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Political Priorities of Serbia in 2024

Between Trans-Atlantic, Sino-American, and EU-China Relations

In the face of looming global challenges, Serbia finds itself navigating a complex and uncertain landscape. The ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza, coupled with heightened tensions in the Western Balkans region, have placed the country in a precarious position. The past year has been particularly turbulent for Serbia, marked by widespread anti-government protests and snap elections in December 2023, which were characterised by allegations of electoral fraud, both on national and local levels. On a foreign policy level, developments such as the United Nations [Srebrenica resolution](#) and developments regarding Kosovo's Council of Europe [membership application](#) have further inflamed public discourse and increased political tensions in Serbia. Meanwhile, exactly a decade since the start of the accession talks, Serbia's journey toward the EU shows no encouraging signs of the necessary change.

Amidst these challenges, the European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade) and Le Grand Continent organised a closed discussion titled "Political Priorities of Serbia and the Balkans between Trans-Atlantic, Sino-American, and EU-China Relations in Times of Global Changes." The event was held under the Chatham House rule and gathered over 20 experts from civil society, academia and the private sector who shared their insights, perspectives, and opinions on the pressing issues facing Serbia. The discussion was divided into two panels, with the first one focusing on offering an outlook on Serbia's internal situation in the context of its EU accession process, while the second focused on the country's foreign policy amidst shifting global dynamics. This paper presents a summary of the discussions and offers important insights publicly while respecting the Chatham House rule and protecting participants' names and affiliations.



Serbia and EU: neither here nor there

Having in mind the length and slow progress of the accession process, Serbia appears to be stuck on its EU membership path. Accession negotiations began a decade ago, yet only 23 out of 35 negotiation chapters have been opened, and just two have provisionally closed. This limited progress is underscored by the European Commission's annual progress reports, which, when [quantified](#), show progress of only 0.5 percentage points since 2019. The persistent scale of power abuse and [state capture](#) suggests that the government has little incentive to break away from its entrenched practices. This is noticeable when examining chapters 23 and 24, the readiness level has barely increased since the chapters were opened, and reforms are made *pro forma*. Furthermore, statements by Serbian officials often contradict the EU commitment, and the lack of a coherent EU strategy only reinforces doubts about the country's commitment to the EU integration process. Although EU membership is formally labelled as a strategic goal and a country's national interest, the current government programme does not elaborate on specific actions that the Government plans to take to achieve this goal. This shows that no significant changes are forthcoming in Serbia's approach to reforms in the context of the accession talks.

The EU's broader goal of accelerating the integration of the Western Balkans into various aspects of the Single Market, such as the Single European Payment Area, underscores its focus on economic interests. As a result of that interest, the EU has become less critical of Serbia and its democratic shortcomings, which creates the impression that it has turned a blind eye to these problems. Because of this, the Serbian government feels more at ease and diminishes the likelihood of meaningful reforms, further slowing down the country's EU accession.

The issues of democracy and the rule of law are further complicated by the absence of external pressure from the EU. The EU's criticism peaked during the December 2023 elections, with clear evidence of electoral fraud and a strong reaction from the EU, which resulted in the European Parliament [resolution calling for an independent international investigation](#). This is seen as an outlier rather than a sign of the EU's future behaviour. While the atmosphere has shifted since then, and recent local elections have been slightly improved to meet minimal standards, the EU's interest in the matter seems to have waned. This has fit, experts fear, with the EU's track record of focusing, when assessing progress, largely on the adoption of laws rather than their substance or effective implementation, creating a false impression of progress and neglecting other shortages. Moreover, Serbia has yet to effectively implement the legislative framework stemming from constitutional amendments to the judiciary, further highlighting the issue in this regard. The current situation regarding democracy mirrors the one prior to the pandemic, when conditions for free and fair elections were questionable and when the EU was forced to step in to mediate the inter-party dialogue in order to improve election conditions. As Serbia continues to backslide, meaningful improvements are unlikely without renewed and robust pressure from the EU.

In light of the democratic backslide, there is a growing concern among experts that the EU's strategic interests in Serbia have overshadowed its commitment to democratic principles, as evidenced by the lack of pressure on the Serbian government. Serbia appears to navigate its relationship with the EU through transactional arrangements, such as allowing the exploitation of lithium, an economically crucial resource for the Union, or purchasing Rafale fighter jets from France. Additionally, as the EU prioritises regional stability, the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo and keeping the situation stable seems to have taken precedence over democratic concerns for some time. Moreover, the EU's broader goal of accelerating the integration of the Western Balkans into various aspects of the Single Market, such as the Single European Payment Area (SEPA), underscores its focus on economic interests. As a result of that interest, the EU has become less critical of Serbia and its democratic shortcomings, which creates the impression that it has turned a blind eye to these problems. Because of this, the Serbian government feels more at ease and diminishes the likelihood of meaningful reforms, further slowing down the country's EU accession.

