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Friends or Foes within the Pan-Slavic Brotherhood: A Narrative Analysis of Aleksandar Vučić's Stance on Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine

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Abstract

Amidst the Russian aggression against Ukraine, peace and stability within the geostrategic region of the Western Balkans have come under the spotlight. While some have called for the “denazification” of the Balkans, others have firmly supported Ukraine. Among the six non-European Union states in the Balkans, the Republic of Serbia is perceived as the most visible and longstanding supporter, akin to a brotherly state, of the Russian Federation. This article aims to investigate President Vučić's narrative in his *Addresses to the Nation* concerning the war in Ukraine. The objective is to gain a better understanding of Serbia's foreign policy positioning with regard to the conflict in Ukraine. Anchored in the Regional Security Complex theory, the article examines President Vučić's *Addresses to the Nation* from February 2022 to February 2023, revealing Serbia's consistent insistence on independent decision-making in foreign policy matters, including in the context of the war in Ukraine. These *Addresses to the Nation* further reinforce the notion of Serbia's multi-vector foreign policy, while also utilizing the war in Ukraine to reignite public discussions on the importance of Kosovo to Serbia's foreign policy.

Keywords: narrative analysis; Aleksandar Vučić; Serbia; Ukraine; Russian Federation; War in Ukraine

Introduction

Together with Belarus, the Republic of Serbia remains the only European country that refuses to align with *the West*, predominantly comprising the member states of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in imposing retaliatory measures on the Kremlin due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The National Security Council of the Republic of Serbia (*Savet za nacionalnu bezbednost Republike Srbije*) took a day and a half to issue a statement regarding the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, highlighting the mutually friendly relationship between Russia and Ukraine, while emphasizing the “economic and political interests of the Republic of Serbia” when considering the necessity of imposing restrictive measures or sanctions against any country, including the Russian Federation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022). This statement remains uncontested and unchanged ahead of the second anniversary of the war.

In 2014, Belgrade faced comparable uncertainties, albeit on a smaller scale, following the Russian annexation of Crimea. It presented an opportunity for Serbia to demonstrate its strong alignment with the West, particularly the European Common Foreign and Security Policy, in condemning Russian actions. However, Serbia chose to disregard the broader Western alliance against the Russian Federation and opted to officially support the territorial integrity and sovereignty of

Ukraine, while refraining from imposing any sanctions on Russia. This parallel scenario unfolded in both 2014 and 2022. The shared position on the status of Kosovo and Metohija, as discussed by scholars such as Petrovic (2010), Radeljic (2017), and Jovic-Lazic and Ladevac (2018), further solidifies the relationship between Russia and Serbia.

While the West viewed Serbia with skepticism in 2014, it was evident that the decision not to align with Western sanctions following the initiation of the war in Ukraine, often referred to as one of the most significant conflicts since World War II (Wadephul 2022; Lederer 2022; Hirsh 2022), would now come at a higher cost. In the context of victorious 2022 presidential and parliamentary elections, it is crucial for President Vučić to maintain his and the Serbian Progressive Party's (SNS) popularity by garnering electoral support for both domestic and foreign policy measures, particularly amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine. Unlike in any other Western Balkan country, President Vučić's *Addresses to the Nation* occur on a monthly and, at times, weekly basis, serving as effective means to communicate key political messages to the wider public. The more significant the crisis, the more consistent the presence of President Vučić on national television. In the first five months of 2020, only four pro-government tabloids – *Alo*, *Kurir*, *Srpski Telegraf*, and *Informer* – received €220,000 of public funds, and in the second half of 2020, they violated the Code of Journalists 3,900 times (Švarn 2021). Privately owned TV stations, such as TV Pink, TV Prva, and TV92, have reportedly changed their reporting in favor of the ruling elites, particularly President Vučić, whose TV appearances have increased since the ownership of these channels changed.

Within this context, this article examines the narrative surrounding the Russian aggression against Ukraine as conveyed by President Vučić in his *Addresses to the Nation* series. To accomplish this, the article addresses two research questions: Firstly, *what are key thematic areas in president Vučić's discourse vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine?* Secondly, *how do these elements (recurring thematic areas) contribute to Serbia's foreign policy identity, and positioning in a changed geopolitical context?* Through Narrative Analysis (NA), the article conducts a detailed investigation of 12 out of 16 analyzed *Addresses to the Nation* that either mention or specifically address the topic of the war in Ukraine from its start in February 2022 until its first anniversary in February 2023. The article aims to provide a fine-grained understanding of the multi-layered dynamics in Serbian policy outputs vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine as seen through the President Vučić's political narrative to anchor the analysis into a broader geopolitical context. Our main assumption is that through his political narrative, President Vučić proposes and shapes the policy output regarding the war in Ukraine by using a set of intertwined historical, geopolitical, and domestic policy elements that inform the general public on the "righteousness" of Serbia's preferred choice.

Theoretical Background: A Role of Language in Shaping Reality

Within the field of international relations, social constructivism emphasizes the active role of agents in constructing reality. The agent-structure approach posits that agents do not passively conform to social structures but actively shape and construct them through their actions and interactions. This perspective is relevant to narrative analysis (NA) because it suggests that the narratives produced by political actors are not mere reflections of the social context, but rather actively contribute to shaping it (Wendt 1987, 335–370; Giddens 1984, 5–25; Wendt 1992, 71–81). Post-structuralism, on the other hand, highlights the instability and contingency of meaning. Scholars such as J. Derrida, M. Foucault, J. Lacan, and J. F. Lyotard argue that meaning is not fixed but rather fluid, continuously shifting and changing. Language, as the medium through which meaning is created, is highly contested and unstable. Moreover, language is not a neutral tool for communication; it is shaped by cultural and social forces that influence our understanding of the world. Hence, to comprehend the meaning of political narratives, it is essential to analyze not only the narratives themselves but also their construction and the social and cultural context in which they emerge.

