



Serbia and France: the special relationship?

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Abstract

What is the relationship between the European Union and the Western Balkans, and Serbia in particular? The author reviews the process of accession of the Western Balkan countries (with a focus on Serbia) to the European Union, but also the geopolitical stakes in this region, which is sought after by external actors such as China and Russia, and which the European Union should pay more attention in order to strengthen its strategic autonomy. The EU needs to take a bold stance in the Western Balkans and France wants to be at the forefront. European actors must show future member states that the door to full membership is indeed open, but only if they can truly embrace democratic values. In his analysis, the author writes about Serbia's path towards EU integration through an increasingly close relationship with France. The current situation in Serbia is rather complex. Will it continue with its "hamster in the wheel" approach, where the result is always expected to be the same, or should Serbia adopt a different approach for the future? As concerns Serbia, France will certainly continue to insist on economic cooperation and the improvement of French investments in Serbia. They will also take a stand against damaging foreign influences which they believe could potentially destabilize the region and are fundamentally at cross purposes with the policy favored by the European Union.

Keywords: Western Balkans, European Union, Serbia, integration, identity

Introduction

What future can be predicted for the countries of the Western Balkans? The fact that this geographical unit (the Western Balkans) is surrounded by

the borders of the European Union (EU) is a good indication of the common future that binds them together inextricably. Having undertaken, in cooperation with the UN, the OSCE, NATO, and the United States, to rebuild and develop, and then stabilize the former entities of the defunct Yugoslav Federation, the accession process has encountered specific obstacles from the EU and the neighborhood. While the latter was necessarily a driving force for European external action, whose stabilization and association process, launched in 1999, led to the transformation of the candidate countries, their specificities also highlighted the shortcomings of the European offer. The accession process has become an unidentified technocratic object for the enlargement-weary Member States.

The EU's renewed interest in the region in recent years stems mainly from the rise of external actors such as Russia and China, less from the democratic side than from the rule of law. The place of the Western Balkans in European geopolitics is an integral part of European power aspirations and, above all, a fundamental test of the declared strategic autonomy that the full integration of this neighborhood into the EU must one day bring (A Credible Enlargement Perspective For And Enhanced EU Engagement With The Western Balkans, 2020). The current political situation is that France is likely to take the lead on EU integration-related matters, especially in dealing with Serbia and the other non-member countries of the Western Balkans. Although France fully supports a coordinated EU position on relations with Russia and China, observers do not expect Paris to be the one to insist that Serbia pursue this agenda without any reservations.

President Macron has so far not insisted on any of these things, and ahead of the 2022 presidential elections, he has focused mostly on domestic events in France and the reform of the European Union institutions, which he advocates. France is not a country in the EU that would push for this goal, unlike Germany, which requires its partner countries to clearly align their own foreign policy ambitions with those of the European Union. In the future, it is to be expected that France, and more specifically President Macron, will insist in his new presidency on the same things that France has always emphasized in its relations with Serbia. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that some unforeseen events may occur that could influence the activities carried out so far and lead to new developments. One example is the possibility of France taking a significantly more engaged role and position in the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. France has already shown such tendencies during the 2019 negotiations, and it is expected that this will continue and even increase. President Macron's recent policy has been that European integration cannot be achieved without prior reforms within the European Union institutions. It cannot be entirely excluded that he has taken this position

precisely because of domestic political events in France and the electoral process.

Methods

There has been a lot of research carried out based on international literature such as scientific articles, abstracts, presentations, reports, and other studies that deal with the issue of Serbia's EU integration and President Vucic's sudden good relationship with President Macron. In addition to various theoretical aspects, the author uses a number of practical methodological elements, databases, electoral data, and economic analysis to assess political stability in Serbia. Before using these, it is important to define in this content analysis what is to be evaluated, for what purpose, and how. A short general overview of the portraits of the Western Balkan countries in the current political context is applied first. Then, by looking at recent events and statements, we will take a closer look at the current situation in Serbia (spring 2022) and how the Macron-Vucic cooperation fits into this. This study provides valuable historical insights into recent events in Serbia, through content analysis. Outlining the trends and major events of the last ten years, the author aims to put into perspective first the Western Balkans in general, and then the political processes in Serbia, and thus to give a more complex picture beyond the numbers.

Discussion

The importance of the region was recognized long before the European Commission wrote in its 2018 Strategy for the Western Balkans that the accession of these countries represented a "geostrategic investment". In 2003, the Council of European Union's European Security Strategy (European Security Strategy: Europe In A Better World, 2009) highlighted that the credibility of European foreign policy lay precisely in "consolidating our achievements" in the Balkans. Also, in 2019, the EU's Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy stated that the EU must "re-energize the European perspective of the Western Balkans" and "the Western Balkans remain a priority for the Union" (European Union External Action).

