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## EU Sentiments of Serbia's Citizens

### Unpacking the Motivations Behind the Ayes, the Nays, and the Undecided

Throughout the past decade, Serbia has made progress on its path towards the EU. Important milestones range from the obtainment of visa liberalisation in 2009 and candidate status three years later, to starting the accession negotiations in 2014 and opening the first negotiating chapters in 2015. What remains a predicament, however, is the fact that the aforementioned accomplishments were often not accompanied by increased public support for the EU accession process. In fact, public support has proven to be quite volatile and relatively independent from Serbia's EU progression rate.

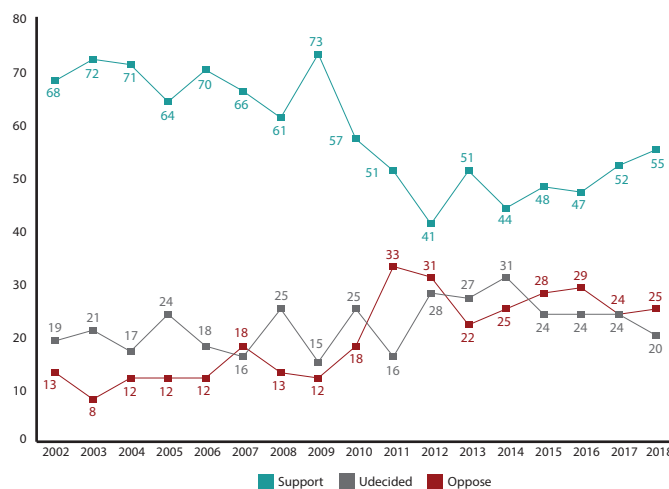
Thus far, Serbia has managed to open only 16 out of 35 chapters, while provisionally closing just two. Given the slow pace at which chapters are being opened and closed, it seems unlikely that Serbia will be ready for accession in 2025.<sup>1</sup> Hence, as the accession process is likely to last for the foreseeable future, **the question is how much longer the EU perspective will continue to occupy the hearts and minds of Serbian citizens.** If the goal is to sustain the credibility of Serbia's EU perspective in the eyes of the Serbian public, this issue will require additional policy attention.

**The purpose of this policy brief is to uncover the motivating factors for EU membership support in Serbia by employing multivariate regression.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, it develops a set of recommendations for a communication strategy and initiatives aimed at boosting citizens' support for EU membership.** After discussing the state of play of public opinion and its volatility, this policy brief goes on to present the key findings, focused on four sets of driving factors: 'socioeconomic', 'personal identity and values', 'information and media', and 'social capital'. Having presented the results, this brief concludes by offering a set of recommendations directed at policy-makers in Serbia and the EU.

#### I. The EU in the Eyes of the Serbian Public – A Volatile Relationship

The results of existing public opinion polls – conducted by the Serbian European Integration Office/Ministry of European Integration<sup>3</sup> – reveal that public support for the EU accession process averaged 68.12% in the period 2002-09, reaching its peak in 2009 after Serbia acquired visa liberalisation. Since then, however, public support has dropped significantly, averaging 49.55% in the period 2010-18 (see *Graph 1*).<sup>4</sup> **The average drop of almost 19 percentage points in the public's endorsement of EU accession over the past decade brings into question the likelihood of success of the entire process.**

**Graph 1.** The Support for EU Membership in Serbia (2002-2018), based on MEI's public opinion polls.



1. The indicative date for accession was proposed in the Commission's 2018 communication titled "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans."

2. The survey was administered to a sample of 1202 respondents in Serbia (without Kosovo and Metohija\*) via CATI (Computer Assisting Telephone Interviewing). The sample was random, stratified proportional to size of region, municipality, and type of settlement within municipality.

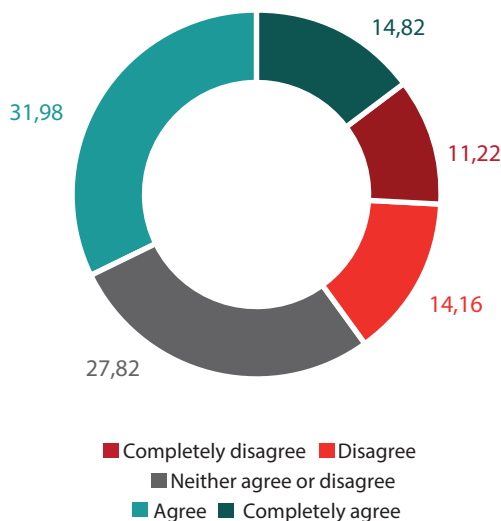
3. The Serbian European Integration Office ceased to exist on June 27, 2017 after the Law on Amendments to the Law on Ministries established the Ministry of European Integration. Accordingly, the former's functions were taken over by latter.