This work is also grounded in the Regional Security Complex Theory, which posits that regional political dynamics are shaped by a complex interplay of local and global factors (Buzan 2007). Analyzing presidential speeches in local languages enables a deeper understanding of how local political actors interpret, shape, and respond to global issues and how these interpretations are influenced by local social, political, and cultural dynamics. Additionally, through processes of politicization and securitization (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998), which involve framing certain issues as political or security threats through verbal labelling, the articulated narratives shape the audience's understanding and opinion formation.

Therefore, to investigate the development of President Vučić's discourse on the Russian aggression against Ukraine within one year timeframe, we employ NA as a valuable methodology that aligns with the perspectives of social constructivism and post-structuralism within International Relations and Security Studies. These approaches posit that sociopolitical reality is constructed through ongoing social processes, with language playing a vital role in this construction.

We approach our analysis closest to Riessman's (2008) empirical illustration of Thematic Analysis, which focuses primarily on the content of the narrative. Roberts (2006, 703–714) argues that this approach enables a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complexities of international relations, incorporating multiple perspectives and voices. Additionally, the study of political narratives provides insight into the construction and presentation of collective identities (Shenhav 2005).

Narrative and discourse are closely intertwined concepts in the study of language and politics. Narrative refers to specific accounts that individuals use to construct and convey meaning, allowing us to interpret and make sense of our experiences and knowledge in the world (Souto-Manning 2014, 162). It provides a framework for understanding and organizing our perceptions and understanding of events. On the other hand, discourse analysis examines the social, political, and cultural forces that shape language and how language, in turn, reinforces and reproduces these forces. It includes the ideological assumptions and power relations that underpin language use (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 3). Narrative analysis can be employed to connect specific microevents to broader discourses and contexts, revealing how social experiences are constructed through narratives (Souto-Manning 2014; van Dijk 1993). In our investigation of President Vučić's stance on the Russian war against Ukraine, we have chosen NA as our primary approach, although other approaches, such as (Critical) Discourse Analysis, the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse, or an analysis of President Vučić's operational code, could complement our analysis and provide additional insights into the broader picture. Especially the below-described coding scheme is inspired in operational code analysis in creating a cartesian coordinate system of "us and them" and "cooperative-conflictual" axes.

Methodology: A Toolkit for Analyzing Political Narratives

For the analysis, we identified 16 *Addresses to the Nation* delivered by President Vučić between February 25, 2022, and February 24, 2023 – the first year of the Russian open war in Ukraine. The selection of these addresses was conducted through Content Analysis, which aims to analyze data within a specific context, considering the meanings attributed to them by someone (Krippendorff 1989, 403). In total, 4 speeches were excluded from the analysis due to their thematic focus on topics such as the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, internal affairs, Serbia's relations with Western powers, or other issues unrelated to Russia, Ukraine, or the war. However, these thematic areas were crucial for comprehending the broader context of the war in Ukraine and for conducting further in-depth analysis of the Serbian narrative surrounding the conflict. Subsequently, 12 presidential speeches were included for analysis.

Based on the content analysis, each sentence from the transcribed addresses was assigned to 1 of 15 categories. A total of 929 sentences were coded. All speeches were assigned codes and thoroughly

examined to identify patterns and the overall tone of President Vučić's addresses, despite the focus of the analysis placed on 4 thematic areas as below (see [Table 1](#)):

- (1) *War in Ukraine*: This category includes direct references to the atrocities, military situation on the ground, military supplies, war crimes, and related aspects of the conflict.
- (2) *Sanctions*: This category encompasses references to Western retaliatory measures against Russia in response to the war in Ukraine.
- (3) *Kosovo through the lens of Ukraine*: This category explores the comparisons and connections drawn between the cases of Kosovo and Ukraine, examining how they are perceived as similar or intertwined.
- (4) *Sovereignty and territorial integrity*: This category pertains to references that relate to the concept of sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly in the context of the three involved states (Serbia, Ukraine, and Russia).

These 4 categories collectively represent President Vučić's narrative on the war in Ukraine, and their deconstruction allows us to understand the development of specific micronarratives over time. The remaining categories provide a broader context for evaluation and analysis, and they are encoded with sentiment indications. These categories include the following:

- (5) *Cooperation with NATO*
- (6) *Military neutrality*
- (7) *Western Balkans neighbors*
- (8) *Partnership with Russia*
- (9) *Internal affairs*
- (10) *Serbia vis-à-vis Western powers*
- (11) *History referencing*
- (12) *Serbia as a victim*
- (13) *Serbia as peaceful and stable*
- (14) *Economic security*
- (15) *Belgrade-Pristina dialogue*

In the analysis, individual sentences are deconstructed into code sequences using four codes: Ukraine (UA), Russian Federation (RF), West (WEST), and Serbia (SRB). Each code is accompanied by a sentiment indication, either positive (+), neutral (0), or negative (-). Informed by the conducted content analysis, the code WEST represents Vučić's references to the EU, NATO, the US as the perceived dominant, and generally the so-called political West. It purportedly represents the given content to reflect the operational code approach positioning the speaker on certain axes (us/them, amity/enmity, conflict/cooperation, etc.) This coding approach thus allows for the examination of how President Vučić perceives Serbia's position to the political West and to the Russian Federation, as well as his perceptions of Russia-Ukraine mutual relations and the war itself. These codes are deliberately constructed as fluidly binary, enabling comparisons between different entities. This approach also allows for the tracking of how their relationships and perceptions develop over time.

This research, like any other, has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, there is subjectivity involved both in the narrative analysis itself, which focuses on individual speeches constructed from a particular worldview, and in the interpretation of the analysis by different researchers. However, the subjective nature of the analysis is also a strength of this investigation, as it allows us to uncover how a specific speaker views and describes the political world. Speeches are analyzed in the speaker's native language, Serbian. However, this approach provides the advantage of capturing the full context and nuances of the speeches, without losing language specifics through multiple translations. Secondly, it is important to recognize that this research is based on a relatively limited qualitative dataset so its generalizability may be limited, too.

