

# Serbia: A pragmatic performance between Russia and the European Union?

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**Abstract.** Relations between Russia and the western powers can still be defined in a logic of opposition and, sometimes, pragmatic cooperation, as in the past times of the Cold War. In this setting, we see States defining their futures oscillating between one or other hegemonic power, trying to seek a position of autonomy to better preserve their interests. This brief analysis aims to interpret and delineate the position of Serbia in this context. By examining how this country, which claims to be a close friend of Russia, has acted as a player of great importance to Vladimir Putin in the Balkans, we will see in what directions Serbia can go in the future. Through a rapid journey in the past thirty years up to the present moment, the quintessence of this paper is to put the following question: What is going to be Serbia's stance concerning the present Russia's foreign policy towards Europe, and how is this going to influence the ongoing Serbian procedure to integrate the European Union?

**Keywords.** Serbia, EU's enlargement, Russia's foreign policy, Balkans

## 1. Introduction

When we look at the Balkan region, we see a set of countries that nowadays is in contention between the western great powers, namely, the European Union, the USA and its historical ally, Russia. If, historically, Russia has taken a stance of supporting Serbia in its moments of conflict [1], like when the First World War started, after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, the growing presence of the EU in the region has represented a tipping point in this relation.

Due to the enlargement aspirations of the EU, in the 2000s, the European leaders initiated negotiations with the Balkan countries in order to attract them to their democratic *modus operandi* of governance. As a consequence, they would move them away from the Russian sphere of influence. Although the six nations that were part of Yugoslavia, that is, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Slovenia, started their accession processes to be part of the European Union in this period, much still needs to be done to conclude this operation.

This analysis aims to shed light on what concerns the case of the Serbian State once it has close cultural and religious ties with Russia. However, on

the other hand, they also have an increasing proximity and economic dependence with the EU and other important western actors [2]. This way, the crucial question is: What position is Serbia going to take in a scenario where Russia struggles to stop the enlargement of NATO and the EU? What are the prospects for Moscow as they try to keep the Serbians closer, when, at the same time, an ongoing process of entering the EU is occurring?

## 2. Methodology

The discussion presented in this paper is based in what Historians, scholars of International Relations and Geopolitics wrote about the questions involving the countries analyzed. In addition, the data observed on the website of the European Commission and on the Trade Map website were also investigated. By reading and crossing the information available, I formulated the essence of this short study.

## 3. Results

The study showed that, after the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2014 (and things will get worse now, with the new attack in 2022), the geopolitical framework of the world changed. In what concerns

to Serbia, although its closeness to this player, the growing economic benefits of entering the EU are remarkable and cannot be discarded.

According to the Trade Map database, the previous years have shown an outstanding growth of economic trade between Serbia and the EU when compared to Russia [3]. In the year of 2021, this number was of \$19.248.795 of Serbian imports from it and of \$16.444.994 of exports. Comparing the same period with Russia, we could see that this connection was not that big: \$1.741.730 of imports and \$995.748 of exports. The same happened to the foreign investments analyzed. The numbers revealed more funds coming to Serbia from EU and other western partners than from Russia. In such a case, it is likely that Serbia will continue on its path towards the consolidation of the alliance, with the EU taking a clearer position and becoming less "neutral" in this scenario.

## 4. Desintegration of Yugoslavia: a decade of war

After Tito's death in 1980, the ingredient that kept together the six nations referred previously had gone. Scholars, politicians, and researchers agree that he was the component that could maintain too much different ethnic, religious and cultural groups together for such a long time [4]. In this scenario, tensions started to arise among these people, whose desire, from that time forth, was to conquer their independence and define their own futures.

The first nations to fight for their autonomy were Slovenia and Croatia in 1991. This move was followed by a short period of war that killed a lot of people, but could not be compared to what was about to come regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnia's process of independence was a tragic event, conquered after massacres and ethnic cleansing provided for both competitors [5]. In 1995, just after NATO's intervention, a peace agreement was set up finishing the quarrel, but it merely froze the tensions. Later, in 1998, it was Kosovo's turn to fight for its right of self-determination, continuing the struggles in the locality. The outcomes of this dispute were also negative, with the bloodshed stopped, once again, by the intervention of the western nations.