4. These numbers were obtained by adding the support for EU membership from 2002 to 2009, and 2010 to 2018 and dividing those numbers by the number of years.

Additionally, CEP's public opinion survey, conducted for the purpose of this brief, shows that support for EU membership sits at 46.80%. On the other hand, 25.38% of people oppose EU membership, while 27.82% remain undecided (see Graph 2). The difference between CEP's and MEI's findings could, in part, be explained by how each institution formulated its survey questions. For instance, CEP's question reads - To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Serbia should become an EU member state?" On the other hand, MEI's question asked - If there was a referendum tomorrow with the following question: "Do you support our country's membership in the EU?", how would you vote?<sup>5</sup> Given these differences, it would be sensible to argue that there is a greater sense of urgency in MEI's question, due to the fact it mentions a referendum and that this could, in fact, explain some of the variation in the results.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the duration of the EU integration process has certainly contributed to the drop in people's EU membership support since the enthusiasm in the early 2000s. At the same time, since the accession negotiations were opened, MEI's results show that the overall support has been on the rise, which can be explained by a perceived sense of acceleration of the accession process.

Graph 2. The Support for EU Membership, based on CEP's research



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## II. The Drivers of Public Attitudes in Serbia

### II.1 Socioeconomic Factors – National Economy is the Key

Socioeconomic factors have proven to play a significant role in explaining public attitudes.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this brief, socioeconomic factors have been divided into micro and macro variables, with the micro variables representing the personal level, and the macro variables representing the societal level. On the micro level, if an individual believes that joining the EU will positively affect their material well-being or create economic opportunities, the expectation is that they would be more likely to support EU membership. The same logic applies to the national economy; that is, if an individual expects that EU membership will benefit the national economy, they will tend to be in favour of the accession process.

From a micro-economic standpoint, the results show that **Serbian citizens who evaluate their financial well-being positively are more likely to be in favour of EU membership.** In other words, as people's satisfaction with their financial situation increases, so does their support for EU membership. In fact, regression results show that with a 1 unit increase in the independent variable (personal finances), there is an expected change of 0.35 units in the dependent variable (the support of EU membership).

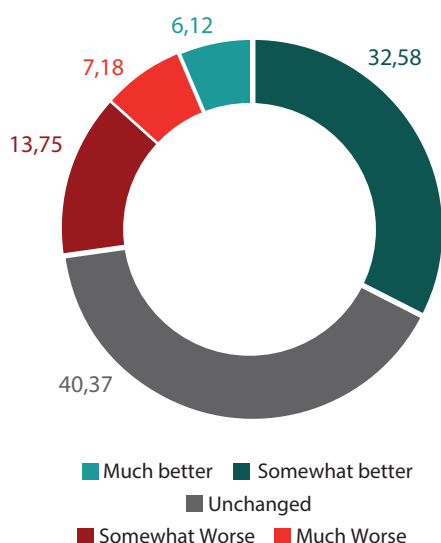
5. Ministry of European Integration, "Evropska orijentacija građana Srbije – ispitivanje javnog mnjenja", July 2018, available at [http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna\\_dokumenta/istrazivanja\\_javnog\\_mnjenja/istrazivanje\\_jul\\_2018.pdf](http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/istrazivanje_jul_2018.pdf)

6. Damjanovski, Ivan. Public opinion and Macedonia's accession to the European Union (2004-2014). IDSCS and KAS: 1-55; See also: Toshkov, Dimiter, Elitsa Kortenska, Antoaneta Dimitrova, and Adam Fagan. 2014. The 'Old' and the 'New' Europeans: Analyses of Public Opinion on EU Enlargement in Review. MAXCAP Working Paper No. 2: 1-41; Bielasiak, Jack. 2002. Determinants of Public Opinion Differences on EU Accession in Poland. Europe-Asia Studies 54 (8): 1241-66; Tanasoiu, Cosmina, and Constantin Colonescu. 2008. Determinants of Support for European Integration: The Case of Bulgaria. European Union Politics 9 (3): 363-77.