Anchoring the “War in Ukraine” Narrative in a Wider Political Context

The direct presidential elections took place on April 3, 2022, providing an opportunity for Vučić to be re-elected as the head of the country and consolidate his position further. With the highest turnout (58.63%) in the last three presidential elections, Aleksandar Vučić secured a resounding victory with 58.59% of the vote, leaving his closest rival far behind with a mere 18.39%. President Vučić also obtained the highest number of popular votes, with 2,224,914 people voting in his favor (*Republička izborna komisija* 2022). As per Serbian Constitution, it is the Prime Minister who possesses the broadest range of formal political powers, but the President in Serbia actually holds decision-making power in designated areas of responsibility – such as defense and foreign policy – and has a wide range of informal instruments to influence other policy domains.

When the war in Ukraine started, President Vučić modified his campaign slogan from “Together we can do everything” (*Zajedno možemo sve*) to “Peace. Stability. Vučić” (*Mir. Stabilnost. Vučić*), thereby rhetorically emphasizing the country’s emergency situation and positioning himself, as well as his party, as the ones capable of navigating the country through this crisis. Despite Serbia’s physical distance from the military conflict, its indirect involvement in the war came under intense domestic and international scrutiny, leading to the issue becoming securitized. The war in Ukraine thus quickly became the most critical issue during the elections and dominated public discourse, relegating other issues that directly impacted the daily lives of citizens to the background.

During the election campaign, all candidates, both from the ruling party and the opposition, adopted a Serbia-centered and nationalist approach toward NATO, the Kosovo issue, the Srebrenica massacre/genocide, and the EU. While this rhetoric has resonated strongly within the pro-government discourse over the years, it has also become an essential narrative for any candidate aspiring to participate in Serbia’s political landscape (Varga 2022). This aligns with Gagnon’s (1994–1995) argument that the faction of elites who successfully aligns itself with the collective interest and defines it in a way that maximizes its own ability to achieve its goals, often by perpetuating narratives of external threats to be combated through increased nationalism, achieves a significant victory.

Moreover, a coalition partner of SNS, Socialist Party of Serbia, based its 2022 general elections campaign on a commitment to strengthening relations with Russia and a firm stance on Kosovo as an inseparable part of Serbia. The right-wing opposition parties focused on defending national identity, but also advocated closer relations with Russia. Other Serbian officials were only reinforcing this rhetoric. In June 2022, Jovan Palalić, current general secretary of Serbian People’s Party (*Srpska Narodna Partija*, SNP), a member of electoral list led by SNS in both 2022 and 2023 snap parliamentary elections, underlined that the issue of Kosovo and imposition of sanctions on Russia are two “non-negotiable” things for Serbia, whereas former Economy Minister, Rade Basta was dismissed from the government in July 2023 after advocating for the introduction of sanctions on Russia due to heavy price his country continues to pay.

The National Security Strategy of Republic of Serbia reads that partnership cooperation with both NATO and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as being equally important, as well as improving relations with “the United States of America, Russian Federation, the People’s Republic of China, and other traditional partners and significant actors of the international community” (Ministry of Defense 2021). The official governmental line therefore underlines the country’s multi-vector foreign policy, which continues to raise questions about Serbia’s strategic directions – not least due to non-alignment with any restrictive measures against Russia over the war of aggression against Ukraine, as per the latest European Commission 2023 progress report.

The overall sentiment among Serbian citizens also indicates an increasing level of multipolarity: More than one third (42.6%) of citizens hold that “Serbia does not belong to either the West or the East,” while more citizens think that it “belongs to the East” (28.1%), rather than “to the West” (17.3%) (Westminster Foundation of Democracy 2023). Serbia’s geopolitical ambivalence is thus not only a part of the regime’s foreign policy but also deeply embedded domestically (Bieber

2023). Serbian citizens often refer to their Russian counterparts as *naša braća* (our brothers). It goes as far as to consider Russia as the most preferred partner to rely on in international relations (42.1%), only to be followed by the EU with 25.8% (Westminster Foundation of Democracy 2023). This stems from a long-standing historical, religious, economic and political partnership with Russia (Samorukov 2022; Hajdari 2018; Konitzer 2010). Russia reinforces the notion that Orthodox South Slavs should seek its protection and distance themselves from Western alliances (Bechev 2021, 540). Following President Putin's visit to Belgrade in 2014, Russian Patriarch Kirill also visited the Serbian capital, further strengthening the religious ties between the two nations. In his speech, he referred to Kosovo, emphasizing that "in more recent times – when you [Serbian people] were bombed – we were also with the Serbian people with our hearts, and we are now together going through what the Serbian population in Kosovo and Metohija are experiencing" (Barišić 2016, 108).

Context Meets Analysis: The Growing Nationalistic Appeal amidst the War against Ukraine

Serbia's weak institutions, the interdependence between the three branches of power, and the dominance of the ruling party, coupled with a lack of independent journalism, contribute to the characterization of Serbia as a captured state (Kapidžić and Stojarová 2022). The European Commission 2023 progress report on Serbia confirms the absence of significant improvements for providing enabling environment for the exercise of freedom of expression. Serbian independent media outlets warn that they are facing serious challenges as the ruling party, SNS, exercises direct or indirect control over the majority of media, effectively turning them into propaganda platforms.

The Western Balkan countries, including Serbia, are often referred to as *stabilocracies* – regimes that exhibit notable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance but maintain external legitimacy by offering some degree of stability (Popović 2021; Bieber 2018). Media outlets controlled by the government continue to promote Serbia's preferential approach toward Russia, thereby fueling anti-Western sentiments, regardless of President Vučić's official stance on EU accession or NATO.