Serbia's Foreign Policy: Shifting Alliances and Regional Tensions

Recent patterns in Serbia's foreign policy indicate a gradual distancing from Russia despite long-lasting and deep ties; simultaneously, China is becoming ever more important. Namely, although Belgrade has been refraining from aligning with any EU sanctions on Moscow, Serbia has voted for several UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine, provided humanitarian aid, and even sold weapons to Kyiv, though unofficially. As there is an increasing wall separating Serbia and Russia, there is essentially none for China. Beijing has become a more prominent partner not just in terms of economy and trade, but also in areas such as security, intelligence, and defence. China's decision to vote against the Srebrenica resolution—a rare instance of Beijing taking a clear stance—signals the deepening of these relations and the direction in which they are heading. Additionally, Serbia's Free Trade Agreement with China, which came into force on 1 July, highlights a decreasing commitment to the EU. Thus, Serbia has strategically shifted its orientation towards China. With the government actively seeking to deepen its ties with Beijing, this trajectory is unlikely to be easily influenced by external parties.

When it comes to leading its regional policy, the Serbian government is actively implementing its so-called "Serbian world" approach. Serbia is in a specific situation with eight neighbouring countries, which means that there is no regional stability without good relations with them. However, there are growing fears that Belgrade is strategically using the ethnic Serb populations in countries like Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to achieve its own national

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Although the Banjska crisis caused a lot of trouble to Belgrade's reputation and leverage vis-à-vis the EU, the fact Kosovo's Prime Minister Kurti has kept taking unilateral actions against the spirit and essence of the agreements undertaken in Brussels during the Dialogue, made it easier for Serbia to keep the ball in Kosovo's court. Such context has only elevated the rhetorical importance of the "Serbian world" discourse in speeches and media statements of officials.

interests, sometimes at the expense of these countries' EU integration processes. Moreover, Montenegro and North Macedonia are treated as extensions of Serbia's internal policy, where Belgrade attempts to entrench its influence further. Meanwhile, Kosovo remains a significant destabilising factor in the region, with constant tensions and potential for escalation. Although the Banjska crisis caused a lot of trouble to Belgrade's reputation and leverage vis-à-vis the EU, the fact Kosovo's Prime Minister Kurti has kept taking unilateral actions against the spirit and essence of the agreements undertaken in Brussels during the Dialogue, made it easier for Serbia to keep the ball in Kosovo's court. Such context has only elevated the rhetorical importance of the "Serbian world" discourse in speeches and media statements of officials. This approach, experts fear, risks solidifying nationalist tendencies in Serbia, while potentially acting as a destabilising factor in the region.

Leveraging the Growth Plan for Reform

Despite Serbia's long list of yet-to-be-resolved issues, the Growth Plan presents a promising opportunity to address some of them. Through the Reform and Growth Facility, the Growth Plan foresees the allocation of additional funds, which, when combined with IPA funds, [match those proposed in Stage 1](#) of the CEP/CEPS Model for Staged Accession. Furthermore, the Growth Plan also introduces other incentives aimed at accelerating sectoral integration into the Single Market, together with membership in various programmes and agencies. However, what distinguishes this instrument is that access to the benefits is contingent upon the successful implementation of targets outlined in the Reform Agen-

da, particularly those related to fundamental reform areas. Moreover, for the Growth Plan to be effective, the implementation of the Reform Agenda must be, experts call, more transparent and inclusive, particularly by further involving civil society in their development. This was a notable gap when the Reform Agenda was initially developed. With the first semester grades due before the year's end, there is limited time to ensure that transparent monitoring and implementation are prioritised. Thus, although the Growth Plan offers an opportunity to move certain things forward, CSOs' involvement in the process will be crucial in achieving the Growth Plan's aims to accelerate the integration process, while keeping governments accountable.

Although the Growth Plan is seen as a welcome step forward, reaffirming the Union's dedication to enlargement, experts are still reluctant to overtly embrace the optimistic narrative on the future enlargement prospects. Namely, given the current developments following the European Parliament elections and elections in some of the EU's key members, no major changes in relations between Serbia and the EU regarding enlargement should be expected in the near future. The recent surge of right-wing parties in several EU capitals suggests an imminent impact on the EU and its enlargement policy, as those parties are mostly against further expansion of the Union. The potential power vacuum in France following the general elections could slow down the momentum of enlargement, while the German federal elections next year might also hinder the process. Additionally, the rise of non-liberal forces in France may further obstruct both the enlargement process and necessary EU reforms, especially considering that "liberal Macron" slowed down the enlargement process in 2019 by insisting on revising the enlargement methodology. As a result, there is a risk that the circumstances will become increasingly unfavourable for enlargement. With the enlargement window slowly but steadily closing, Serbia's accession process could be slowed down even further, which could reinforce the lack of will to implement the necessary reforms.



About European Policy Centre - CEP

European Policy Centre - CEP - is a non-governmental, 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. A 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 a tangible impact. Today, CEP organises its work into four programme areas:

- 1) Good Governance
- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness
- 3) Regional Policy, Networks and Energy
- 4) Our Europe

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