

# Europe as a Pole of Attraction for Serbia

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### Introduction: A Peace Project as Context

The European Union (EU) as it stands today is at origin an emphatic political post-World War Two peace project. It has created an institutional framework encompassing 27 Member States, comprising close to half a billion citizens.

Serbia is a European country, and along with other countries of the Western Balkans, strongly aspires and endeavours to join that peace project and its present institutional framework.

The soft power of the EU with its policy of open doors to further enlargement is an incentive for new European democracies of the post-communist world to join.

As with the enlargement of the EU (then European Community) to the two post-dictatorship countries of the Iberian peninsula, Spain and Portugal, and to Greece after the dictatorship, so the embracing of the Central and Eastern European countries after 1989 –the “return to Europe”– has been a fundamental shift in the political geography of Europe.

The Balkans are encompassed by the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and Serbia, although no more a seafaring country since the independence of Montenegro in 2006, has strong links to the whole Mediterranean Basin.

The Balkan Peninsula, after the Apennine and Iberian Peninsulas, is the final South European component that will join the EU.

The year 2008 has been a crucial one for Serbia’s European outlook in many respects. It was a year of difficult challenges with the proclaimed independence of Kosovo, but also a year of the people’s adamant choice to go forth on the European path.

### Geography and History

Serbia is part of the geographical core of Europe. It is thus not a neighbour to Europe as is sometimes underlined.

Serbia is today part of what can be defined as the inner courtyard of the European Union and NATO. It is, as is the whole of the Western Balkans, completely surrounded by EU and NATO members. After the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU in 2007 and to NATO earlier, and the accession of Albania and Croatia to NATO in April 2009, the remaining countries of the region are all on the EU conveyor belt and are nearly all members of NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme.

Geography matters and the case of the Balkans confirms it. But history has an equal if not greater impact. As part and parcel of modern European history, Serbia, whether as an independent state in the 19th century or as part of Yugoslavia in the 20th century, has been an engaged European ally and actor. In particular, in the First and Second World Wars, Serbia/Yugoslavia’s role was a crucial contributing factor to the victory over those who in Europe and the world attempted to subjugate and repress freedom and democracy.

### The Fall of Communism

On the night of 9 November 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, symbolizing the end of communism, a new political reality dawned on Europe and the world. Yugoslavia, which had had relations with the European Community since 1971, was seen by many as the first prospective post-communist country to join the European peace project. Initial contacts and an outlook for negotiations were launched by the last Yugoslav Federal Government in 1990. This unique

historical opportunity to join the EU early on was squandered and the country fell into a catastrophic violent breakdown, causing huge loss of life, uprooting hundreds of thousands of people, and provoking devastating extremes of suffering.

The absence of democracy, rule of law, and a rights-based societal framework meant that there were no institutional levers for citizens of Yugoslavia to impede what the political leaderships were leading towards. The devastating institutional legacy of communism –which had atomized society; impeded political pluralism and freedoms of expression and association; and reinforced paternalistic and patriarchal authoritarian patterns of behaviour through a negative selection of cadres based on loyalty and obedience– meant that a power-retention battle was in the making between the existing leaderships, using nationalism as a mobilizing tool and appealing to the worst historical legacies/memories of the inter-ethnic strife. In fact, this was completely opposite to the Spanish model of transition, in which all political forces in the mid-seventies decided not to invoke the legacies and memories of the 1930s Civil War.

It is important to recall briefly this recent history to underscore the importance of the idea of Europe as value and the European Union as an institution

### Why is Europe Attractive?

Serbia and its citizens, along with other countries of the post-communist world, have aspired and aspire to normalcy, a life free of fear, uncertainty and insecurity, freed from the turmoil of history. In Churchill's famous words, the Balkans produce more history than they can consume. And yet contrary to all expectations a war occurred in Europe at the end of the 20th century in spite of all the post-1945 lessons and exhortations that war should never occur again on the continent. Why did this occur? The reason, to be added to the absence of democracy, is simply that among others it had not become part of the Monnet-Schumann European project, due to the Yalta-Potsdam Cold War order.