In present-day Serbia, the populist narrative emphasizes the "will of the people" while simultaneously pursuing unchecked power and marginalizing political minorities and while also neutralizing those who advocate for power limitations (Lutovac 2020, 205). Another characteristic of populism is the antagonistic narrative, which portrays *others* as dangerous actors seeking to undermine the country's institutions, particularly in challenging security situations. President Vučić continues to depict NATO as the *other*, describing the Alliance as responsible for "killing the lives of thousands of innocent people" and launching aggression against a sovereign country without UN Security Council approval. He also asserts that those who believe they can harm and displace the Serbian people will not succeed (*The Limited Times* 2022).

Numerous factors contribute to nationalist narratives in Serbia, including the NATO intervention and the collective memory of suffering caused by NATO. In the Western Balkan context, joining the EU has become closely associated with joining the Euro-Atlantic Alliance. For example, Slovenia first joined NATO in 2004 and then the EU in 2007, while Croatia became a NATO member in 2009 and joined the EU in 2013. Similarly, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia joined NATO in 2009, 2017, and 2020, respectively, and are candidates for EU membership.

The strong connection between EU membership and NATO alliance resonates deeply in the minds of the Serbian people, as the memories of the war persist. Nationalistic narratives often highlight the perceived unfairness of the West, as Serbian perpetrators of the conflicts in the 1990s are believed to have been punished more severely than their Croatian or Bosniak counterparts (Pavičić 2019, 111–112). Serbia maintains a stance of military neutrality and considers NATO membership as undesirable. President Vučić has made it clear on multiple occasions that Serbia will not join NATO and will ensure its own safety and security (N1 Srbija 2022). However, Serbia has engaged in cooperation with NATO and actively participates in various programs offered by the alliance, such as the Defense Education Enhancement Programme, Partnership Interoperability

Initiative, Science for Peace and Security Programme, and the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center (NATO 2022).

Since 1999, NATO has been leading the peacekeeping operation in Kosovo (KFOR) and has been the foundation of Serbia-NATO cooperation. Since joining the NATO Partnership for the Peace program in 2016, Serbia has conducted over 150 exercises with NATO member states up until 2020. In 2019 alone, Serbia held 17 military exercises with various countries, including 12 with NATO members and 4 with Russia (European Western Balkans 2020).

Serbia's far-right parties and organizations are seizing the opportunity presented by the war in Ukraine and Russia's involvement to amplify their vocal support for Orthodox Russia. The People's Patrol, known as the most outspoken ultra-nationalist movement, has taken to the streets to protest against what they label as "Western Nazis," urging Serbs to "solve the current situation in holy land of Kosovo and Metohija" (Dragojlo 2022). These protests, which have been ongoing since the outbreak of the war, have served as a platform to advocate for various foreign policy issues, including an anti-NATO stance, insistence on non-recognition of Kosovo as an independent country, and support for Russia based on historical and cultural ties between the two nations. The protesters have even displayed banners with the "Z" sign, symbolizing support for Russian militia in Ukraine, as well as the names of convicted Serbian war criminals Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić (*Radio Slobodna Evropa* 2022). The fact that these far-right organizations go beyond the moderate politics of the ruling government on matters related to the West and Russia is evident in their protests against Serbia's vote to expel Russia from the UN Human Rights Council.

That said, President Vučić faces a challenging task of navigating mounting international pressure while also managing his own supporters within the SNS party. The pressure to align with the West on imposing sanctions against Russia is also felt within far-right parties that have gained seats in the National Assembly in 2022 general elections. Newcomers such as *Dveri* and the ultranationalist *Zavetnici* (the Oathkeepers) have been vocal in their support for Serbia's firm stance against joining the sanctions bloc, citing dependence on Moscow's energy supplies and long-standing historical and cultural ties with Russia as the main reasons (Eror 2022). The pro-Russian bloc – which includes parties like *Dveri*, *Zavetnici*, and some members of the national-conservative Democratic Party of Serbia (later known as the New Democratic Party of Serbia) or monarchist Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (the latter two in coalition) – has secured 35 seats in the National Assembly out of a total of 250 seats. While this represents only circa a seventh of the seats, it is important to note that some members of President Vučić's own party may also align with the "Russia & co." bloc. Thus far, President Vučić has been successful in balancing his party's desires with the foreign policy necessities of Serbia, considering the European Union as the country's most important economic partner.

Analyzing Aleksandar Vučić's Narration on the War against Ukraine

The four core thematic areas that form the narrative on the Russian aggression against Ukraine – namely *Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity*, *Sanctions*, *War in Ukraine* (militaristic view), and *Kosovo through the lens of Ukraine* – appeared in a total of 111 instances out of the 929 analyzed sentences. Among the remaining thematic areas, Aleksandar Vučić referenced *Cooperation with NATO* the least, with only 8 instances, while *Economic Security* of Serbia was the most frequently addressed area with 310 references. The *Belgrade-Pristina* theme followed closely behind with 240 instances. Given the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and its economic implications for the Western Balkans region, including Serbia – such as high inflation rates and energy security concerns – it is not surprising that *Economic Security* of Serbia received significant attention in President Vučić's addresses. Additionally, the ongoing debates surrounding the *Belgrade-Pristina dialogue* continue to be a prominent topic in public discussions in Serbia. The remaining thematic areas were mentioned only a few tens of times each (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1. Identified thematic areas and sub-narratives in *Addresses to the Nation*. Source: Authors