The EU's responsibility for the development of the region is clear. After all, the mentoring of Serbia and Montenegro proves that Brussels has seen these countries as leaders of enlargement, despite their democratic difficulties (Koller, 2019). In the meantime, the announcement at the end of 2017 of their possible accession in 2025 has further increased mistrust of the EU in these countries (Troncota, 2014). This sentiment, widely described by regional civil societies, also feeds into other sources of frustration, such as the stultifying dysfunction of Bosnia and Herzegovina twenty-five years after the Dayton Agreement, or the Brussels mediation of the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue,

which needs to be rethought to break the deadlock that represents the last two unresolved European challenges exploited by populist elites playing on nationalist strands (Subotic, 2019).

The €9 billion economic and investment plan (with a potential leverage effect of €20 billion) adopted in October 2020 (An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans) is an act of solidarity and support to give a new impetus to intra-regional and EU market reforms and convergence. They also tend to anchor the Balkans to their vocation to join the EU.

In her State of the Union speech on 16 September 2020, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen recalled that the Western Balkans are “part of Europe, not a stop on the Silk Road” (“Von der Leyen elnök értékelő beszéde”, 2020). The concession of the Greek port of Piraeus in 2009 and Serbia's strategic partnership with China made the region the next step in the European market. With the exception of Kosovo as an independent state, which Beijing does not recognize, the other Western Balkan countries have joined the 17+1 initiative. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro benefit most from the loans and are exposed to the debt trap. But above all, it is the Serbian government that is exploiting this to consolidate its patronage networks at the expense of the Community legislature, while China is growing economically and technologically stronger.

On the occasion of the commemoration of the Dayton Accords in Sarajevo, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated Russia's opposition to any revision of the institutional order established in 1995. The discord maintained by the status quo between the three constituent peoples and the infiltration of Russian interests into the breakaway entity of the Republika Srpska reinforce a strategy that hinders any progress by Bosnia and Herzegovina towards EU and NATO membership. Beyond political, economic, and military cooperation with Serbia, Moscow has enough leverage to maintain anti-Western narratives, intervene by proxy in Bosnian, North Macedonian, or Montenegrin affairs, or prevent Serbia from escaping its control if it were to normalize its relations with Kosovo. On the other hand, as Gazprom has dominated the Serbian oil and gas sector since 2008, Russia is seeking to extend the TurkStream pipeline from Azerbaijan via Turkey, inaugurated a year ago, to bypass Ukraine and sanctions. In a project as controversial as Nord Stream II, which Washington has been fighting, Moscow has also made progress on European soil by handing over the Serbian section connecting it to Bulgaria. At the same time, the EU-backed Trans-Adriatic pipeline, which also runs from Azerbaijan through Turkey via Albania to Italy, paves the way for reducing Europe's dependence on Russian supplies, as do ongoing or planned US liquefied natural gas shipments through Croatia, Greece, and Albania. But the current war in Ukraine, which starts on

24 February, will change many things, especially as more countries rethink their diplomatic relations and the growing urgency of the gas pipeline issue.

Prior to the pandemic, The World Banks' data shows that the region accounted for around 72% of its trade with the EU, and although the EU only accounts for a small share of world trade with the region (1.4%), its economic recovery depends on the near future of the Western Balkans. According to the World Bank, the region is heading into a "deep recession", with deficits growing by between four and ten percentage points, depending on the country, and no significant improvement is expected before the end of 2022. As the Western Balkan economies looked towards a post-global economic recovery, the region faced new challenges. The economic performance of the Western Balkans has now surpassed its pre-pandemic level, but the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has brought higher public debt and permanent damage. Potential growth remains limited. Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, higher energy prices and the challenges of the green transition were already a major burden for the Western Balkans. The war is now affecting the whole region, in particular through higher energy and food prices, but also through disruption to trade and investment flows, threatening the region's economic recovery and rebound. The Western Balkans will need prudent policy support within a stricter fiscal framework to overcome the next challenges. The Western Balkan economies experienced a strong growth wave in 2021, with a broad-based rebound in economic activity. GDP growth in the Western Balkans reached 7.4 percent in 2021, after a contraction of 3.2 percent in 2020. The strength of the recovery exceeded initial forecasts (The World Bank Regular Economic Report, 2021). While the health crisis (Covid19) is exacerbating the deterioration in democratic governance and providing scope for arbitrariness and the violation of fundamental freedoms, the socio-economic consequences may also be exacerbating emigration (which affects around a third of the population). The recession may therefore aggravate the deterioration in the rule of law, which calls into question the credibility of the new EU methodology, which focuses on this key area and Serbia in particular.