Furthermore, this research finds that **citizens who believe that the future EU membership will positively affect the national economy are more likely to be in favour of membership.** The results of the regression indicate that with a 1 unit increase in the independent variable (national economy), there is an expected change of 0.65 units in the dependent variable (the support for EU membership). Moreover, the statistical analysis shows that concerns over the state of the national economy are far more important than the level of satisfaction with personal finances.

These results confirm the expectation that positive perceptions of the national economy are correlated with positive sentiments towards future EU membership. This correlation could perhaps be related to the fact that the EU is often perceived as a source of economic stability and potential prosperity by Serbian citizens. Conversely, those who have a negative perception of economic matters are typically unfavourable towards the EU perspective. This correlation can presumably be explained by the fact that some citizens are unaware of the benefits that EU membership could bring to their personal finances and the national economy. To further reinforce this claim MEI's research shows that when asked whether they have heard of any projects funded by the EU, 72% of Serbian citizens responded negatively.<sup>7</sup> This is somewhat worrying given the fact that the EU has been Serbia's most significant donor since 2000.

**Graph 3.** Perceptions of the Economy if Serbia Becomes an EU Member, based on CEP's research



*The EU is often perceived as a source of economic stability and potential prosperity by Serbian citizens.*

### II.2 Personal Identity and Values - Liberals Favouring Membership

Personal identity and values are generally considered as important factors in public opinion research.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this policy brief, personal identity and values are defined as "views (beliefs) of personally and socially desirable norms of behaviour, types of activities, and relatively permanent conditions in nature, society and the individual."<sup>9</sup> In the context of analysing EU sentiments of Serbian citizens, this policy brief examines people's attitudes towards religion, national identity, human rights - national and ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and gender equality.

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7. Ministry of European Integration, "Evropska orijentacija građana Srbije – ispitivanje javnog mnjenja", July 2018, available at [http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna\\_dokumenta/istrazivanja\\_javnog\\_mnjenja/istrazivanje\\_jul\\_2018.pdf](http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/istrazivanje_jul_2018.pdf)

8. Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. 2004. Does Identity or Economic Rationality Drive Public Opinion on European Integration?. PS: Political Science and Politics 37, (3): 415-20.

9. Bora, Kuzmanović. 1995. Društvene promene i promene vrednosnih orijentacija učenika. Psihološka istraživanja.

The basic assumption is that the citizens' sentiments towards the EU are dependent on their personal beliefs and convictions, given that the candidate country must harmonize its legislation with EU legislation, whilst standing for EU's fundamental values – all of which imply changes of relations and institutions of a society. Following this logic, being loosely tied to their national identity, liberals identify EU values as their own, whereas conservatives perceive the changes resulting from this process as a potential threat to their national identity. Therefore, a hypothesis emerges that the more liberal values a person possesses – more open to change (i.e. modern), less religious, and more acceptive of others (i.e. tolerant) – the more likely they are to be in favour of Serbia's EU membership; and conversely, the more conservative values a person holds, the less likely they are to support Serbia's EU accession.

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As anticipated, the findings illustrate that **people with liberal proclivity exhibit higher support for EU membership**. Furthermore, those who support EU membership do indeed have a tendency to be modern, open, tolerant, as well as less religious. The EU membership embodies a specific set of values, as defined in Article 2 of the Treaty on EU, which has the potential to transform the value system of a given society; hence, it comes as no surprise that those who are more liberal are more willing to accept and commit to EU-driven value changes in their society.

### II. 3 Information and Media – Story Above Facts

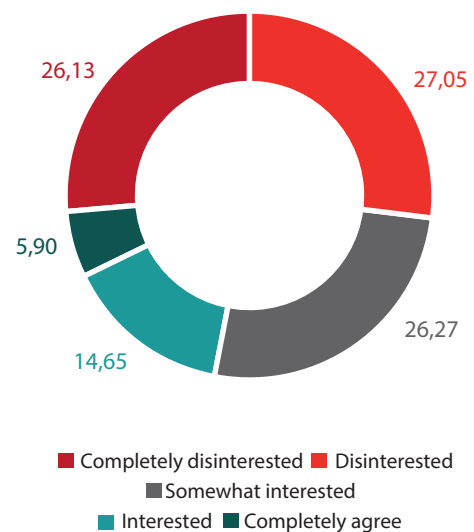
While information and media are expected to play an important role in the way people understand and perceive the EU, the exact manner in which they affect each other is unclear. For instance, during a debate on the Brexit referendum, Simon Hix noted that "it is widely assumed that more information about the EU will lead to more support for remaining a member of the EU." Yet, as

he concluded, to date, there is no data to confirm this claim.<sup>10</sup> This brief tested the correlation between interest in EU related information and the support for Serbia's future EU membership. The assumption is that there is a positive correlation between people's level of interest in the EU and positive sentiments towards future EU membership.

