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Speeches in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia

Discourses on the EU and foreign countries



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O vama se radi.

Speeches in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia

Discourses on the EU and foreign countries

**Autorka:
Milena Manojlović**

**Urednica:
Tamara Branković**

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● Research methodology

The Open Parliament, as an initiative dedicated to increasing the publicity of the work of the Parliament and informing the citizens about the work of the Assembly, researched the way the MPs talk about the most important foreign actors in Serbian political life – European Union (EU), United States, Russia, China and Turkey. The period from September to the end of 2021 was analysed, i.e. the last four months of the work of the National Assembly in the past year. The analysis covered a part of the extraordinary sittings and the entire ordinary autumn session held in this period. For that purpose, continuous monitoring of all speeches in the plenum of the National Assembly was conducted, as well as recording of each individual mention of the cited actors with an assessment of the tonality: whether the actors were spoken about in a positive, neutral or negative light. A total of 741 speeches were held in the plenum, i.e. 999 cases of recording and assessing the tonality of mentioning the most important foreign actors.

Further analysis of the discourse sought to find out how, through the analysed speeches, foreign policy patterns are reproduced. Given that the 12th legislature of the National Assembly is characterised by a pronounced lack of pluralism and that as many as 97 percent of MPs belong to the ruling coalition, it can be argued that discourses in the National Assembly are in fact discourses of the ruling majority. This is especially important in the Serbian context, because the entire parliamentary debate was largely misused for the purpose of addressing voters. This practice, which causes great damage to the legislative function and the quality and direction of the debate in the plenum, has led to the Assembly being significantly reduced to yet another channel for political marketing. In this light, the discourses on foreign actors in the National Assembly are based on messages sent by the ruling majority to their constituents, with a greater “degree of freedom” than the representatives of the Government and the President, who are more obliged to adhere more strictly to the principles of official foreign policy in their statements.

● Frequency of mention of actors

First and foremost, when it comes to the frequency of mentions (Chart 1), the EU is by far the most frequently mentioned foreign actor, referred to in a total of 588 speeches. These results do not come as a surprise or aberrance from the previous Open Parliament research. In addition to the fact that EU accession is, officially, an important goal of the current government, the EU is Serbia’s largest trading partner and the National Assembly itself has a central role in adopting the EU acquis. It is important to emphasise that the mention of the EU included all its institutions, but this number does not include individual mentions of the EU member states.

The difference in the number of speeches in which the United States and Russia were mentioned is negligible, so it can be concluded that Washington and Moscow received the same “amount of attention” in the National Assembly. China, with a slight lag, was in the fourth place and was mentioned in a total of 103 speeches. The frequency of mentioning Turkey as a regional power lags significantly behind Brussels and the permanent members of the UN Security Council..

