the opposition's demands, even if 5 million people (i.e., almost

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<sup>54</sup> *Evropska unija sanira klizište između Mokre Gore i Kremne*, July 28, 2017, <https://europa.rs/evropska-unija-sanira-kliziste-izmedju-mokre-gore-i-kremne/> [accessed March 10, 2023]; Pero Jovović, *GDE SU PARE? 2014. godine smo dobili MILIONE za prevenciju poplava, A SAD NAM SE DEŠAVA ISTI PAKAO! KAKO?*, June 9, 2019, <https://www.espreso.rs/vesti/drustvo/397167/gde-su-pare-2014-godine-smo-dobili-milione-za-prevenciju-poplava-a-sad-nam-se-desava-isti-pakao-kako-foto> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>55</sup> *Kome i zbog čega smeta Vučić, ako ga podržava skoro dve trećine građana Srbije? Političkim secikesama i lopovima svih rasa...*, November 10, 2018, <http://macvanski.info/kome-i-zbog-cega-smeta-vucic-ako-ga-podrzava-skoro-dve-trecine-gradjana-srbije-politickim-secikesama-i-lopovima-svih-rasa/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>56</sup> *EU Ambassador to Serbia Condemns Assault on Opposition Members, EU Officials Urged to React*, November 24, 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/11/24/eu-ambassador-serbia-condemns-assault-opposition-members-eu-officials-urged-react/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

all of Serbia) took to the streets.<sup>57</sup> Since then, anti-government demonstrations have been using the “1 of 5 Million” (“1 od 5 miliona”) slogan, which quickly became the slogan of the opposition and alternative circles opposing Vučić’s autocratic politics. The protests culminated in March 2019 when demonstrators stormed the headquarters of the state-owned RTS television, demanding to be allowed to appear in front of its cameras and present their arguments.<sup>58</sup> It seemed as if the Serbs were strongly determined to repeat the scenario of the 2000 Bulldozer Revolution when Milošević was overthrown. However, this did not happen, and the energy of the demonstrators quickly burned out, with most of them deciding that there was no real chance of changing those in power.

The same is true today because the democratically oriented part of society has lost faith in the possibility of changing the situation. In May 2019 (so before the outbreak of the pandemic), Slobodna Evropa published the results of a survey conducted in the Balkan countries (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Bulgaria, and Romania) in 2018–2019, which showed that 75% of young Serbs dreamed of emigrating from the country, which was the highest rate in the region.<sup>59</sup> It can be assumed that since the overwhelming majority of Serbian youths dream of going abroad, they do not believe in the economic progress and a better future promised by the authorities. Experts alarm that the youngest and best-educated citizens are gradually moving from Serbia to other countries (mainly Germany) and that their decisions are motivated not only by higher wages but also by the disastrous organization of the state and its institutions.<sup>60</sup>

On the other hand, many Serbs like the populist slogans, especially since the incumbent president is able to read the dreams and expectations of ordinary people, both domestically and internationally. The problem is that the actions of his team are not aimed at real modernization of the country and improvement of the quality of life of citizens. Instead, they are calculated to help them remain in power and profit from it.

## Conclusions

As emphasized in the introduction, the example of Serbia discussed in this article has parallels among the countries of the region where autocratic politicians remain in

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<sup>57</sup> *Vučić o protestu: Nek vas se skupi pet miliona, nijedan zahtev neću da ispunim*, December 9, 2018, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/a442570-vucic-o-protestu-u-beogradu/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>58</sup> *Policija izvela demonstrante iz RTS-a, MUP podneo krivične prijave*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29825130.html> [accessed March 10, 2023].

<sup>59</sup> *Bez komentara: Vučića im preko glave, rekordnih 75% Srba želi da emigrira iz Srbije*, <https://www.vidiportal.ba/index.php/novosti/11558-vucica-im-preko-glave-rekordnih-75-srba-zeli-da-emigri-iz-srbije> [website unavailable].

<sup>60</sup> *Rajić: Eksperti neće zaustaviti iseljavanje mladih iz Srbije*, January 11, 2019, <https://www.danas.rs/ekonomija/rajic-eksperti-neze-zaustaviti-iseljavanje-mladih-iz-srbije/> [accessed March 10, 2023].

power, proving that only they can ensure stabilization. Characteristic of all Western Balkans societies is a negative perception of the political class, a deep conviction that it is guided only by its own interests and not by the needs of citizens. The problem is that widespread criticism does not translate into electoral defeat because people are willing to vote for those in power again for fear of destabilization and worsening of the already bad state of affairs. Such fears are not entirely unfounded since in many cases, such as in Serbia, the opposition is weak, divided, and lacks a concrete program.

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