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## Serbia's COVID-19 Diplomacy and the Outcomes of the Zagreb Summit

### Introduction

The beginning of this year promised to reset the sluggish dynamics of Serbia's EU accession path. Following the EU's endorsement of the revised enlargement methodology, however, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the focus of the relationship between Serbia and the EU to economic recovery and questions of solidarity. Hence, the long-awaited EU-Western Balkans Summit which took place on 6 May 2020 has also adjusted its format and declaration to respond to these unprecedented times. How well has Serbia adjusted? The COVID-19 crisis shed light on the fragile state of Serbian democracy, which became particularly visible when the authorities introduced a state of emergency and adopted stringent and out-of-proportion measures to fight the pandemic. To make matters worse, during this period the latest Freedom House Report came out, in which Serbia was no longer classified as a "semi-consolidated democracy", but rather as a "hybrid regime". As Serbia geared up for the June 2020 parliamentary elections, tensions grew even greater, especially as a large part of the opposition opted for the strategy of boycotting the election.

In order to better understand the challenges of the post-pandemic EU accession process, the European Policy Centre – CEP has discussed the current situation and the road ahead with prominent domestic and foreign stakeholders. On 13 May 2020, CEP hosted an online, closed-door discussion panel titled "Serbia's COVID-19 diplomacy and the outcomes of the Zagreb Summit: Déjà vu or crucial milestone on the path to EU accession?" The following represents an analysis of key elements brought up by discussants at the event.\*

### The Zagreb Summit – "A much-needed success in a time of crisis"

The EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit, organised under the auspices of Croatia's Council Presidency, brought together leaders from the six Western Balkans partners and the heads of state or government from all the EU Member States, with the goal of jointly addressing crucial and pertinent issues and reaffirming the European perspective of the region. As such, it represented the culmination of the continuous effort dedicated to enlargement by the preceding Council presidencies. Given the circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis and the overarching emergency agendas of EU Member States, it was "a miracle" the Summit was held at all. Considering that "no Prime Minister nowadays wakes up thinking about the Western Balkans", Croatia performed well during its Presidency by ensuring that enlargement remained a topic of relevance for the Union in a time of crisis.

The Zagreb Summit did, however, lack the "emotions and images" needed in the enlargement process, as the whole event was held via video conference as a precautionary measure due to the pandemic. The visibility of symbolic aspects of a live event would have perhaps strengthened the impact and message of the Summit in the public perception, as well as ensured greater media coverage. The Summit also missed the opportunity to refer to the "completion of Europe [and] to set the scene for something new". Yet, the Summit's positive achievements – such as the reaffirmation of the EU's unequivocal support to the region's European perspective, its provision of a package of over €3.3 billion in support to the region in tackling COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery, its announcement of a robust economic and investment plan to boost the economies of the region, and its establishment of "Green Lanes" to ensure the fast flow of essential goods – outnumbered the aforementioned misgivings. Furthermore, even though Croatia recently handed over the Council presidency to Germany, it is encouraging that the former is still considering how to engage the region in some form of follow-up meeting and usher a path for further cooperation. All of these elements could serve as new incentives for the Western Balkans to pursue accession.

Nevertheless, the Serbian public and media received the outcomes of the Summit unenthusiastically. Communicating key results of EU-related processes to the public has never been easy, and the pandemic has not made that task any easier. In fact, much of the media coverage of the Summit in Serbia was devoted to issues of terminology, such as the lack of the direct mention of words such as "enlargement" and "membership". "Having fallen into the trap of searching for buzz



\*All cited statements are quoted from the participants who remain anonymous under the Chatham House Rule.

words”; the media neglected to mention the fact that enlargement has been very much alive in the first half of 2020 – especially after Albania and North Macedonia were given the green light to start accession negotiations and following the introduction of the revised enlargement methodology.