### *Interest in the EU and support for the Union go hand in hand.*

Based on the results it can be inferred that **citizens interested in knowing more about the EU are more likely to support Serbia's future EU membership**. The regression results show that a 1 unit increase in the independent variable (level of interest in the EU), produces a 0.42 unit increase in the dependent variable (the support of EU membership). In other words, interest in the EU and support for the Union go hand in hand. Surprisingly, there is very little variation in the level of interest in EU-related information across regions. In fact, levels of interest range from 19% to 21% throughout different parts of Serbia.

Graph 4. Level of Interest in the EU, based on CEP's research

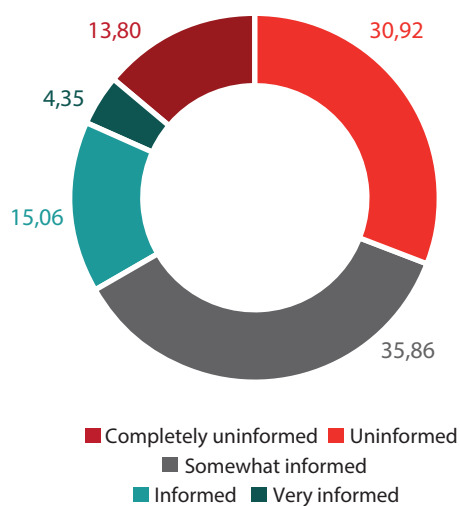


10. Simon, Hix, "Brits know less about the EU than anyone else." USAPP, 4 December. 2015, available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/11/27/brits-know-less-about-the-eu-than-anyone-else/>

However, somewhat surprisingly, **whether citizens are informed about Serbia's EU accession process is not statistically significant.** This further raises the question of why the level of interest in EU matters more than whether citizens are informed about the accession process. A potential explanation could hide in the fact that, in general, the Serbian public holds a greater interest in EU politics than the EU accession process. Namely, political news is covered more extensively by the Serbian media, whereas the technical information about the accession process may seem lacklustre for the average citizen.

It is also important to note that the results of this research show that 56.35% of older people get their information about the EU from television, whereas only 28.18% of younger people rely on this medium. Interestingly, 53.89% of younger people get their EU related news from social media, while only 24.17% of older people get their news from the same source. This divide in information consumption will receive closer attention in recommendations.

**Graph 5.** Interest in Information About Serbia's EU Accession, based on CEP's research



#### II. 4 Social Capital – Society Matters

Social capital represents “the glue that holds societies together.”<sup>11</sup> Fukuyama goes as far as to argue that an abundant stock of social capital represents a necessary condition without which a modern liberal democracy cannot sustain itself.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, social capital can be defined as “features of social organisation such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”<sup>13</sup> It is, therefore, expected to be an important driver of EU support. Namely, as EU membership relates to all the virtues that social capital is supposed to generate, due to its promotion of collaboration and trust between countries and nations, active citizenry, open societies, and democratic consolidation, it is assumed that citizens with higher social capital will support Serbia's EU membership, and vice versa, that citizens with lower social capital will oppose it.

The findings show that **citizens with higher social capital tend to support EU membership more.** For instance, as people become more optimistic about others returning their lost wallet, a 0.08 unit increase in EU membership support is observed. Furthermore, as people become more optimistic about the possibility of making changes in their local community, a 0.11 unit increase in EU support is observed. Nonetheless, even with these findings, when compared to other drives of public attitude in Serbia, **social capital exerts the least influence on citizens' perception of EU membership.** A potential explanation for a lower than expected level of significance of social capital is a generally low level of social capital in the Serbian society, regardless of the social group or category. Additionally, research has shown that post-communist countries tend to have lower levels of social capital.<sup>14</sup>

*When compared to other drives of public attitude in Serbia, social capital exerts the least influence on citizens' perception of EU membership.*

11. Paldam, Martin. 2000. Social Capital: One or many? - Definition and measurement. *Journal of Economic Surveys* 14 (5): 629-53.