French and Serbian relations

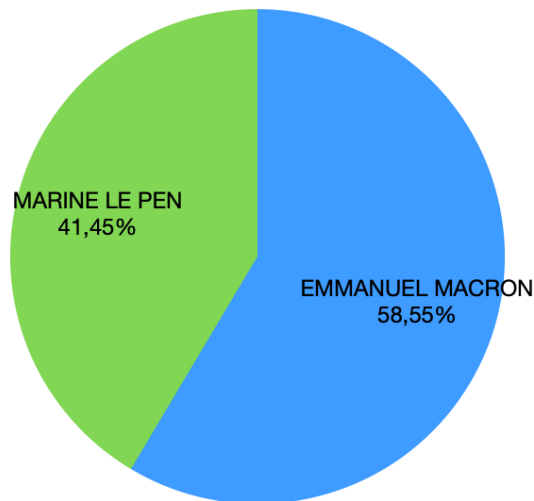
In this spring's elections in France, the incumbent president was re-elected (Table 1, Figure 1), while in Serbia the incumbent president retained power (Table 2, Figure 2). President Macron started his second term in office after his second-round victory over his main rival Marine Le Pen.

Table 1: French presidential election 2022

List of candidates for the presidential election (2nd round)	Vote	Percent
EMMANUEL MACRON	18 768 639	58,55%
MARINE LE PEN	13 288 686	41,45%

Source: [https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult__presidentielle-2022/\(path\)/presidentielle-2022/FE.html](https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult__presidentielle-2022/(path)/presidentielle-2022/FE.html)
Own creation (22.06.2022.)

Figure 1:
French presidential election 2022



Source: [https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult__presidentielle-2022/\(path\)/presidentielle-2022/FE.html](https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult__presidentielle-2022/(path)/presidentielle-2022/FE.html)
Own creation (22.06.2022)

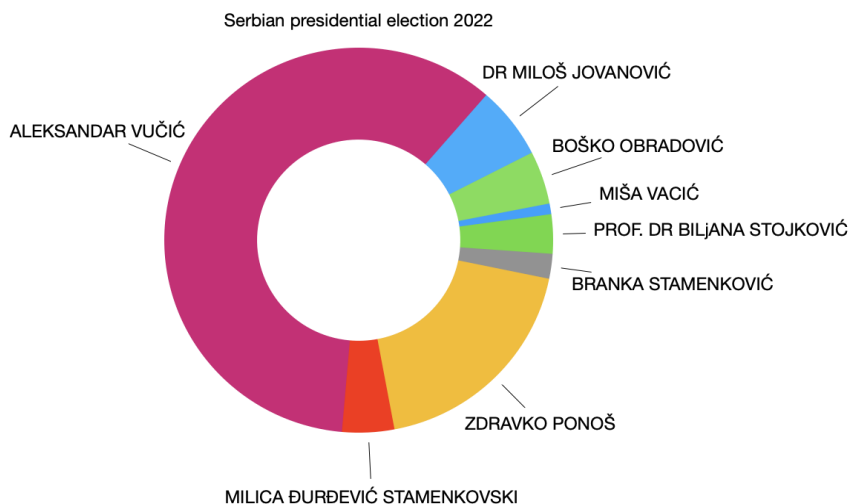
At the same time, President Vucic won another landslide victory in the first round of Serbian elections, and the Progressive Party retained power, while losing its absolute majority in parliament for the first time since 2014 (“Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic Wins”. 2022).

Table 2: Serbian presidential election 2022

List of candidates for the presidential election	Vote	Percent
MIŠA VACIĆ	32947	0,87%
PROF. DR BILJANA STOJKOVIĆ	122378	3,22%
BRANKA STAMENKOVIĆ	77031	2,03%
ZDRAVKO PONOŠ	698538	18,39%
MILICA ĐURĐEVIĆ STAMENKOVSKI	160553	4,23%
ALEKSANDAR VUČIĆ	2224914	58,59%
DR MILOŠ JOVANOVIĆ	226137	5,95%
BOŠKO OBRADOVIĆ	165181	4,35%
Summa	3707679	97,63%

Source: <https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/vest/sr/317359/70-sednica-republicke-izborne-komisije.php> own creation (22.06.2022.)