### **Mutual Trust and Support – “A two-way process”**

Another topic of importance is the complex relationship between Serbia and the EU in the context of the former’s ongoing accession process. What makes this relationship increasingly complicated is the fact that Serbia’s progress towards the EU membership has been, at best, limited, while Serbia’s commitment appears to be insufficient. Considering these impediments, changes in approach are needed. Without mutual trust, the accession process cannot function properly, as it is, above all, a joint effort. As such, it requires that “the ball goes back and forth” between the two sides of the process. Otherwise, there is a risk that the process might turn into “a one-sided game”, which could slow down the whole process and further thwart citizens’ expectations.

In this regard, lack of political will on the Serbian side is becoming more visible, as the country’s leadership has been hesitant, in Winston Churchill’s words, to “put its head into the lion’s mouth” and show clear commitment to the goal of accession. While Serbian decision-makers readily welcome the EU’s financial and technical assistance, they nevertheless remain unwilling to show genuine commitment to the accession process – through both reform and rhetoric. This lack of commitment was also notable when the Serbian President issued a statement in March 2020 proclaiming the end of European solidarity, while openly praising and siding with the Chinese government. This issue extends beyond the political elites, however. Positive promotion of the EU in the Serbian media is scarce, and the attitude of the public towards accession is deemed to be one of, at best, indifference. In contrast, Russia and China’s activities in Serbia are disproportionally praised, which is why this matter is of serious concern.

A key strategy to rebuild trust and reach mutually-shared objectives is the “incentives-reforms-rewards” formula. The logic of this formula is the following: credible offers of future political and economic benefits from the accession process have the potential to incentivise comprehensive reforms in candidate countries, the undertaking of which, and solid track records, will lead to the reaping of those rewards. For this equation to work, genuine commitment and strong political will are needed on both sides. The EU has, for the most part, fulfilled its fair share: now, the ball is in Serbia’s court.

### **Elections 2020 – “All that is left of democracy”**

In Serbia’s case, parliamentary elections scheduled for the second half of June have been a cause for much debate on the national level as political tensions have begun to re-emerge. Responses to the announced elections have ranged from scathing criticism and stern warnings to dispassionate statements of interest, especially as the period prior to the elections was characterised by an atmosphere of extreme polarisation and a “catastrophic level of political theatre”. With the opposition disorganised and unable to stand out as a viable alternative (an element that is greatly concerning in the eyes of Europeans), and with more liberal, Europhile voices all but

muffled, there were suspicions of their limited potential to bring about meaningful change.

Regardless of the latest elections, the general state of democracy in Serbia is what also raises eyebrows. In fact, reputable international sources such as Freedom House clearly show that the state of democracy in Serbia is “concerning” at best and moribund at worst – plagued by corrupt government and officials, devoid of respect for the rule of law, and saddled with farcical institutions devoid of healthy political processes, all under a cynical, coercive regime. In this context, “elections are all that is left of democracy” in Serbia, and even prior to their organisation, there were fears that such ineffective elections would only prolong this situation in which “citizens are held hostage by the state”.

When it comes to the process of democratisation of Serbia, the EU finds itself in a delicate position, “constantly walking on a fine line” in its struggle to find a balance between being critical and supportive of Serbia’s government. Would harsher criticism fuel further societal division and risk causing a “negative spiral” in the motivation of current political elites? Conversely, what guarantees that supportive messages can positively impact motivation? At the end of the day “the EU has no place in playing either government or opposition”, as such engagements extend beyond its mandate in host countries.

Nevertheless, there is still some room for its engagement. On the one hand, the EU, specifically through the European Parliament, has already attempted to create a larger platform that would enable negotiations between ruling elites and the opposition. It appears that this effort has not, however, been fully successful, as the pre-electoral narrative within the opposition continued to be characterised by “no talk about policy, no talk about platform,” while remaining divided as to whether “to boycott or not to boycott.”