Foreign actors – number of speeches in which they are mentioned

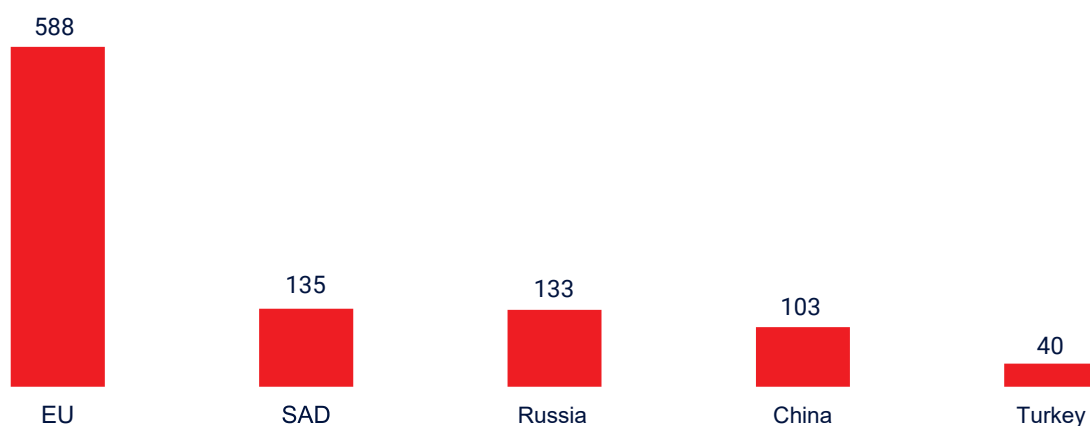


Chart 1: Representation of all actors

● Discourse on the EU

While the frequency of mentioning indicates the presence of the topic, i.e. the amount of attention paid to each actor in the speeches held in the Assembly, only the analysis of the tonality and context in which the actor was mentioned gives a more complete picture (Chart 2).

The EU was predominantly mentioned in a neutral tone (61 percent), then in a positive tone (29 percent), while in 10 percent of speeches in which the EU was mentioned, it was done in a negative context.

European Union – tonality of speeches

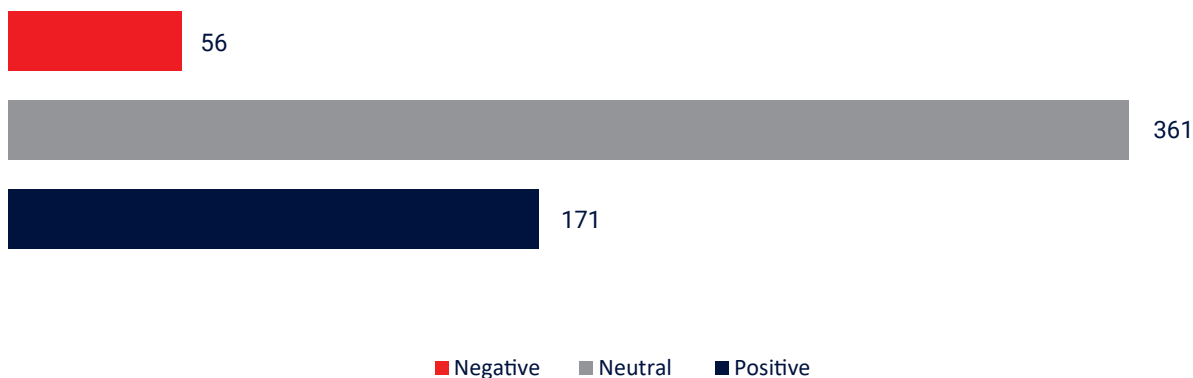


Chart 2: Tonality of mentioning of the EU

What is particularly interesting in the case of the EU is that it is not possible to make a complete correlation between speeches marked with a negative tone and Euroscepticism. As a matter of fact, the MPs (and other speakers in the National Assembly, primarily government representatives) do not question the very European integration of Serbia even when they criticise Brussels: *“Today, it is not good to talk about how Europe has no alternative only for this government. Europe is all around us. God is high, Russia is far away, and Europe is all around us.”* Ambivalence towards the topic of European integration is obvious – although clearly articulated opposition to the EU accession is largely absent, even with a negative tone, it is still extremely important to demonstrate a lack of enthusiasm and deviate from the policies of the previous majority. This is probably a consequence of the assessment of the extent to which (more precisely in what way and under what conditions) the current majority electorate supports Serbia’s European integration, but also disagreements within the EU itself when it comes to the accession of Western Balkan countries.

