

West Side Story in Serbia

Serbia is prepared to do all that is required to join the European Union. Almost. Recognising Kosovo is one thing it's not prepared to do.

by Vesko Garcevic *

At the beginning of March, the high representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy, Federica Mogherini, travelled to the Western Balkans in an effort to encourage states in the region to follow the path of reform and to reinvigorate the EU enlargement process in this part of Europe. Her trip was not only a demanding political task but also in some moments a highly unpleasant and frustrating experience. She had to deal with a complex regional situation and unpredictable local actors.

While addressing the Serbian parliament, Mogherini was booed by MPs from the far-right, nationalistic and xenophobic Serbian Radical Party, who were banging on benches and chanting "Serbia, Russia, we don't need the Union". Mogherini's experience in Belgrade was, no doubt, at the same time both exceptionally annoying and representative of the trip. It demonstrated the direction Serbia might take if the EU doesn't proceed properly in the years to come.

Only a few weeks before this incident, Serbia had opened Chapters 20 and 26 as a part of its EU accession talks. The accession process launched in January 2014 brought a sigh of relief from those who believed that the state had definitively set its EU trajectory, and that the pace of the accession process would be reasonably smooth. But with just six chapters opened, progress to this point has not been impressive and the future remains unclear. Because membership in the EU is (and will re-

main) high on the agenda of any Serbian government, Serbia is likely to continue tottering through its transition no matter who wins the presidential elections in April. Thus the more pertinent question is how close to Serbia's heart EU membership really is.

A clear answer (if there actually is an answer) to this question will help us to understand Serbia's Janus-faced approach to EU accession, which has been puzzling its European partners. For the entirety of the history of modern Serbian statehood, the country has been caught between two fires. On one side, Serbia is lured by the high standard of living and democratic values nestled in Western Europe. On the other, it flirts with national-conservative narratives in which Serbia's natural place has always been and always will be with Russia. This is not a new historical phenomenon, nor is it merely a result of the current political situation in and around Serbia.

At the moment of the dissolution of Serbia and Montenegro, many in Europe believed that Serbia had a clear, unhindered path forward. It appeared that it would only be a matter of time until the country would join the EU. And there were solid reasons to believe that the odds of success were in Serbia's favour. Indeed, with its remarkable human capital and noteworthy economic capacities, coupled with its size and its position in the Balkans, Serbia could bet on a long, uncertain and sometimes contradictory future. The country was seen as better prepared and comparatively more advanta-

geous than Montenegro, but it now lags behind its former smaller partner in the federation. Montenegro has already opened 26 chapters with the goal of having all 35 chapters opened in the next ten to 12 months.

Two issues will determine the future of Serbia and the EU, and both are closely linked to the EU's strategic and, from the EU's point of view, justifiable posture towards the Balkans. The first issue is Serbian relations with Russia, and the second is Kosovo. The way Serbia handles these two issues shapes public opinion in the country and affects its citizens' perception of the EU integration process.

The last public opinion poll, called "European Orientation of Serbian Citizens", was conducted by the European Integration Office of the Serbian Government and showed that if the referendum on the EU membership was held today, 47% of Serbian citizens would be in favour of EU membership, 29% would be against, 15% would not vote and 9% would not know what to answer. At the same time, 35% of respondents said that EU membership would be a good thing in their opinion, while 31% of citizens considered it to be a bad thing and 34% were indifferent towards the issue. This poll confirms a well-known fact: Serbian citizens are split over their support for the EU, which is a direct consequence of both the EU policy towards Russia and the EU's recognition of the independence of Kosovo. The overwhelming majority of Serbs, including young people, have a sympathetic view of Russia and disapprove of the EU's sanctions against the country. Another public opinion survey from 2016, led by the respected polling agencies CESID and B92, showed that 55.2% of respondents believe that Serbia should stick to its historical alliance with Russia. And support for Moscow is constantly growing. The former Serbian defence minister, Bratislav Gasic, was quoted in 2015 as saying that "Serbia will not falter in the face of (EU) pressure to introduce sanctions against Russia".

Along with long-standing good relations, rooted in cultural and religious similarities, Serbia also has a strong political motive to align itself with Russia. Belgrade doesn't ►►



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Above. The high representative of the EU for foreign affairs and security policy, Federica Mogherini, with the Serbian prime minister, Aleksandar Vucic. During her speech before the Serbian parliament, Mogherini was heckled by right-wing members of the Radical Serbian Nationalist Party. Left. Serbs in Kosovo waving the Serbian flag.



