

Stuck in the Middle with EU - Serbian Accession to the European Union, Current State and Future Perspectives

Is the EU good enough for us?

Being a part of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Serbia already had relationships with European Union (EU) during the period of socialism, before the breakup of the federation in 1991. Moreover, SFRY was one of the leading EU trade partners in the Mediterranean region outside the EU. In 1990, just before the breakup, EU officials offered SFRY (consisting of 6 “to be independent states” federal units) status of associate member and investment package worth about 5 EUR bln.^{1 2} Local political leaders, quietly supported by the powerful geopolitical interest from abroad,³ decided to step back “initiating” the process of secession. After refusal of that generous political offer, history of the SFRY federal units in the following 10 years, excluding Slovenia and North Macedonia, was marked by civil wars during which over 140,000 people died and almost 4 million were displaced,⁴ by emigrations, economic and political instability, as well as slow and painful political and economic transition process afterwards.

The EU negotiations were thawed just after the soft revolution and political changes in Serbia (2000), within the Thessaloniki Summit (2001). The EU offered a new membership perspective to the Western Balkan countries. Within a new political agenda, strongly pro-EU oriented Serbian Government was full of optimism signaling that Serbia could join the EU in 2007 or 2010. During the last two years, it seems that the EU membership has never been less important within political agendas in both Serbia and the EU.

This paper provides arguments that the EU integration process has been intentionally frozen through mutual informal agreement between political elites in Serbia and the EU which left EU accession outside the list of priorities. As per Economides (2020), current situation could not be described as “enlargement fatigue”, but “enlargement resistance”.⁵

Barriers hampering more dynamic EU integration over the last two decades

There are several reasons that have been preventing closer cooperation and more dynamic integration process over the last two decades, couple of them being still relevant. Firstly, normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo*⁶ and two ethnic groups (Serbians and Albanians) is important prerequisite for sustainable economic development in the Balkans. Although the EU officials have never stated Serbian recognition of Kosovo as a condition for

¹ Jakovina, T. (2013). Hrvatska je mogla ući u Europu još 1989". Jutarnji list. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/tvrtko-jakovina-hrvatska-je-mogla-uci-u-europu-jos-1989.-861259>

² What did EU offer to SFRY in 1990? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNkJnT2m1aA>

³ On the reasons of SFRY collapse and external support to breakup read more at: Jović, D. (2009). Yugoslavia: A state that withered away. Purdue University Press.

⁴ <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-FormerYugoslavia-Justice-Facts-2009-English.pdf>

⁵ Economides, Spyros (2020) From fatigue to resistance: EU enlargement and the Western Balkans. Working Paper (17). The Dahrendorf Forum, Berlin, DE.

⁶ For more details, please see: Bieber, F. (2015). The Serbia-Kosovo agreements: an EU success story?. Review of Central and East European Law, 40(3-4), 285-319.

membership, partly given that 5 EU members still did not recognize Kosovo independence, there have been no other state to join the EU prior to defining its own borders.⁷ Secondly, high level of corruption, underdeveloped institutions and presence of the “captured state” phenomenon,⁸ which researchers often use to describe the case of institutions that are not acting in the interest of society, are fueling the fear of many EU countries that membership of the Balkan countries including Serbia would “import” and legitimize mafia.⁹ Thirdly, Serbian foreign policy needs to be fully adjusted with regard to EU political priorities. Closer political relationships with China and Russia, partly due to their position towards Kosovo will certainly not be tolerated. However, greater presence of China and Russia might actually accelerate integration since the EU would need to “protect” the Balkans putting the region under its sphere of interest despite of their “incomplete democratization” as it was the case with Romania and Bulgaria.¹⁰ Fourthly, although not deterministic, regional issues also matter. Regional political conflicts (i.e. between Slovenia as the EU member and Croatia as the EU candidate¹¹) might prevent faster accession requiring mediation of the EU institutions. Serbia has a lot of potential to face similar issues with neighbors over the next years. Finally, it takes two to tango. Every global (i.e. Coronavirus pandemic) or internal issue (i.e. Brexit) might change the EU political priorities putting Balkan countries’ accession completely aside of the agenda.

