

# Serbia: The Dilemma between European Accession and Alliance with Russia

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With Ukraine's defence against Russia heading toward a stalemate in the second half of the year and increased pressure inside the EU to deliver on its promises to provide the country with needed financial and military support, Serbia's ambiguous relationship with Russia and the West has been brought increasingly into the spotlight in 2023. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), ruling since 2012, and President Aleksandar Vučić have been responsible for continued democratic backsliding and have failed to align with the Union's foreign policy during Serbia's lengthy EU accession process, pushing the situation closer towards a tipping point in Serbia-EU relations.

As the Union stepped up its efforts to advance in the enlargement process, looking to prepare candidate countries for membership, which included developing the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the Reform and Growth Facility, Serbia's failure to align with EU standards, particularly in the areas of democracy, rule of law and foreign policy, were painstakingly at odds with its official objective of joining the EU. Serbia's government continued to refuse to adopt sanctions against Russia, exported dual-use goods to Russia and government representatives regularly promoted Russian narratives about the war, publicly and through national media.

Serbia's progress on its EU accession path was still blocked in 2023 by the lack of results on fundamental criteria like good governance and rule of law and the country's failure to align with the Union's foreign policy. The government's inability to deliver in these

crucial areas led to the EU not allowing advancement even in other areas where Serbia showed some progress (such as on economic criteria).<sup>1</sup> At the domestic level, 2023 witnessed a serious crisis, with mass protests over two tragic shootings and snap elections at the end of the year. Although a verbal agreement was achieved between Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti in February 2023, known as the Ohrid Agreement, tensions further escalated following local elections in North Kosovo in May. The Serbian government and President were under pressure both from domestic audiences for the agreement which would lead to a de facto recognition of Kosovo and from the country's international partners for not delivering on the commitments made in Ohrid.

## **Caught in a Perpetual Crisis: A Watershed Moment for Serbia's Democracy?**

2023 was a critical year, with Serbia experiencing some of the biggest mass protests since the Bulldozer Revolution that brought down the regime of Slobodan Milošević in 2000. The first wave of protests was organized after two mass shootings in Serbia in May and rallied tens of thousands of demonstrators under the slogan Serbia Against Violence, with people taking to the streets regularly until November 2023. The organizers of the protests demanded the resignation of several government ministers and actions to prevent pro-government media from promoting violence. Simultaneously, farmers organized their protests demanding better conditions for agriculture and increased subsidies.

<sup>1</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Serbia 2023 Report*, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9198cd1a-c8c9-4973-90ac-b6ba6bd72b53\\_en?filename=SWD\\_2023\\_695\\_Serbia.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9198cd1a-c8c9-4973-90ac-b6ba6bd72b53_en?filename=SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf).

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As the May protests against violence quickly escalated into anti-government demonstrations, calling for steps against the existing media capture in the country and fair conditions for elections in the country, the SNS government's support started to crumble. In November 2023, President Aleksandar Vučić announced a date for snap parliamentary elections, which took place on 17 December alongside multiple local elections, including in the capital Belgrade. The parliamentary elections resulted in SNS winning with 48% followed by Serbia Against Violence, a coalition of opposition parties formed in October 2023, with 24%. The highly contested Belgrade elections resulted in a stalemate among the political parties, and, after a failure to constitute a majority in the City Assembly, the date for new elections was announced for 2 June 2024.<sup>2</sup> According to monitoring missions and non-governmental organizations, the elections were marked by serious irregularities<sup>3</sup> leading to another wave of mass protests against the alleged fraud and stolen elections, with several opposition politicians going on hunger strike.<sup>4</sup> With the SNS-led government under increasing pressure over the last year, the attacks by its representatives on political opponents, independent media and civil society only increased,<sup>5</sup> building up the political and societal polarization. According to inter-

national rankings, the state of democracy in Serbia further deteriorated with the most pronounced democratic decline among the 29 countries included in Freedom House's Nations in Transit report. The failure of the Serbian government to ensure the December elections were free and fair was also criticized in the European Parliament's resolution in February 2024 with MEPs calling for an independent investigation into the elections and proposing the suspension of EU funding if the conclusions show the Serbian authorities' direct involvement.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the European Parliament, a group of 24 senior European politicians called upon EU institutions to investigate the alleged election fraud.<sup>7</sup>

### Serbia between East and West

Serbia has been demonstrating a steady democratic decline since 2016 (Table 1), which has been repeatedly noted by the European Union. Already in 2018 in its Strategy for Western Balkans the European Commission noted that the countries in the region were showing clear signs of state capture, including government links with organized crime groups and corruption.<sup>8</sup> The lack of reform efforts by Serbia's government is reflected in the slow progress in the country's EU accession process. Since 2019, Serbia has opened only one negotiating cluster (Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity) in 2021, a decision which has been highly controversial given the SNS is strengthening its grip on power and amid the environmental protests over the Rio Tinto project. Since then, the negotiations have stalled as the government is expected to demonstrate progress on democratic reforms, alignment with foreign policy and in negotiations with Kosovo.