| Thematic areas | Sub-narratives | Number of mentions |
|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------|
| War in Ukraine | Serbia most sincerely regrets everything that takes place in the east of Europe. Russia and Ukraine have always been friendly countries to Serbia, and Serbian people think of Russians and Ukrainians as fraternal nations. | 40 |
| Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity | Serbia deems breach of territorial integrity to be extremely wrong. It is a lie that Serbia does not support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. | 29 |
| Sanctions | Serbia is guided exclusively by the protection of its vital economic and political interests. The decision has been taken in best interest of Serbia. Whatever Serbia does, it will not be to likening of all. | 23 |
| Kosovo through the Lens of Ukraine | If Kosovo proclaimed its independence and executed its right to self-determination, Republic of Donbas, Donetsk, and Lugansk could do the same without asking permission from central Government of Ukraine. Many countries, including the Western ones, have recognized independence of Kosovo. With this precedent, the three republics could do the same. | 19 |
| Military Neutrality | Serbia is surrounded by NATO countries. Serbia's politics is to stay away from NATO, and Serbia will continue to follow this trajectory. | 10 |
| Cooperation with NATO | Relationship between Serbia and NATO is fair overall. NATO is protecting sacral objects in Kosovo and Metohija. There were no problems with NATO until now and hopefully there will not be in the future. | 8 |
| Western Balkans neighbors | Serbia will not respond to provocations coming from Pristina, Podgorica, Sarajevo, or Zagreb. Some in the region want to involve Serbia in conflicts and portray the country as going against the West. Leave Serbia alone and stop spreading falsehoods; Serbia will find its own way. | 37 |
| Partnership with Russia | Serbia will not nationalize Russian property. Serbia will not rush to make enemies just because someone wants it. Serbia will preserve its own interests and long-standing partnerships. | 22 |
| Serbia vis-à-vis Western powers | Serbian strategic path is that of Europe. Money that we have today is thanks to the large amount of investments coming from the EU. Serbia will not copy-paste the decisions from Brussels. Serbia will not crush its friendships in the East regardless of the pressure. | 66 |
| Serbia as a victim | Serbia is attacked from all sides and Serbian nation has been cornered. Serbia to endure all, to win and be by far the best in the region. All Serbia wants is peace and respect for signed agreements. | 27 |
| Serbia as peaceful and stable | Independent and free Serbia takes care of its citizens. Preservation of integrity and stability. Solving problems is in the interest of citizens. | 15 |
| Belgrade–Pristina dialogue | Number of attacks on ethnic Serbs and sacral objects in Kosovo have risen since Albin Kurti came to power. Serbia is worried about ethnic Serbs in Kosovo. Serbia's biggest mistake was to allow the EU to handle the resolution of Kosovo and Metohija status. Regardless of Brussels Agreement, the Association of Serb Municipalities is still far from being established. | 240 |

Continued

Table 1 Continued

| Thematic areas | Sub-narratives | Number of mentions |
|---------------------|---|--------------------|
| History referencing | NATO intervention in the 1990s. Sanctions by the West introduced to Serbia in the 1990s. Fallen Serbian victims in the WWI and WWII. | 15 |
| Economic security | Serbia has ensured energy supplies as Russian oil sector is not under as heavy sanctions as others. Serbia has enough stocks of wheat, grains, and other food supplies. Serbian banking sector is safe, and balance sheets are cleared. | 310 |
| Internal affairs | Serbian government has formed the special teams to deal with energy and food security. Serbia has formed the team for humanitarian help to Ukraine. | 69 |
| Total mentions | | 929 |

In accordance with the research questions, the article primarily examines the narratives specifically related to the war in Ukraine, which encompassed a total of four thematic areas in President Vučić's *Addresses to the Nation* (see Figure 1).

The thematic area of *Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity*, examined in relation to Ukraine and Serbia, was addressed 29 times in President Vučić's *Addresses to the Nation*. Out of these mentions, 8 had a positive sentiment, 12 had a negative sentiment, and 9 were neutral. The overall sentiment score for this thematic area was -0.034, indicating a slightly negative sentiment overall. This can be attributed to President Vučić's hesitance to openly address Russia as the sole aggressor in the war due to the brotherly sentiment toward Russia among the Serbian public, as well as the pressure faced by Serbia from the West for not imposing sanctions on Russia.

When referencing the territorial integrity of Serbia, President Vučić often draws a comparative analogy to the perceived violation of Serbia's integrity by the international community, particularly during the Kosovo war. Positive addresses in this context highlight Serbia's strong condemnation of any violation of territorial integrity, making it a top priority in foreign policy discussions. This in

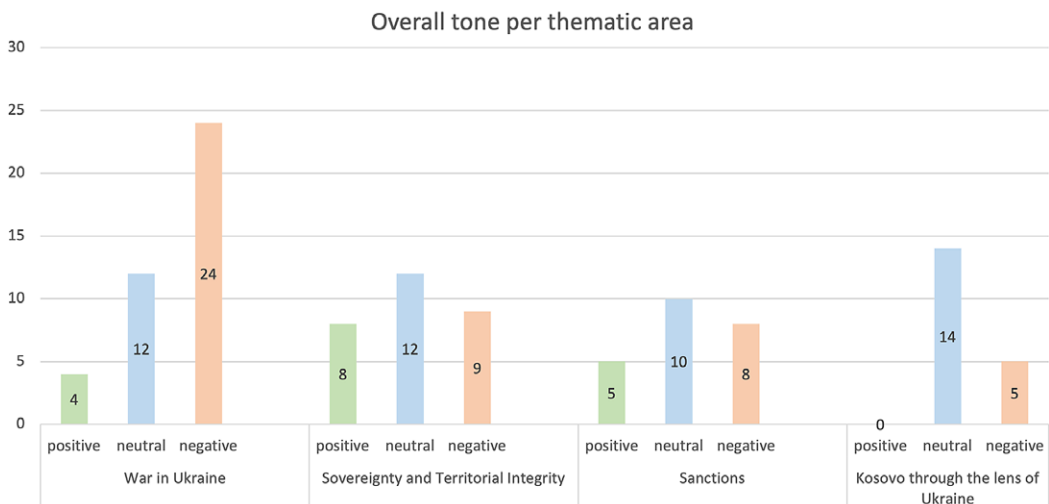


Figure 1. Overview of key thematic areas in president Vučić's narrative. Source: Authors.

turn brings Serbia forward as “one of the few in the world who are able to say that [we] are in favour of respecting international law,” as emphasized by president Vučić.