Speeches in which the EU was mentioned in a negative tone concerned the activities of the European Parliament, especially the MPs who were involved in moderating the inter-party dialogue on election conditions (up until the last stages of the dialogue) or in any way criticised certain moves of Serbian officials. Moreover, when the European Parliament and some MPs were “accused” of directly supporting the opposition, the EU was negatively discussed in the context of supporting Kosovo’s independence, i.e. of support or lack of ability of Brussels to influence the behaviour of the authorities in Priština. They also criticised the circumstances under which Serbia would access the EU as *“being completely different from those that applied to some others who were about to become EU members in the meantime”*. Another criticism is that Brussels is guided by double standards when it comes to Serbia’s relations with Russia and China. The sentiment is reflected in the words of one member of the ruling majority: *“You know, when EU countries need gas, then it is a question of gas, and when Serbia needs gas, then it is a bad influence of the Russian Federation.”* Similar conclusions were reached when it comes to Chinese investments. According to some MPs, Brussels looks more favourably upon these investments when they are realised in countries that are already members of the EU.

● Discourse on the United States

The United States was mentioned in 135 speeches in the National Assembly. Expectedly, most of these mentions were in a neutral tone (64 percent). However, unlike the EU, where the positive tone significantly outweighed the negative one, the percentage of negative and positive mentions of Washington is equal. With 18 percent of speeches dominated by a negative context, when the number of total mentions is ignored, the United States is a foreign actor that is most often the “target of criticism” in the Assembly (Chart 3).

However, a more careful analysis of the negative tonality of speeches points to a few significant findings that need to be taken into account before reaching final conclusions. In point of facts, a significant part of these speeches refers to the legacy of bilateral relations, and to the role that MPs attribute to the United States in the civil war in the SFRY, the bombing, as well as the October 5 changes. When MPs and other speakers in the National Assembly have a negative view of current US policy, criticism is usually partial – directed at one part of the establishment (individual political party or administration), Albanian, Kosovo, Bosniak and other lobbyists and congressmen they influenced, and the like. It seems that it is important to create the impression that within the United States there are currents that are not in our favour, but that there are also “our” factions that are more inclined to recognise and respect the interest of Serbia. The United States as a whole is not perceived and presented as hostile, even in critical speeches.

As in the case of the EU, negative tones are especially present in situations where the actions of officials can be interpreted as criticism of the authorities in Serbia, and when it is associated with support for the opposition. Such was the case with the letter that 7 congressmen sent to the President of the USA in early November 2021: *“For the first time you have this coordination of tycoon and political elite here in Belgrade, temporary institutions in Priština, Albanian lobbyists in the USA, Bosniak lobbyists in the USA lobbyists in the United States. I am not saying this unknowingly. The protest staged in New York in front of the headquarters of the mission of the Republic of Serbia in the USA, i.e. in the UN, was organised by the Albanian lobby in America, the Bosniak lobby in America, the Montenegrin lobby in America. So, they all came together to say that Serbia has a malignant influence in this region.”* Support for an independent Kosovo is, as in the case of the EU, another significant reason for occasional criticism of the United States..