<sup>2</sup> "Serbian Ruling Party Agrees To Hold New Belgrade Elections After Disputed Vote In December." *RFE/RL*, 2 March 2024, [www.rferl.org/a/serbia-new-belgrade-elections-disputed-vote-sns/32845266.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-new-belgrade-elections-disputed-vote-sns/32845266.html).

<sup>3</sup> OSCE, *ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report – Republic of Serbia Early Parliamentary Elections 17 December 2023*, [www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/3/563505\\_0.pdf](http://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/3/563505_0.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> MARTINOVIC, I. "As Postelection Protests Rock Serbia, Hunger Striker Becomes The Face Of The Opposition." *RFE/RL*, 29 December 2023, [www.rferl.org/a/serbia-tepic-hunger-strike-fraudulent-elections-opposition-vucic/32752757.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-tepic-hunger-strike-fraudulent-elections-opposition-vucic/32752757.html).

<sup>5</sup> FREEDOM HOUSE, *Nations in Transit 2024 – Serbia*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2024>.

<sup>6</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, "Serbia did not fulfil its commitments to free and fair elections, say MEPs." 8 February 2024, [www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240202IPR17327/serbia-did-not-fulfil-its-commitments-to-free-and-fair-elections-say-meps](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240202IPR17327/serbia-did-not-fulfil-its-commitments-to-free-and-fair-elections-say-meps).

<sup>7</sup> HÜLSEMANN, L. "Senior politicians urge Ursula von der Leyen to probe Serbian election." *Politico*, 18 January 2024, [www.politico.eu/article/senior-politicians-urge-ursula-von-der-leyen-to-probe-serbian-election/](http://www.politico.eu/article/senior-politicians-urge-ursula-von-der-leyen-to-probe-serbian-election/).

<sup>8</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans." 6 February 2018, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d284b8de-0c15-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d284b8de-0c15-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF).

**TABLE 1** Development of the Democracy Score in the Western Balkans from 2010 to 2024

Country	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Albania	4.07	3.96	3.86	3.75	3.82	3.86	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	3.75	3.75	3.79	3.79
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.75	3.68	3.64	3.61	3.57	3.54	3.50	3.46	3.36	3.32	3.32	3.36	3.29	3.21	3.18
Croatia	4.29	4.36	4.39	4.39	4.32	4.32	4.32	4.29	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25
Kosovo	2.93	2.82	2.82	2.75	2.86	2.86	2.93	3.04	3.07	3.11	3.18	3.14	3.25	3.29	3.29
Montenegro	4.21	4.18	4.18	4.18	4.14	4.11	4.07	4.11	4.07	3.93	3.86	3.82	3.82	3.79	3.75
North Macedonia	4.21	4.18	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.71	3.57	3.64	3.68	3.75	3.82	3.82	3.86	3.79
Serbia	4.29	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.32	4.25	4.18	4.04	4.00	3.96	3.89	3.79	3.79	3.61

Notes: Countries are rated on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democratic progress.  
Source: Freedom House, Nations in Transit annual country reports, <https://freedomhouse.org/>.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Serbia's government has been in the spotlight over its refusal to align with Western sanctions against Russia and its ambiguity in condemning the Russian aggression. While Serbia backed the UN General Assembly resolution<sup>9</sup> and voted to expel Russia from the UN Human Rights Council,<sup>10</sup> the Serbian executive continues to

## The lack of reform efforts by Serbia's government is reflected in the slow progress in the country's EU accession process

stand behind its decision not to impose sanctions.<sup>11</sup> Serbia's representatives justify this decision to their Western partners citing concerns for the country's energy security as it is dependent on Russian gas. While the share of gas in Serbia's energy supply is relatively low (15%),<sup>12</sup> it is imported practically ex-

clusively from Russia; although in 2023 the government did sign a gas-supply deal with Azerbaijan.<sup>13</sup> More criticism towards Serbia was prompted recently by the fact that the country continues to receive arms from Moscow<sup>14</sup> and for its export of dual-use goods to Russia.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, however, there are serious claims that Serbia has been arming Ukraine, despite the government's denials.<sup>16</sup>

From the EU's perspective, it is obvious that Russia's war in Ukraine increased the importance that the Union attaches to the alignment of the candidates with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), included under negotiating chapter 31. However, so far the EU has been falling short of motivating Serbia to change its relationship with Russia, despite being far and away the country's main trading partner and investor. Besides Russia's position in Serbia's energy sector, the economic relations between the two countries are very limited compared to those with the EU. In 2022, the EU represented 58.7% of Serbia's total trade and 32.9% of foreign direct investments, while trade with Russia accounted for just 5.8%.<sup>17</sup> The main foreign investors are

<sup>9</sup> "Serbia votes 'yes' to UN's resolution condemning Russian attack, West welcomes." *N1 Belgrade*, 2 March 2022, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbia-votes-yes-to-uns-resolution-condemning-russian-attack-west-welcomes/#:~:text=Belgrade%20voted%20in%20favour%20of,voted%20against%2C%20and%2035%20abstained.>

<sup>10</sup> "UN suspends Russia from human rights body: How your country voted." *Al Jazeera*, 8 April 2022, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/8/russia-suspended-from-un-human-rights-body-how-countries-voted](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/8/russia-suspended-from-un-human-rights-body-how-countries-voted).