Figure 2: Serbian presidential election 2022



But since both of their victories five years ago, the political landscape has changed dramatically. The war in Ukraine has turned the EU's attention to geopolitics and put the seemingly forgotten Western Balkans back on the European agenda. The threat of instability and the growing influence of third parties in the region sounded the alarm bell in the new global context, and with it began the debate on revising a European strategy that had been largely inadequate for a decade. In contrast to previous periods, when France took a more passive approach and seemed rather indifferent to developments in the Western Balkans, Paris resumed a significant role in the regional arena during the first term of the Macron presidency. As part of his ambition to become a European political leader, President Macron launched a number of initiatives to change the European enlargement policy. An examination of the steps taken in the light of these initiatives leads to the conclusion that the aim was to halt the enlargement process in the near future and replace it with a reinforced French economic and political presence that would ensure stability in the region within the European sphere of influence. To this end, Emmanuel Macron was ready to work with political regimes such as the one in Serbia, which he considered key to maintaining stability in the Western Balkans. This strategy has led to the region becoming less secure and less democratic, undermining Europe's once unquestioned credibility and influence. The 'political earthquakes' on the European continent should be a wake-up call to critically assess and rethink French policy in the Western Balkans, including the reversal of relations with the current regime in Belgrade.

France's approach to the Western Balkans during Macron's previous presidency was seen as proactive. A number of initiatives were taken, but the current complexity remained, one of the consequences of which was that the accession process of the countries of the region was delayed. The main reason for this policy is that French public opinion is largely unfavorable to a possible new EU enlargement. Macron has repeatedly stated since coming to power in 2017 that there will be no new members until the EU undergoes a profound internal reform. His strongest stance came in October 2019, when France and the Netherlands blocked the start of formal accession talks with northern Macedonia and Albania, sparking huge frustration across the region (Emmott and Baczynska, 2019). At the same time, Macron saw his greater involvement in the enlargement process as a golden opportunity to build his image as a European foreign policy leader, starting with a reshaping of relations with the EU's immediate neighborhood. To demonstrate his commitment to regional development and to prove that the European perspective for the Western Balkans is still alive after the French veto, Macron put forward the idea of a new accession methodology in November 2019 ("Non-Paper"). On the basis of this proposal, the new methodology introduced clustering of negotiating chapters, rewarding those who champion reforms and sanctioning those who

fail to implement them or are late in doing so, as well as the reversibility of the process. In fact, the new methodology is nothing more than a new packaging of the same technocratic process that does not address the main weaknesses of the accession process, as it continues to emphasize the need to meet the criteria rather than insisting on tangible reforms, thus prolonging the status quo.

After knowing the facts, the author then asks the question: how did Vucic become Macron's closest ally in the region? How does Macron's rapprochement with the Belgrade regime appear? The answer is that Vucic is the perfect ally for Macron's strategy in the Western Balkans. Serbia's decades of democratic and economic struggles (Ördögh, 2019) provide the perfect pretext for the entire region's non-accession, as it feeds the negative perception of the French public and provides arguments for delaying the process in the Brussels debates. Ironically, further Serbia moves away from the necessary European standards, the more it becomes an ideal partner for Paris. Belgrade is also widely seen as a potential factor for stability in the region (Ördögh, 2019). Serbia has a significant influence on destabilization problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro. In addition, the influence of third countries, especially China, has grown rapidly in recent years. Therefore, there is a widespread view among European stakeholders that the EU should keep Serbia in its sphere of influence, even if this means turning a blind eye to some of the country's activities. Macron could therefore easily claim that he is ensuring regional stability by maintaining close ties with Vucic. Moreover, the economic nature of the bilateral relationship between the two regimes creates an opportunity for French companies to negotiate directly with the Belgrade government on lucrative deals, some of which raise environmental concerns (“Metro Workers Starts Amid Uproar” 2021).

The current regime in Serbia sees Macron as a worthy heir to Angela Merkel, as the external defender of ‘stabilocracy’. Like Merkel, Macron has repeatedly praised the pace and ambition of Serbia's reforms during his meetings with President Vucic and has stated that Serbia will be the next country to join the European Union. This kind of public support is key for Vucic to maintain the screen of European support for the Serbian public. Vucic, for his part, is happy to support the so-called pretense of progress on the EU path that Paris is trying to impose, increasing President Macron's ostensible influence in EU diplomatic circles. In return, he expects the French government to play some sort of defensive role in the EU towards his country. Serbia should ease any harsh criticism or pressure on the country by EU institutions or other member states on the state of democracy and the rule of law. After the recent political changes, France seems to have taken over from Germany as one of the most important Western allies of the Serbian regime.