State of play – current internal and external factors of the Serbian EU integrations

Given the political barriers elaborated in the previous section, it would be reasonable to consider the existing factors keeping integration process alive. From the EU perspective, enlargement has been basically fueled by economic gains (i.e. access to the EU market of around 500 million citizens, available cohesion and other funds to support development, etc.¹²), spreading political influence as well as strengthening security.¹³ However, current political situation within the EU does not favor enlargement, which is also in line with recent public opinion polls suggesting relatively low to moderate support. In the 2019 Eurobarometer, for example, only a third of French respondents (32 percent) approved of enlargement in principle, while 58 percent said they were against it. Similarly, disapproval is high in Germany (57 percent), Austria (57 percent) and Belgium (56 percent).¹⁴

⁷ For more details about Serbia-Kosovo issues, you may also consult: Hajrullahu, A. (2019). The Serbia Kosovo dispute and the European integration perspective. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 24(1).

⁸ https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Policy_brief_Undermining_EU_enlargement_Western_Balkans_September_2020.pdf

⁹ For more details, see: Richter, S., & Wunsch, N. (2020). Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(1), 41-62.

¹⁰ UKessays. (November 2018). Why Were Bulgaria and Romania Accepted in the EU?. Retrieved from <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/politics/bulgaria-romania-accepted-eu-7084.php?vref=1>

¹¹ Bickl, T. (2021). The Border Dispute between Croatia and Slovenia. The Stages of a Protracted Conflict and Its Implications on EU Enlargement. Cham: Springer.

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget/2021-2027/benefits-eu-budget_en

¹³ More detailed elaboration could be found at: Piedrafita, S., & Torreblanca, J. I. (2005). The three logics of EU enlargement: interests identities and arguments. *Politique européenne*, (1), 29-59. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-europeenne-2005-1-page-29.htm>

¹⁴ Hübner, C. et al. (2021), It’s the EU, Not Western Balkan Enlargement... French public opinion on the EU membership of the Western Balkans, Open Society Foundations, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/its-the-eu-not-western-balkan-enlargement>

Since setting up the integration process in 2001, there have been two groups of EU sceptics. First refers to those challenging the EU as an idea and political project itself. It is a relatively heterogeneous group of antiglobalists, pro-Russian organisations, extreme right movements and less influential political parties. According to them, joining the EU Serbia will lose its national sovereignty and destroy local economy that will be flooded by disloyal competition. Another group of sceptics are those criticizing the process considering the EU as a dysfunctional organization being disappointed by the EU's inertia.¹⁵ According to them, the EU set higher accession criteria if compared to previous candidates, Croatia (entered the EU in 2013) and especially Romania and Bulgaria (2007). However, this group of sceptics see the problem in the nature of EU-Serbia relationship rather than in fundamental idea of the EU.

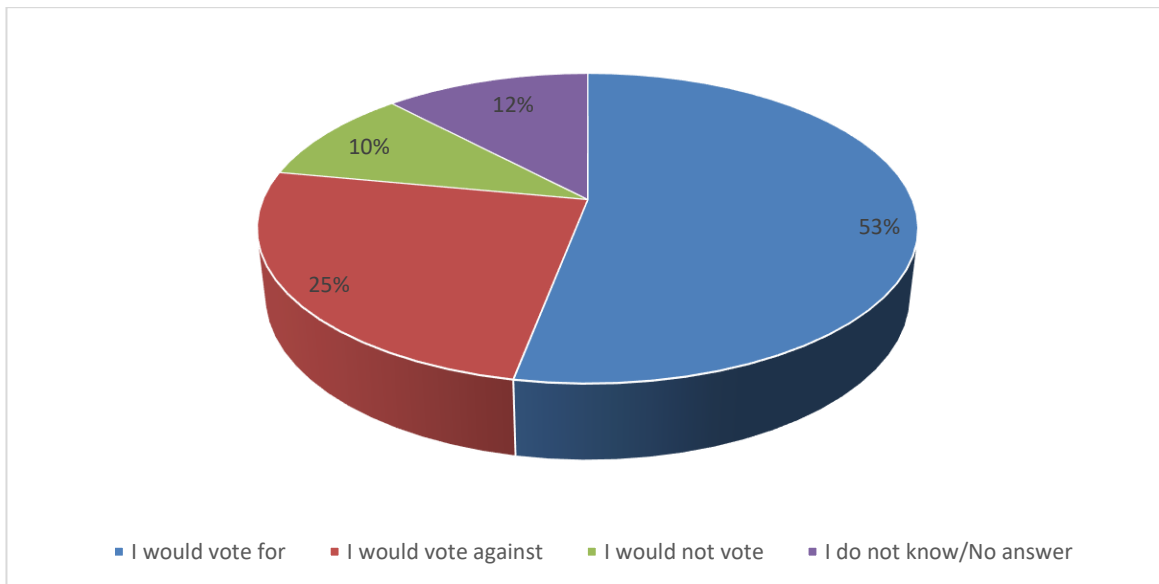
Establishment of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party - SNS (2008) and its takeover of power after the elections held in 2012 has partially solved the aforementioned problems in pro vs. contra EU debate since there is no strong political party opposing the process anymore. Firstly, SNS has been created by people who led the conservative, anti-EU, and now ephemeral Serbian Radical Party. Secondly, it has a very broad coalition which includes EU sceptics. SNS put them under control through economic benefits. Thirdly, it has developed solid relationship with the EU being cooperative with regard to Kosovo issue and declaratively oriented towards the EU. SNS created a position of "perfect equilibrium" since any major change might worsen the achieved balance:

1. Unfreezing the EU integration would harm the business of corrupted local elites being very close to ruling party and make institutional deficiencies even more visible;
2. Stronger cooperation with Russian Federation and China would jeopardize relationship with the EU and the USA;
3. Political trade that would result in Kosovo's formal independence and unblocking its EU perspective would create internal political tensions in Serbia and weaken the position of the current regime.

Therefore, the existing foreign policy could be described as "don't touch anything" and "pretend being a very constructive" regional player. Serbian Government is balancing between the EU perspective on the one side and international support of Russia and China on the other. It is formally dedicated to the EU, while daily politics indicate flirting with both internal and external integration opponents. In line with that, recent public opinion polls suggest balanced public support to integrations (Figure 1).

Figure 1. If there was a referendum tomorrow with the question: "Do you support the accession of our country to the European Union", how would you vote? (%)

¹⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/serbias-future-is-euroskeptic/a-19468607>



Source: Ministry of European Integration, Government of the Republic of Serbia
Total sample = 1,050, Period: June-July, 2019

On the other hand, achieving equilibrium requires autocratic governance style which relies on almost complete control of traditional media, judiciary and vital institutions¹⁶. To illustrate the extent of power of the current regime, it could be noted that after the opposition decided to boycott parliamentary elections (May 2020), more than 90% of the parliament members belong to the parties that participate in the Government¹⁷.

Although EU progress reports suggest no progress has been made in the field of democracy and media freedom¹⁸, EU officials are still criticizing Serbia “between the lines”. It seems that, similarly to the Serbian Government, they prefer current situation.

Future perspective

Since the opening of EU negotiations in 2014, Serbia has opened 18 out of 35 negotiation chapters. In 2020, for the first time, no negotiation chapter was opened. This pause could be the time for Serbia to reconsider priorities conducting some form of socio-political cost-benefit analysis calculating pros and cons of the EU membership. Unfortunately, current political situation in Serbia is not supportive in terms of political debate, whereas the EU officials seem quite inert towards the further EU enlargement. Therefore, extension of the “vacuum” period would probably last over the next year. There are three factors which could shift the existing equilibrium:

- (1) A new initiative advocated by the “core” EU and based on applying well known “stick and carrot” policy could unfreeze the existing “stability” and provide stimulus for further integration including institutional reforms. This scenario might occur in case some ambitious political leader tries to impose himself through solving the Kosovo issue and initiating more dynamic integration of the Western Balkans;

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf

¹⁷ <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/national-assembly/national-assembly-in-numbers/parliamentary-groups.1744.html>

¹⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf

- (2) Change of the USA foreign policy under the Byden administration searching for “small” geopolitical victories worldwide;
- (3) Internationalization of the internal tensions in Serbia that would require international mediation. In that case, dealing with democratic deficiencies in Serbia would be a part of the broader plan for Western Balkan integration.