12. Fukuyama, Francis. 2001. Social capital, civil society and development. *Third World Quarterly* 22 (1): 7-20.

13. Putnam, Robert. 1995. Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1): 65-78.

14. Rothstein, Bo, and Eric M. Uslaner. 2005. All for all: Equality, Corruption, and Social Trust. *World Politics* 58 (1): 41-72

### III. The Ultimate Drivers

The final regression model includes all models that were previously tested individually and offers the most accurate picture of relevant drivers that influence people's attitudes towards Serbia's EU membership. Taken together, they contribute to the robustness of the results by estimating the effects of each variable by holding all other variables constant. In other words, the final regression estimates the effects of the economic variables while holding personal identity and values, information and media, and social capital variables constant.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the individual models tested each set of variables independently from the others.

*CEP's research has shown that citizens prioritise the state of the national economy above all else.*

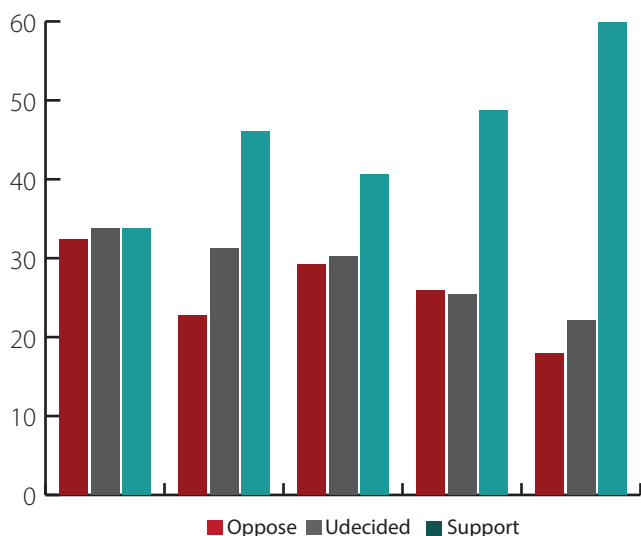
The results of the final regression show that the **most significant driver of people's EU sentiments is their perception of the national economy.** In other words, citizens who believe that EU membership will positively affect the national economy are more likely to support EU membership. A 1 unit increase in the independent variable (national economy), leads to a change in the dependent variable of 0.49 units (the support of EU membership). Therefore, despite the fact that **other drives have moderate significance, CEP's research has shown that citizens prioritise the state of the national economy above all else.** The microeconomic variable, interest in obtaining EU related information, the personal identity and values, and social capital are all statistically significant and play a part as drivers of people's attitudes; nevertheless, their explanatory power is considerably lower when compared to the state of the national economy.



15. This is true for other variables as well. The effects of personal identity and values are estimated by holding economic, information and media, and social capital variables constant.

Furthermore, all models contained six control variables – settlement type, region, gender, age, parenthood, and education – in order to account for differences in the sample. Out of these variables, age turned out to be the most important, being statistically significant in all individual models and in the final model as well. In fact, the results convincingly show that **the support for EU membership increases with age**. More specifically, older people (65+) display the strongest support at 59.92%, whereas the younger population (18-29) shows the highest degree of scepticism in this regard with 33.81% supporting EU membership (see *Graph 6*). While it is true that a significant number of young people are opposed to EU membership, it is also true that a significant percentage – 33.81% to be exact – remains undecided, which warrants further research.

**Graph 6.** *The Support for EU Membership by Age, based on CEP's research*



Finally, **the regional aspect is not statistically significant** in the final model. Moreover, a crosstabulation of support for EU membership and regions shows **slight differences in support for EU membership across regions**. For instance, the highest level of support is in Belgrade at 49.39%, while the lowest level of support is in Central and Western Serbia, at 43.39%. Moreover, support in Vojvodina is at 48.80%, while South and Eastern Serbia sits at 46.52%.

#### IV. Recommendations

While all four set of factors play a role in explaining people's attitude to EU membership in Serbia, the national economy reigns supreme and consequently warrants most attention. Other factors, however, should not be neglected. Promoting EU values, increasing social capital, and disseminating data-driven information should all contribute to Serbia's EU path.