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recognize Kosovo's independence, and one can hardly imagine any Serbian government or politician willing to swallow such a bitter pill in the foreseeable future. As long as recognition of Kosovo is a precondition for Serbia's inclusion into the EU, the Serbian road to accession is effectively a dead-end street. In the eyes of the Serbian public, including many of the EU-affiliated political actors, EU membership cannot be justified if the price to be paid is so unreasonably high.

Belgrade points its finger at the five EU member states who have not recognized Kosovo (and have no intention of doing so), arguing that the EU's insistence on the recognition clause hinders democratic processes in Serbia and is harmful to its successful accomplishment of the EU agenda. Whether or not this argument is merely employed as a good excuse for slowing down reforms, it is very powerful and resonates deeply with popular sentiment. Its effect is

magnified by the belief of many Serbian citizens that Russia fully understands the emotions of Serbs, whereas the EU backs Kosovo Albanians.

To address this dichotomy, the former prime minister of Serbia, Boris Tadic, argued that Serbian foreign policy should be anchored to four pillars: the EU, the US, China and Russia. Some in Serbia praised him for developing a wise and comprehensive strategy that fully conforms to Serbian strategic foreign policy goals, but others warned that this approach would cause Serbia to drift away from the EU. The current state of affairs regarding EU accession appears to prove the latter point, made by those who suspected that the four-pillar policy would not bear (EU) fruit.

It is difficult to understand and properly explain Serbia's historical, national and political dilemmas. Even for those of us from the neighbourhood, it is no easy task. One can only imagine how bewildered international dignitaries become when faced with situations like the one Mogherini experienced during her address to the Serbian parliament. She walked out of the meeting as a victor, but if Serbia would like to emerge similarly victorious from this maze, it must make a clear cut, decide to move towards the EU and stop playing with the so-called third way.

The EU, on the other hand, needs to be more engaged in the region. Its vision for the Western Balkans must be reinvigorated, and EU member states such as Italy have a particularly important supporting role to play as they know our region well, have historically had good relations with Serbia and enjoy a very good reputation among its citizens. A win-win scenario must be created for both Serbia and the EU. Otherwise, if the EU gives up on the Western Balkans, Serbia may give up on the EU as well. And in that case, the winner will be Russia. [e](#)

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A VICTORY AS CLEAR AS DAY

by M.K.

The current Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic won the presidential elections held on April 2 in Serbia with over 55% of the vote, a tally that will enable him to avoid the run off. Running under the emblem of the Serbian centre-right Progressive Party, he defeated ten other candidates, including the Socialist Party's Sasa Jankovic, the former foreign minister in the previous government led by Vuk Jeremic (and one of the favourites); the famous radical Serbian nationalist who has spent 11 years in jail in The Hague, Vojislav Seselj; and the eccentric anti-establishment figurehead Luka Maksimovic. There's a saying which claims that "things in the Balkans change with the wind". Even the future president Vucic, a former ultra-nationalist and education minister under Slobodan Milosevic, converted approximately ten years ago and embraced a much more moderate stance that is clearly pro-Europe and in favour of austerity measures. He now promises to lead Serbia towards a democratic future, reduce unemployment and revive the country's industrial sectors while protecting the rights of women. He wants Serbia to be a neutral military force; he doesn't recognise Kosovo, but he doesn't reject negotiations with Pristina outright. Serbia has already experienced having its internal politics influenced by foreign powers and having to choose which side of the fence they want to stand on. Vucic is appreciated by Western leaders – and considered an important ally, capable of keeping the lid on Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo as well as being a mediator between the EU and Russia – as well as by Vladimir Putin. Sasa Jankovic, the main challenger in the Democratic Party,

was awarded 16% of the ballots, which he called a "victory for Serbia". Jankovic, a former ombudsman and defender of civil rights, was backed by the liberal opposition, scholars and intellectuals. The candidate who caught the eye of many was prankster Luka Maksimovic, alias "Ljubisa Preletacevic Beli" (an ironic wordplay mocking political turncoats), with his amusing and extravagant campaign. He promised, "You will receive 16 monthly salaries, we will build three-storey homes for you and there will be no war". He came in third with 9.4 % of votes.