Summarizing, using Eric Hobsbawn's words [6], a century that started in the Balkans had its epilogue at the same place. However, in this totally contrasting scene, the European Union, NATO, USA and other powers were seeking to expand their leverage and power pushing away Russia's interests.

## 5. Balkans towards the EU

After a decade of wars in the Balkan peninsula, the European Union continued the process of expanding

its influence all over the continent. During the 2000s, this movement represented and stimulated the pacification of the region, showing the ex-members of Yugoslavia that their future would be as components of the alliance.

The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), crafted by the EU and launched in 2000, as a way of promoting stability and paving the way to accept these nations [7], represented the beginning of a long walk these countries would go through since then. In a first moment, the main purpose was to create an environment appeased and pacified. After these first strides, negotiations were undertaken to implement democratic principles of governance inspired by liberal western ideas and the rule of law.

Notwithstanding with the fact that some Balkan countries were culturally, politically and religiously connected with Russia, as we will see ahead, their foreign policy was expressly of integration with the alliance as we can see in the words of the Bulgarian Prime Minister a few years ago: "Now or never for expanding the EU into the Balkans"[8]. Such words indicated a growing concern of Russia's expansion towards the locality [9].

In this scenario, the countries targeted by the process of expansion of the Union during these years initiated their application for membership. They were willing to go through the necessary means to achieve the accession criteria proposed by the EU to become members.

Analyzing the case of Serbia, which applied for membership in December 2009 [10] and so far is under evaluation, we see that relevant reforms and achievements were accomplished, but a lot still needs to be done. The crucial issues that constitute obstacles to the full integration of Serbia into the EU's project concerns its relations with Kosovo. Also, the weakness of democracy (which is a heritage of years of dictatorship in the region), the necessity of justice reforms, the need to fight against corruption and other factors contribute to this position [11]. According to an official statement released by the European Commission in 2021, "Serbia's progress on the rule of law and the normalization of relations with Kosovo is essential and will determine the overall pace of the accession negotiations" [12].

To sum up, since 2009, the Serbians have successfully achieved significant progress and fulfilled the requirements proposed by the integration process. The funding provided by the European Union to the region has helped the countries to do so, and this nation is proof of that. However, the efforts of the West have been compensated by the opposition of the great power of the east, namely, Russia. If, the economic profits of swinging more to the Western nations are quite attractive to Serbia, its connection with Russia and its government, Vladimir Putin, is also an element that Serbians constantly take into account. By these means, they aim to obtain other benefits when they

need, as the next chapters will show.

## 6. Russia's geopolitics vis-à-vis the West

According to Mark Entin, "the divisions of the Cold War remain and have not been overcome" [13]. Following this statement, it seems to be true that a lot of aspects of the period from 1947 to 1991, are still alive in Europe at the present moment as they were back there in the time of the Soviet Union. Calling for the cultural ties and proximity with the western Balkan countries, Moscow's purpose is to avoid this region to fall to the European Union and the West's sphere of influence. While the EU and the USA do their best to debilitate the Russian power, trying to expand their values of democracy, rule of law, human rights, stability, and peace to the region, Russia keeps on exploiting ethnic nationalists tensions regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo [14]. These strides pursue a logic of maintaining alive separatist disputes that are a substantial obstacle in their way towards integration with the alliance of the West.

EU's enlargement, started in the 2000s towards the Balkans, aims to provide help to these partners once they are in the European continent and are considered their "backyard". However, it has been quite a proof to the alliance, once these neighbors have institutional, political and economic problems to be solved. This way, integration cannot be a "panacea", because if it does not work as expected, it can also weaken the confederation when difficulties arise, making members decide to leave. In this scenario, Russia has worked to forestall, as much as possible, this process to keep its power alive in the peninsula.

Of note, the economic relevance of the region to Moscow is a matter that we must highlight. According to Stephen Blank [15], three pipeline projects intended to deliver gas and oil to Europe were meant to operate in the region. One was a Russian business that would be a great source of winnings to its partners. In this sense, playing with economic tools could be also a way of keeping some States aligned with the interests of the Russian government.

In a broader analysis, all these efforts are part of what some scholars have called "Russification" [16] meaning, by that, the attempt of expanding to the countries that were part of the Soviet Union the Russian political, cultural and economic values. Their intention, by doing so, was to undermine democratic principles of governance and the rule of law which are cardinal values to the West. With this approach, the Russian government, Vladimir Putin, makes the EU accession process to these countries a tough grind and weakens the capacity of your former enemy to get closer to its borders.