An important piece of the puzzle for the friendly bilateral relations between the regimes in France and Serbia is the large-scale business ventures of recent years. The French companies Alstom and Egis Rail are building the Belgrade metro together with the Chinese company Power China (“French, Chinese Firms Sign Deal” 2021), a highly profitable and strategic project for the Serbian capital. The French companies are expected to supply the trains and electromechanical subsystems, while the Chinese company will carry out the construction works (“Serbia signs MoU”, 2021). Another important French investment in Serbia is the 25-year concession contract for Belgrade airport, signed in December 2018 with the French company Vinci (“Vinci Signs Belgrade” 2018). This agreement has sparked much controversy, as the Serbian government has been accused of deciding to take over the management of the second airport in Nis because the agreement with the French company had a secret clause limiting the development of other airports in the country so that they could not compete with Belgrade airport in the market (“Serbian Government’s Takeover” 2018). Serbia has also turned to France for arms. Serbia bought French Mistral short-range anti-aircraft missiles in 2019 (“Serbia signs for the acquisition”). In addition, President Vucic announced in April 2022 that Serbia plans to purchase 12 new Dassault Rafale aircraft early next year (Vasovic).

In recent years, it has become clear that the EU's policy of promoting 'stabilization' has failed in the Western Balkans. The accession process has been stalled for years, the regional security environment is deteriorating and there has been no significant progress on rule of law reforms. While the responsibility naturally lies with local political institutions, the European approach has provided the perfect conditions for such developments. All this has led to a serious credibility crisis in local public opinion and the deterioration of European influence in the region. Most countries in the region have made little or no progress on key issues such as the rule of law, the fight against organized crime, and the consolidation of democratic institutions. The reforms that have been implemented are often cosmetic and merely tick the boxes of the technocratic accession process. For many years, the EU has been the main catalyst for these reforms and a powerful external driving force. However, as the prospects of membership gradually diminish, there is no real incentive for regimes to pursue the necessary reforms and the pressure of citizens on their governments is diminishing (Reljic, 2021). As ECFR Deputy Director Vessela Tcherneva rightly puts it, “the EU's current enlargement policy is flawed and largely based on a mutual exchange of hypocrisy - the bloc pretends to enlarge and the Western Balkan countries pretend to reform” (2019).

As accession has become a seemingly endless process, the concomitant loss of EU credibility has led to a growing questioning of the EU's influence

in the region. Nothing rings more hollow than the unfulfilled promise that hard concessions will pay off. Support for the ‘stabilocrats’ is draining EU support from the more pro-European parts of societies. Moreover, frequent changes in methodology have greatly undermined the integrity and accountability of the actors in the process, relativizing what was once solid, but is now seen as negotiable terms. This approach rewards less reformist regimes, such as Serbia, and slows down those willing to take the boldest steps in the process (State of the Union, 2020). The norms negotiation strategy pursued by the Belgrade government over the past decade may increasingly look viable to its neighbors. As a result, citizens in the region have lost confidence in the EU. According to a recent opinion poll, support for the accession process in Serbia has fallen below 50% (Dartford, 2022) for the first time. As a result, the lack of a European vision has led to an increase in the influence of third powers - China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf countries - in the region.

Conclusion

But it is important to rethink the practical solutions to specific problems. France's most valuable contributions in the Balkans - its contribution to allied efforts in Balkan interventions, its participation in peacekeeping operations, its support for transitional justice, its support for bilateral dispute settlement, its strengthening of the rule of law, and its protection of minorities - have all been guided by a spirit of public interest, while remaining pragmatic and focused on crisis resolution. The joint mobilization of “soft” and “hard” power promoted French interests and global public goods. The success of France's international policy must be judged by its proven track record. In this changing environment, much remains to be done. The Western Balkans must move away from a paternalistic approach: identifying the lack of capacity and expertise of local actors should not imply that international action should replace them. Reforms should be implemented together with local actors, not instead of them. Even if the international motivations are clear and efforts are only aimed at improving the lives of local actors, without their involvement, reforms can be undermined by local disputes.

The aim cannot be merely to keep the concept of enlargement alive. The real goal should be to make the accession process effective, a process that would bring tangible changes for citizens and create functioning democratic states in the region. That is why the EU must be brave in the Western Balkans and France must be among the countries at the forefront. European players must show the future Member States that the door to full membership is indeed open, but only if democratic values are truly embedded in the region's identity and the Copenhagen criteria are respected.

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