<sup>11</sup> JEVIĆ, J. "Vučić reiterates refusal to sanction Russia: 'A friend in need is a friend indeed'." *Euractiv*, 21 February 2024, [www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/vucic-reiterates-refusal-to-sanction-russia-a-friend-in-need-is-a-friend-indeed/](http://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/vucic-reiterates-refusal-to-sanction-russia-a-friend-in-need-is-a-friend-indeed/).

<sup>12</sup> INTERNATIONAL ENERGY AGENCY, *Serbia*, [www.iea.org/countries/serbia](http://www.iea.org/countries/serbia).

<sup>13</sup> "Serbia signs gas supply deal with Azerbaijan." *Reuters*, 15 November 2023, [www.reuters.com/business/energy/serbia-signs-gas-supply-deal-with-azerbaijan-2023-11-15/](http://www.reuters.com/business/energy/serbia-signs-gas-supply-deal-with-azerbaijan-2023-11-15/).

<sup>14</sup> "Serbia receives another arms delivery from Russia despite international sanctions over Ukraine." *The Associated Press*, 14 February 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-russia-arms-deliveries-embargo-fb63352c3a76404f7f4f13dd0358b187>.

<sup>15</sup> KATIC, M.; JEVIĆ, M. and ZIVANOVIC, M. "Investigation: Serbian Firms Ship Sanctioned Dual-Use Tech To Russia." *RFE/RL*, 8 November 2023, [www.rferl.org/a/serbia-russia-sanctions-dual-use-technology/32676159.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-russia-sanctions-dual-use-technology/32676159.html).

<sup>16</sup> LANDAY, J. and VASOVIĆ, A. "Exclusive: Leaked U.S. intel document claims Serbia agreed to arm Ukraine." *Reuters*, 12 April 2023, [www.reuters.com/world/leaked-us-intel-document-claims-serbia-agreed-arm-ukraine-2023-04-12/](http://www.reuters.com/world/leaked-us-intel-document-claims-serbia-agreed-arm-ukraine-2023-04-12/).

<sup>17</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Serbia 2023 Report*, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9198cd1a-c8c9-4973-90ac-b6ba6bd72b53\\_en?filename=SWD\\_2023\\_695\\_Serbia.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9198cd1a-c8c9-4973-90ac-b6ba6bd72b53_en?filename=SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf).

Germany (13.5%) and Italy (11.7%), followed by the US (10.9%), Russia (10.9%), China (10.5%), France (8.5%) and Austria (7.3%).<sup>18</sup> In 2022, Serbia's trade with China accounted for 8.7%. However, in October 2023, Serbia signed a free trade agreement with China which contradicts the EU's approach to China and EU membership requirements.

### Can Serbia Be Put Back on a European Path?

After the EU suspended accession negotiations with Turkey in 2019 due to the autocratic nature of the Erdogan regime, the crackdown on the political opposition, civil society and the collapse of independent institutions, Serbia is now the problem child of the EU enlargement process. For many years the Union seemed to ignore the serious democratic backsliding in the country and Serbia's failure to demonstrate its alignment with the EU in its policy towards Russia and China in exchange for the stability that EU leaders hoped Aleksandar Vucic and SNS could guarantee. The potential watershed moment for Serbia's democracy in 2023, with tens of thousands of citizens in the streets protesting against the government's ill practices, has not led to any kind of democratic change, only in fraudulent elections and an ever more disillusioned population. While there are obvious security risks for the EU associated with the failure of Serbia's European integration and increasing space for Russian and Chinese influence, it is becoming clear that the Union's appeasing approach has failed to deliver results.

Serbia's government has repeatedly shown that it intends to maintain its ambiguous approach both to the EU and to Russia and China, reaping the benefits of close relations with both sides. The Union's previous warnings did not stimulate a change in Ser-

bia's course, either in its foreign policy or in the domestic reform process. Punishment in the form of pausing EU accession negotiations will probably not suffice, as the current political leadership does not seem willing to advance towards their country's EU membership if it requires a more level political playing field, independent media and dialogue with civil society. However, the European Parliament's resolution suggesting a possible cut of EU funding, if proof is found of the Serbian authorities' electoral fraud, or the enhanced conditionality introduced last year under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans could provide the needed leverage.

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Furthermore, by adopting a strict and principled stance on election violations, the EU could take a step towards restoring its credibility in the eyes of Serbia's pro-democratic forces and citizens. So far, the Union's predominantly top-down approach to candidate countries has limited it to working mainly with ruling elites, which in many countries are not very eager to progress with difficult reforms. The application of strict conditionality, including financial instruments, combined with better engagement with a more diverse group of actors and with citizens, could be the only remedy the EU has at its disposal to put Serbia back on the European track.

<sup>18</sup> LLOYDS BANK, "Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Serbia." March 2024, [www.lloydsbanktrade.com/en/market-potential/serbia/investment](https://www.lloydsbanktrade.com/en/market-potential/serbia/investment).