These positive connotations for Serbia extend to Ukraine, as President Vučić’s invocation of Serbia’s respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity implies support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Serbia’s firm determination to advocate for respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity remains a recurring narrative in its foreign policy, despite the hesitation to impose restrictive sanctions on Russia. President Vučić sees this stance as a way to keep Serbia from drawing too much attention from the West for not fully aligning with their position.

President Vučić addressed the issue of *Sanctions* 23 times in his speeches, with 5 mentions having a positive sentiment, 8 mentions having a negative sentiment, and 10 mentions being neutral. The overall sentiment score for his stance on sanctions as a retaliatory tool is -0.13, indicating a slightly negative perception. The mentions of sanctions were distributed relatively evenly throughout the speeches, constituting a consistent micronarrative compared to the thematic area of *Sovereignty*. However, the overall sentiment varied significantly in each address, ranging from completely positive to completely negative.

When discussing sanctions, President Vučić emphasized the importance of Serbia having the autonomy to decide whether to impose retaliatory measures or not. He also highlighted the need to maintain fairness in relations with all actors involved, including Russia and China. The negative sentiment toward sanctions stems from the high cost that Serbia incurs for not imposing retaliatory measures against Russia. Additionally, President Vučić expressed negative sentiments toward the West (code sequence WEST), suggesting that external actors should not dictate Serbia’s decisions. As president Vučić put it, “should we copy past the decisions from Brussels? If that is the case, we shall annul our sovereignty and independence.”

The thematic area of *War in Ukraine*, specifically focusing on the military aspects rather than the broader context, was the most addressed micronarrative out of the 4, with a total of 40 mentions. However, in the context of the entire set of 929 sentences, this thematic area scored relatively average compared to other topics such as *Western Balkans Neighborhood* (37 mentions), *Serbia as a Victim* (27 mentions), or *Serbia vis-à-vis Western Powers* (66 mentions). Not surprisingly, the mentions of the war in Ukraine were predominantly negative, with 24 mentions; 12 mentions were neutral.

However, there were also four mentions with a positive sentiment, which mainly referred to Serbia’s immediate response to the events in Ukraine. This included providing humanitarian aid, forming a special team to manage Ukrainian refugees in Serbia, and handling administrative procedures for granting residence permits. The positive sentiments were linked to Serbia’s willingness to support Ukraine in ways other than imposing sanctions, highlighting Belgrade’s readiness to stand with Ukraine in the humanitarian domain, similar to the West. The overall sentiment score for this thematic area was -0.500, indicating a highly negative perception. This perception is not surprising given the nature of war, but the relatively equal distribution of negative and neutral mentions, along with the few positive mentions, suggests President Vučić’s hesitance to solely portray Ukraine as the victim and the Russian Federation as the sole aggressor.

This hesitance may be influenced by the public sentiment in Serbia, which shows deep divisions on the issue, as well as the pragmatic reasons of historically balancing Serbia’s foreign policy and the issue of Kosovo, which is crucial for Serbia’s EU aspirations and where Russia continues to be a key guarantor of Serbia’s sovereignty in the UN Security Council. The addresses within the *War in Ukraine* thematic area remained relatively constant over time, with a consistent negative sentiment. The most “positive” address scored a neutral sentiment (0).

The thematic area comparing *Kosovo through the lens of Ukraine* did not contain any positive mentions. Out of the total 19 mentions, 5 were coded as negative and 14 as neutral. The overall sentiment score for this thematic area was -0.263, making it the second most – still only slightly – negative out of the 4.

Similar to the previous thematic areas, President Vučić displayed a relative reluctance to openly compare Kosovo and Ukraine, as indicated by the prevalence of neutral mentions. The negative

sentiments mainly stemmed from Belgrade's hesitation to take a strong stance against the Russian Federation. This hesitation is driven by the risk of Moscow being expelled from the UN, which would be detrimental to Serbia's position on the Kosovo issue. If Russia were expelled, China would be the only remaining member in the UN Security Council to support Serbia on the matter.

The neutral stance in President Vučić's addresses emerged from his references to Kosovo's proclamation of independence and the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk, Donbas, and Lugansk. He argues that "in the case of Kosovo, the international law ruling implied that territories within a state do not need to ask for permission the central government to proclaim their independence." President Vučić suggests that the proclaimed republics in Ukraine have the right to do the same without consulting the central government. This comparison with Kosovo plays a crucial role in shaping Serbia's stance toward the war in Ukraine and will influence Belgrade's decisions on retaliatory measures against the Russian Federation.

The case of Kosovo has been used by Kremlin officials, including President Putin, to justify the annexation of Crimea. They draw comparisons between the situation of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, who were concerned about Serbian repression, and ethnic Russians living in Crimea, who were said to fear Ukrainian nationalists. However, it is important to note that neither the annexation of Crimea nor the Kosovo independence were approved by the UN Security Council, and the use of force was involved in both cases. There are significant differences between the two situations. In Crimea, there were no systematic complaints of discrimination against the population or ethnic Russians, while in Kosovo, the population faced persecution by Serbian authorities, which led to a humanitarian crisis and NATO's intervention. (Dunay 2015, 61–67).

The Kremlin's justification based on the Kosovo case overlooks the breaches of international law committed by Russia itself. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its subsequent annexation of regions in Ukraine, namely Kherson, Zaporizhzhya, Donetsk, and Luhansk, have violated the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty, which Russia previously advocated for. The issue of Kosovo holds significant importance in Serbia's public discourse and its pursuit of EU membership. It continues to play a defining role in Serbia's international relations, including its stance on the war in Ukraine. However, compared to the previous two thematic areas, *Kosovo through the lens of Ukraine* appeared infrequently in the analyzed speeches. Its occurrence and sentiment were not constant or consistent.