Although existing research shows that people are largely unaware of how the EU contributes to Serbia's economic development, CEP's research shows that people connect EU membership with prosperity. In fact, **Serbian citizens' perception of the direction of the national economy is the most significant predictor of people's attitudes towards the EU. Furthermore, whereas older people (65+) show the highest level of support for Serbia's EU membership, younger people (18-29) report the lowest, albeit a substantial percentage of citizens remain undecided on the issue.** In relation to these key findings, the following recommendations are in order:

- EU-funded projects should be publicly promoted if the goal is to familiarise Serbian citizens with the benefits that can be derived from the EU accession process and future membership.
- Promotion of projects should be data-driven and tailored to specific audiences in order to maximize desired results.
- Public awareness-raising campaigns should be developed for the long-term and carried out all across Serbia, as no region stands out in the level of interest in EU information.
- Communication campaigns should focus specifically on projects that have a macroeconomic impact, such as infrastructure, urban and rural development, connectivity, as well as fostering a market and investment friendly environment in Serbia.
- Programs such as COSME<sup>16</sup> which focus on SMEs<sup>17</sup>, should receive greater public attention and promotion from the government and relevant ministries, demonstrating how they help create a stronger national economy.

16. COSME is an abbreviation for Competitiveness of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

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The government and relevant ministries should publicise the role of the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) and increase the grant availability for Serbia via Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), as highlighted in the Sofia Priority Agenda, in order signal EU's commitment to the region.<sup>18</sup>

Positive examples of how the Central and Eastern European EU member states have benefitted economically from EU membership should be used in communication strategies.

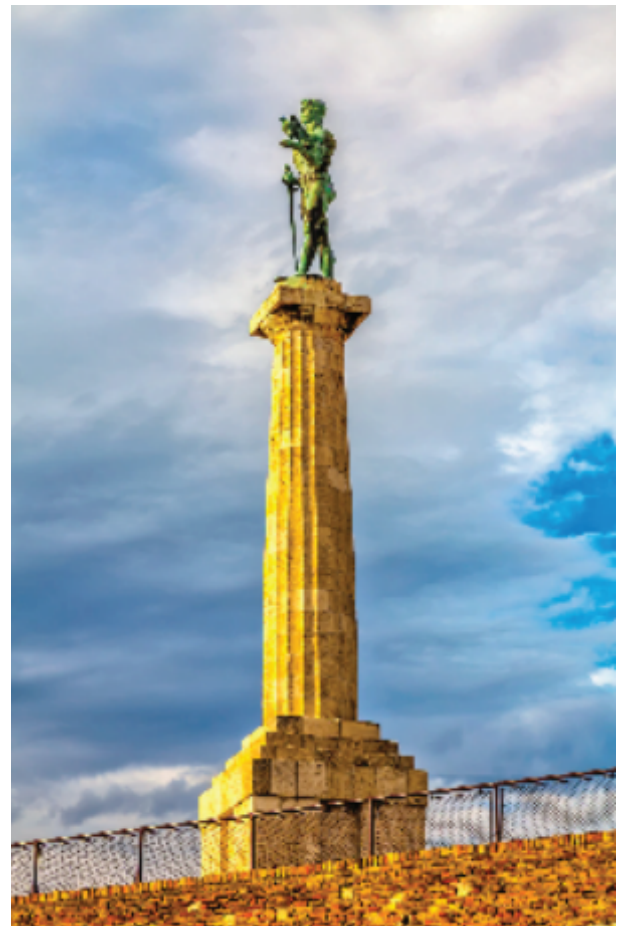
Although communication efforts are needed for the entire society, special emphasis needs to be placed on the youth, as a particular target group for communication, aimed at increasing support for Serbia's EU accession process.

The European Commission's proposal to double the budget of the Erasmus+ programme for the 2021-27 period should be taken advantage of, especially given the fact that Serbia officially become a full member of the program in 2019.

The role of CSOs in Serbia should be strengthened, primarily through grants targeting the youth and aimed at boosting their engagement in the public sphere and raising knowledge on the EU-related topics.

A comprehensive communication strategy for social media (online news and social networks) should be developed, as these represent the main channel on which the youth relies for news and personal expression. Special attention needs to be dedicated to countering fake news and misinformation on social media.

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) should increasingly be used to stimulate youth mobility in the region, research about the attitudes of the young, and for the reinforcement of European values in this segment of the population.



18. Sofia Priority Agenda 2018, available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kosovo/44794/sofia-declaration-eu-western-balkans-summit\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kosovo/44794/sofia-declaration-eu-western-balkans-summit_en).

## About the European Policy Centre

European Policy Centre - CEP - is a nongovernmental, non-profit, independent think-tank, based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven. Profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of the Serbian administration, as well as strong social capital combine to create a think-tank capable of not only producing high quality research products but also penetrating the decision making arena to create tangible impact. Today, CEP organises its work into four programme areas:

- 1) Good Governance, with a strong focus on horizontal policymaking and coordination;
- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness;
- 3) Regional Policy, Networks and Energy;
- 4) Europe&us.