## 7. A closer look at Serbia

Serbia was a driving force back in Yugoslavia time. The independence, perpetrated by the states that composed it, were not received with benevolence by the Serbian population and its president, Slobodan Milosevic. The nationalist project of the Serbians aimed to build a strong Serbian State [17]. With that proposal, they wanted to congregate all the people belonging to this ethnic group and to maintain the integrity of the alliance, letting no one leave the Slavic family composed by the six countries.

Over time, Russia was a great supporter of Serbia's endeavors. Despite its weakness caused by the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and its consequences that hit the country enormously during the 1990s, it condemned the war that was being conducted in the region. However, it still was there for Serbia [18], searching the best position regarding the other countries, for them in this context. As the moment was not good for the ex-soviet power, Boris Yeltsin's actions could not be felt, matching Serbia's wishes. Although a massive number of Serbians thought Russia would come to Serbia's aid if the western countries decided to act, that did not really happen because Yeltsin was not interested in a conflict with NATO [19]. In this setting, against their will, the EU, and the USA took action to solve the conflict in Kosovo in 1999 when NATO launched air strikes to stop the slaughter that was being developed by ethnic groups that hated each other in that locality.

Due to cultural, religious and historical ties, Serbians, and Russians have a long tradition of supporting each other's actions in the international scenario and a considerable part of their population consider this partnership as a matter of "brothers" [20]. The fact they share the same alphabet, the same religion, namely, the orthodox Christianity, they are geographically close and have other cultural aspects, strengthen their friendship and make them back up each other in some issues when needed. Since the 1990s, up to the present moment, Russia has been acting this way because of the importance of this region to its geopolitical agenda. They see the Balkan community as a historic area of influence that is bending to NATO and EU's influence. To avoid, losing power in this locality, Vladimir Putin, in the case of Serbia, has made some movements aligned with his counterpart Aleksandar Vucic to preserve his interests and undermine the presence of the West in the Balkans. The move made by the Russian government concerns the ongoing contention between Kosovo and Serbia.

After the bombing of Kosovo in 1999, the region became an issue of great importance to Russia's foreign policy. Just after Vladimir Putin coming to power in 2000, a new concept of Russia's external interests in the Balkans emerged. Its quintessence was to preserve the territorial integrity of Serbia, not accepting Kosovo's independence, and it advocated in favor of a just settlement in the region

[21].

Since 2008, after the declaration of independence of the Serbian province, Putin calls for the respect of Serbia's territorial integrity by not recognizing this status [22]. His position goes the same way that some other members of EU have adopted. That is, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain, and this is an affair that vastly connects the two leaders nowadays.

Some authors have written and exposed their analysis in what concerns the lengthy time Slavic partners, stating that Serbians, have tried to be neutral [23], not taking sides with the big powers presented in this study. By acting this way they get, thus, economic benefits from the EU and political support from the ex-soviet power. The capital inquisition here goes in a different direction. Inspired by recent events, we must ask ourselves until when the State led by Vucic is going to oscillate between the two powers once the legitimacy of Putin's arguments of respecting territorial integrity of sovereign countries is even weaker in a scenario in which the Russian leader did the opposite of his words in Ukraine repetitiously.

## 8. Conclusion

To conclude the analysis, at the present moment, the driving forces of the present international relations are being reorganized by the implications of recent events. Serbia's posture swinging between Russia and the western forces trying to be "neutral" seems to be a stance increasingly complicated to keep in the long term.

As we could see, the bottom line, of my debate, consisted in scrutinizing the relation between these important players. By taking into account Russia's actions in Crimea in 2014, its geopolitical repercussions and further, its newly aggression against Ukraine at the present moment, my goal was to put in the balance the pros and cons of the EU membership accession process initiated by Serbia in 2009. Since then, Serbians have gained a lot with EU's economic investments and other sources that were provided with the intent of transforming for better the country. The numbers presented at the beginning could demonstrate this and endorse this argument.

Thus, this review aimed to discuss the possibilities and to instigate more investigations and debates that will shed light in some other gaps this survey incites.

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