This suggests that President Vučić and his administration may be more cautious or selective in addressing the issue of Kosovo in the context of the war in Ukraine. The complexities and sensitivities surrounding Kosovo's status and Serbia's aspirations for EU membership may influence the level of engagement or emphasis placed on this particular thematic area.

It is worth noting that the issue of Kosovo remains a highly contentious and complex topic, with diverse perspectives and ongoing negotiations. The limited mention of *Kosovo through the lens of Ukraine* in the speeches indicates that President Vučić may be navigating this issue with strategic considerations in mind, taking into account the broader implications for Serbia's foreign policy goals and relations with international actors.

The status of Kosovo features high on the agenda of Serbia's foreign policy and is more important than any other foreign policy issues, including that of the EU membership (Heler 2021). Municipalities in the north of Kosovo, where the majority of Serbs resides, remains an important piece of the puzzle when contemplating Russia's role in the *Belgrade-Pristina dialogue*, the EU-facilitated framework for the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Western policies, in the eyes of many Serbs, only inflame pro-Russian sentiments. Despite limited Russia's presence on the ground, the declarative support on behalf of Kremlin for non-recognition of Kosovo and the perceived failures of the West make Russia or the Eastern Option (integration within Eurasian Economic Union or within Russian Federation) a desired alternative among the local population (Heler 2021). For the majority of Serbs, Russia is their allied "troublemaker" in the international arena, one who stands against the full independence of Kosovo, challenging the Western policies of recognizing Kosovo's statehood and the West's support for Kosovo state-building; thus, Russia is

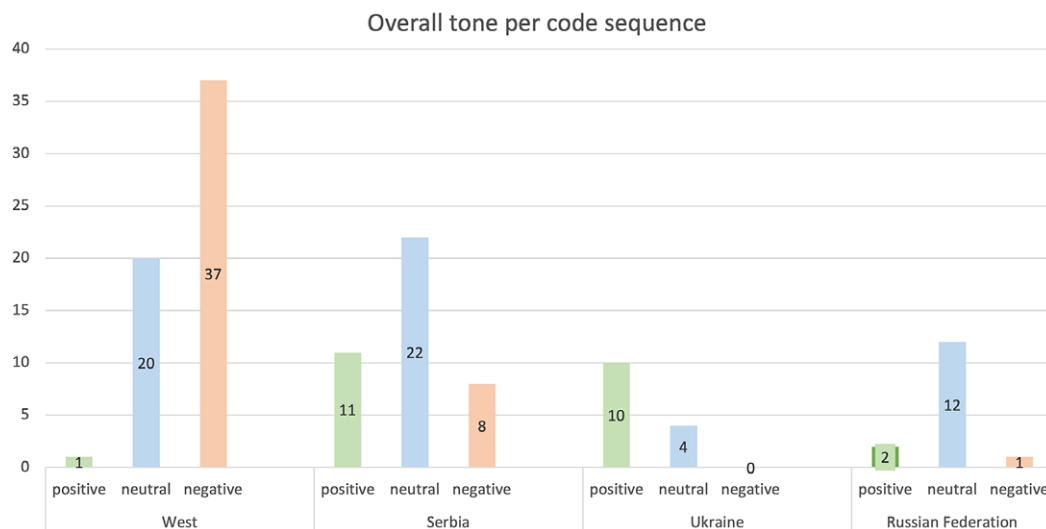


Figure 2. Overall tone per code sequence in president Vučić's narrative. Source: Authors.

also often perceived as the guarantor of the North's Serbian community survival in Kosovo (Heler 2021).

When deconstructing sentences from these 4 thematic areas into code sequences, it is observed that President Vučić perceives the *West* most negatively. Out of the 58 mentions of any West-related issue, 37 were negative, 20 neutral, and only 1 positive, providing an overall strongly negative sentiment with a vector direction of -0.621. On the other hand, despite the relatively low number of direct mentions (14), the code *Ukraine* scored the most positive vector direction of Vučić's perception with +0.714. It had 10 direct positive mentions, 0 negative, and 4 neutral. Direct mentions of *Serbia* scored second in total count with 41 addresses, having the largest number of positive references with 11 cases. In 8 cases, Serbia was addressed negatively, and in 22 cases, it was addressed in a neutral tone. Overall, the positive sentiment toward Serbia is relatively low, scoring only +0.073.

When Serbia is addressed with negative sentiment in President Vučić's speeches, it is mainly in relation to the negative consequences that the war in Ukraine and subsequent political and economic crises brought about to Serbia, rather than being anchored in any criticism by President Vučić toward his country. In that sense, he says, "Serbia [is] facing difficult situation and less than ever there is an understanding for the position of Republic of Serbia and for our people anywhere in the world," or "things will be much harder, and we will see more destruction on all sides, which will bring us [Serbia] in much difficult situation in the upcoming period."

Lastly, the direct addresses to the *Russian Federation* occurred only 15 times within the four analyzed thematic areas, out of which 2 were openly positive, 1 was negative, and 12 were in a neutral tone. This means that the overall score is +0.067, which indicates a slightly positive sentiment. None of these particular codes showed a constantly increasing or decreasing tendency over time, nor was there a significant discrepancy as the war in Ukraine evolved. Nevertheless, the occurrence of these codes in presidential speeches was relatively steady (see Figure 2).

Conclusion: Serbia and Russia as Friends or Foes within Pan-Slavic Brotherhood?