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On the other hand, pro-European and liberal citizens feel abandoned by the EU, whom they blame for tepid policy and rhetoric towards the current Serbian political leadership. For this reason, there are strong voices arguing that the Union should offer more concrete criticism and “offer public comments on everyday breaches of democracy”. Following this line of argument, there should be a clear message from EU officials regarding the government’s adherence to the EU’s values: “either Serbia must play by the rules, or will risk consequences similar to those faced by Turkey”. Such a change of approach would not only potentially pressure the regime into reining in its reckless behaviour, but more importantly, would serve to lift the morale of disillusioned Serbian citizens and other genuine supporters of Serbia’s transformation into a fully functioning, democratic society. If the EU wants to hold the current authorities accountable, it needs to be serious about assessing their behaviour.

From the regional standpoint, looming elections in other countries could be a litmus test for those states currently on their accession journeys, and could be indicative of where such journeys could lead to or be “frozen”. If there are no appropriate reactions from the EU to flawed democratic processes, but rather “tepid warnings or meek slaps on the hand”, the EU’s credibility in the region might suffer further, amidst existing accusations of tacit support for stabilitocracy (regimes characterised by considerable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance, yet that enjoy external legitimacy by offering some supposed stability).

### **Implicit Popular Support and the Role of CSOs – “Living in a European way”**

Even though democracy is in a tough place in Serbia, there are still those who make conscious efforts to “live their lives in a European way”. In fact, there appears to be a “reservoir of democratic energy” in the populace - which became evident during the pandemic as criticism of the state grew more vocal - though ultimately one that the traditional political opposition has hitherto been unable to tap into. What makes the “implicit support” among the people for Serbia’s European perspective less visible is the unfavourable state of the media, as well as the fact that they lack adequate political representation.

In such circumstances, there is the potential for positive change from the civic sector (CSOs). As CSOs are experts at getting down to the facts, they have a strong ability to provide independent assessments and solutions. Going forward, as CSOs work tirelessly on “topics that are fully European in terms of values,” their role will become all the more important, considering that the existing (pre)electoral political divisions and political theatrics are “not very European”.

### **Prospects for a Future Relationship**

As the famous saying goes, “never let a good crisis go to waste”. Despite the evident political instability in Serbia and the questionable dedication to the EU accession process shown by its leaders, there is room for action which could breathe new life into the process. The transformative power of the EU accession process must be given a second chance.

First and foremost, current political tensions in Serbia need to abate and the authorities need to make sure they respect the highest democratic standards, especially when it comes to organising elections. The basic foundations of democracy

must not be called into question. Without these fundamental changes, it is pointless to hope that significant breakthroughs will be made and that Serbia will join the Union any time soon. For this reason, “a thorough review of the democratic quality of the 2020 elections” should be carried out in Serbia and the rest of the region. The findings should represent the basis on which the EU decides which governments in the region it wishes to continue the enlargement process with.

Moreover, authorities should also stop giving preferential treatment to propaganda over facts, and bias over objective assessment. Input provided by civil society organisations should not fall on deaf ears. As fake news becomes more and more common, evidence-based analysis by these organisations becomes all the more important. Therefore, instead of ignoring expert opinions, Serbian authorities should start working towards building mutual commitment and trust.

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Finally, it is important to note that the geopolitical landscape is becoming more complex, and China is becoming the elephant in the room in Serbia’s EU accession process. On the one hand, the recent crisis has shown that China will increase its presence in Serbia as much as the EU allows it. The EU should therefore integrate Serbia into its wider policies such as internal market issues, production and supply lines, digital issues and 5G, and security, in order to counter this phenomenon. In fact, these are all topics that should include the involvement and engagement of the entire Western Balkan region. On the other hand, Serbia should reconsider its COVID-19 diplomacy and fully orient towards achieving accession to the EU – for there is little in the way of alternatives. In order for the accession process to work, it must become a clear national priority on all levels, followed by concrete, tangible changes, clear narratives, and public dialogue.

## About European Policy Centre - CEP

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;
- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness;
- 3) Regional Policy, Energy and Environment;
- 4) Europe&us.