USA – tonality of speeches

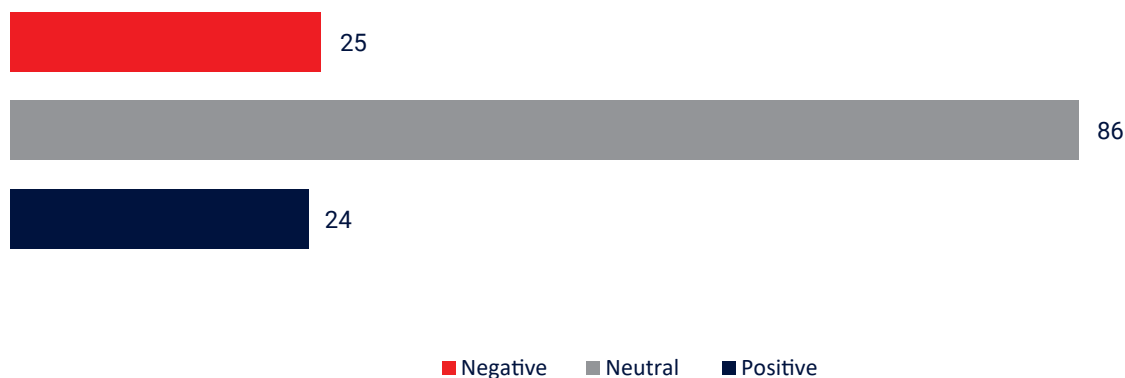


Chart 3: Tonality of mentions of the USA

● Discourse on Russia

Russia – tonality of speeches

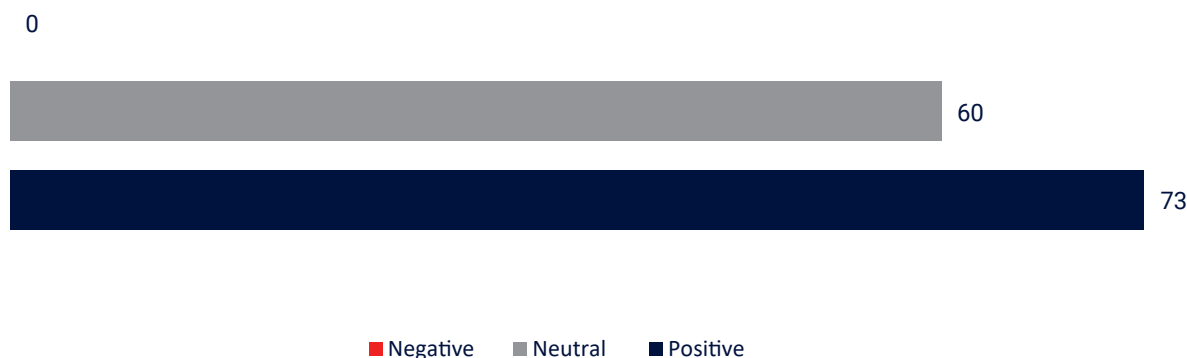


Chart 4: Tonality of mentions of Russia

As can be deduced from Chart 4, the United States and Russia are equal in the amount of mentions, but not in tonality. In 55% of the speeches in which Russia was mentioned, this was done in a positive tone, while the remaining 45% of the speeches can be classified as neutral. In the last four months of 2021, Russia has not been mentioned in the Assembly in a negative context.

Interestingly, Russia is often portrayed positively with the parallel praise of the President of the Republic of Serbia, whose wise policy, for example, provided us a favourable price for gas. Praise heaped on Moscow actually means defending the policy of the ruling majority, that non only advocates EU integration, but also better relations with Russia and China: *“Here, you have seen, if you follow the media, the price of gas is at the highest possible level, globally. However, in Serbia, thanks to President Aleksandar Vučić, to everything he has done in the previous period, and because of the good cooperation we have with Russia and President Putin, we have this price of gas and the price of gas will not change It is important to mention that due to our good cooperation with both the East and the West, Serbia today is able to boast that we have as many as five vaccines at our disposal. If we had not cooperated well with both the East and the West in the previous period, we would not have these vaccines now.”*

● Discourse on China

China is also predominantly mentioned in a positive context (54 percent), then neutral (45 percent), and in the analysed period only one speech of an MP was recorded, which can be characterised as negative: *“I personally also think that Chinese companies should be controlled, because of this thing with “Linglong” was a big scandal, for the simple reason that, no matter how much I respect the Chinese civilisation alternative, I know that capital, whatever it’s called, is the same and needs to be controlled.”*

China – tonality of speeches



Chart 5 Tonality of mentions of China

Similarly to Russia, China is presented as an important partner that has not been “forgotten”, although European integration is a strategic goal of Serbia. That is why the praise for China at the same time often praised the foreign policy orientation of the ruling majority. Furthermore, China was presented as a reliable economic partner and investor, and a friend that provided significant support in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

● Discourse on Turkey

Turkey was predominantly spoken about in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in a neutral tone (60 percent), positive (35 percent), while the two speeches in which Turkey was mentioned can be characterised as negative.