The Republic of Serbia remains one of the only two European countries that are still reluctant to join the Western geopolitical bloc in imposing retaliatory measures on the Russian Federation due to its open aggression on Ukraine. Additionally, the country employs an East-West balancing foreign

policy, and President Aleksandar Vučić refrains from openly labelling Kremlin as the sole aggressor in the war. The overall public sentiment toward Russia is rather brotherly and positive, anchored in a history of amicable political, economic, and ideational relations between two nations. This article therefore examines the development of the narrative surrounding the war in Ukraine as articulated by President Vučić from February 25, 2022, to February 24, 2023, in his *Addresses to the Nation*. The analysis utilizes content and narrative analyses from the perspectives of social constructivism and post-structuralism. A total of 16 presidential *Addresses to the Nation* were examined, with 12 subjected to specific analysis, resulting in the analysis of 929 sentences.

The article sought to understand Serbia's multi-faceted foreign policy position vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine as seen by the President in his political narrative. Considering President Vučić's position as the principal decision-maker in Serbia's politics, these narratives not only provide insights into the trajectory of Serbia's foreign policy but also inform about a set of complex and intertwined elements that help explain Serbia's positioning into a broader geopolitical context.

In light of this, the first research question aimed to explore key thematic areas in President Vučić's discourse vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine, which served to reinforce the rhetoric of partial alignment with the West on Russia. The analysis revealed that the narrative surrounding the war in Ukraine, which was divided into four specific micronarratives, constituted only a small portion of President Vučić's political discourse. Other issues – mainly *Economic security*, *Belgrade-Pristina dialogue*, or *Internal affairs*, etc. – were found to be more persistent and prevalent during the examined period. Much of President Vučić's addresses focused on the economic resilience of the Serbian nation and the measures implemented to mitigate the crisis resulting from the war. Each of the four analyzed micronarratives – *Sovereignty and territorial integrity*, *Sanctions*, *War in Ukraine* (through a military prism), and *Kosovo through the lens of Ukraine* – yielded a slightly negative vector direction. This suggests that President Vučić perceives and interprets these factors in a negative light. It is not surprising that the micronarrative pertaining to the war itself scored the most negative sentiment. In direct references to Serbia, Ukraine, Russia, or the West, President Vučić consistently portrayed the latter as the most negative factor within the international political arena. On the other hand, direct mentions of Ukraine scored the strongest positive sentiment, indicating a more favorable perception.

He maintained a generally neutral tone in discussing the war in Ukraine, seeking to reinforce the prevailing narratives in Serbia, such as the negative perception of the West, while trying to remain as neutral as possible when addressing Russia and Ukraine, describing them as "fraternal nations." An overly negative stance toward the West was reinforced by the President's narrative of Serbia as a "victim" that will not be controlled or dictated, especially by the West. Throughout his addresses, President Vučić emphasized that Serbia will not allow itself to be cornered or instructed by anyone on foreign policy matters. He consistently referred to Kosovo and drew comparisons between the two, conveying the message that Serbia should not bow down to external pressures. In many of his addresses, the *Belgrade-Pristina dialogue* was a recurring theme, which speaks volumes about Kosovo and Metohija, as President Vučić refers to Kosovo as having a principal place in Serbia's domestic debates. It seems Serbia's position on the war in Ukraine is largely dictated by the issue of Kosovo, where Russia's continuous support against Kosovo's independence plays into Serbia's favor.

The second research question focused on understanding how these elements (recurring thematic areas) contribute to Serbia's foreign policy identity and positioning in a changed geopolitical context. "There is no doubt that the war in Ukraine brought misery to us. There is no doubt that when they [the West] talk about the region, they are guided by the events in Ukraine today," described President Vučić in one of his addresses. The war in Ukraine has brought Serbia's multi-vector foreign policy into scrutiny, particularly its refusal to join its Western partners in imposing retaliatory sanctions on Russia. On many occasions, Vučić referred to the Balkans as *their* [Western] *backyard* and had consistently demonstrated reluctance to single out Russia as the sole aggressor in the war, going as far as to call the war in Ukraine a *de facto* war.

While President Vučić acknowledges the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity, his perspective differs significantly from that of the West. He argues that if the precedent of Kosovo's independence was established, then international law should be equally respected in case of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk, Lugansk, and Donbas. This frustration with the perceived Western ambiguity regarding these two cases, which are seen as distinct under international law, shapes Serbia's foreign policy decisions on the war in Ukraine. President Vučić's references to history, particularly the NATO intervention in 1999, further reinforce Serbia's stance. The memories of this intervention and its perceived consequences contribute to the unwillingness to consider retaliatory measures against one of Serbia's few allies regarding Kosovo in the UN Security Council. These mentions underscore the complex interplay of historical, legal, and geopolitical considerations that inform Serbia's position on the war in Ukraine, as articulated by President Vučić.

Despite ongoing pressures from the West, Serbia has remained steadfast in refusing to align with Western positions on the war in Ukraine. President Vučić's narrative has not yielded to these pressures, even at the declaratory level. This persistence can be attributed to the combination of external and internal factors that shape Serbia's foreign policy. As long as these significant external and internal factors remain unresolved, Serbia is likely to continue leveraging the Kosovo argument as a key factor in resisting international pressure. The peaceful resolution of the *Belgrade-Pristina dialogue*, which is integral to Serbia's EU accession process, is closely tied to these caveats. Thus, while the resolution of the Kosovo issue remains externally critical, the current Serbian government strives to keep this question open, so it can be internally utilized to build a threat that needs to be deterred in the stabilitocratic vein and since resolving the issue would eventually mean to concede to Kosovo's independence.

Finally, it is important to note that on a couple of occasions President Vučić admitted that without the Western support, particularly that of the EU, Serbia would be lost: "Serbia needs to participate in the dialogue, Serbia needs to continue its European path, not because I love their hypocrisy regarding respect for UN charter and UN resolution but because we would be politically and economically lost without it." Serbia is thus expected to maintain its balancing position on the war and play the "neutrality" card as long as it does not become threatening to its privileged position as an EU candidate, which grants Belgrade not only economic but also political privileges, while successfully navigating multiple tides.

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