Turkey – tonality of speeches

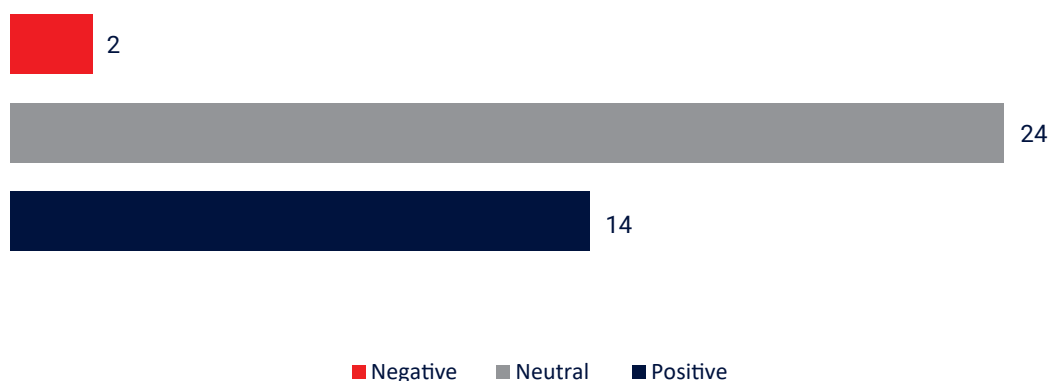


Chart 6: Tonality of mentions of Turkey

Nonetheless, it convenes to note that these two speeches did not represent any criticism of Turkish policy towards Serbia. The first speech with a negative connotation was given in the National Assembly by the Speaker of the Cypriot Parliament, who addressed her Serbian colleagues, and the second referred to the pejorative comparison of the public enforcement officers with the period of “Turkish occupation” (meaning the Ottoman Empire). Therefore, it can be concluded that criticism of Turkey, as well as of Russia and China, was non-existent, i.e. that it is essentially negligible.

● Conclusion

The Open Parliament research indicates that discourses on foreign forces, which are built through speeches in the plenum of the National Assembly, are mostly aimed at maintaining an official narrative through which the ruling majority communicates its foreign policy orientations to voters. Consequently, the EU integration officially remains Serbia’s strategic goal. Nevertheless, it is important to distance oneself from the previous enthusiasm, so that accession is now presented more as a destiny, or inevitability. Brussels is not idealised and that is an understatement. And whenever criticism reaches official Belgrade, the discourse towards the EU becomes increasingly negative. Hence, the question remains whether the possible intensification of criticism could lead to a clearer turn towards Euroscepticism. The United States is not presented as an enemy of this regime, far from it. Nonetheless, the message is being sent to the voters that there are factions within this country that, as in previous times, do not understand the interests of Serbia. Russia and China are “friends”, but these relations are clearly based on mutual benefits. It is especially important to point out to the voters that these benefits are the result of the wise policy of the ruling majority, which, unlike the previous Serbian authorities, resisted pressure from the West to distance itself from these countries, and courageously continues to pursue its own interests. Turkey, although an outstanding regional power whose interests and official policies do not necessarily agree with Belgrade’s aspirations, is not actually recognised as such. Therefore, it is not the target of criticism in the way that the EU and the United States, when it comes to support for an independent Kosovo, The Assembly is not a place where citizens could be informed about the strategic foreign policy directions of Serbia through a focused dialogue in the plenum and in order to supervise the foreign policy led by the Government of the Republic. There is no significant opposition that could question, again through dialogue in the plenum, the expediency of these directions. Although conducting foreign policy is the responsibility of the Government, the MPs attribute all “merits and praise” to the President of the Republic, who, contrary to the Constitution, is also the president of the largest parliamentary party. Therefore, it is easy to imagine a scenario in which the direction of Serbia’s foreign policy would completely change, without provoking any questioning of the MPs in the Parliament. The dominant majority of MPs of the current convocation would then only adjust their speeches in order to build new discourses that would need to be sent to voters.