Without necessarily having an in-depth knowledge of EU institutions or of the intricate 50-year history of the European institutional construction since the Treaty of Rome, citizens of all these countries, and thus those of Serbia, know that the EU, while imperfect as other human constructs, gives its citizens that additional increment of security, prosperity and certainty,

making life somewhat more predictable. That is in essence why they aspire to join.

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Also, the successful accession in 2004 and 2007 of all Central and Eastern European countries to the European Union from Estonia in the north of Europe to Serbia's neighbour Bulgaria in the south was a key example of how states who successfully pursue the work of democratic, political, social and economic reform are accepted into the framework of the European political peace project, the EU.

### Serbia in 2008

In 2008 the citizens of Serbia went to the polls in two crucial, future-defining elections. In February, in the presidential election Boris Tadic was elected for a five-year term on a pro-European platform. In May, snap parliamentary elections were called by the outgoing government of Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica over the issue of the independence of Kosovo. The electoral coalition For a European Serbia, led by the Democratic Party of President Tadic won a convincing victory with a close to 10-point margin over its main rival the nationalist, right-wing Radical Party. The declaration of independence of Kosovo on February 17, 2008 had been an enormous political, social and historical challenge for Serbia. It came at the tail end of the nineties dissolution of Yugoslavia, after a NATO bombing in 1999, lasting 78 days that ended with the Kumanovo agreement on 10 June 1999, which led to Kosovo being put under the authority of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244. Serbia retained formal sovereignty over Kosovo but had lost the practical tools of sovereignty in its Southern Province, Kosovo and Metohija.

The voters of Serbia in 2008 reconfirmed what they had decided in the historical elections of September 2000 when they ousted, peacefully, through the ballot box –in a European way– Slobodan Milosevic and his regime. They had reconfirmed their choice of a European future, based on European values. The Democratic Party of President Tadic and all its coalition members had decided that, notwithstanding the challenge that Kosovo's decision represented, only institutional, legal, diplomatic means would be used to uphold Serbia's positions in opposition to that decision. President Tadic declared in the electoral campaign that he would not lead a new generation of young Serbs to war over whatever challenge Serbia faced. Serbia thus chose the attraction of a more stable European future, ready for the difficult tasks that lay ahead.

In July 2008 a further confirmation of the determination to pursue the European path came with the arrest of the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. The new government of Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic had just been voted in and showed that Serbia was ready to tackle the remaining obligations regarding the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The political will to move forward on this issue was patent. Two indictees remain at large: Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic.

The Serbian Parliament set about defining an agenda of pro-European legislation based on the government's draft-law proposals.

In the political arena two significant events underscored the power of the European pole. First, the Socialist Party of Serbia, the party of Slobodan Milosevic (who had died in the ICTY prison in 2006), with a young leadership, made a clear choice after the May 2008 elections for a European future and joined the pro-European governmental coalition. Second, in the autumn of 2008 the nationalist, right wing Radical Party split over the issue of Europe, with a majoritarian wing espousing the European road for Serbia and naming itself the Serbian Progressive Party.

These changes in the political landscape of Serbia testify both to the success of the attraction of the EU model and to the soft-power dynamics at work in Europe.

### **Communicating Vessels**

Serbia and its citizens have been well aware of the dynamics of Europe. They know what membership

in the EU has done for former dictatorships such as Portugal and Spain. They have witnessed how Greece has developed rapidly since its membership in 1981. Serbs have been guest workers since the 1960s in Austria, France, Germany, Sweden, and many other countries and they have brought back their experiences. Very many of them have lived in the European democratic institutional framework with market economies and a system of social security.

The ethnification of politics in the 1990s that then led to war and destruction was a cul-de-sac that Serbia entered and then needed 10 years to extricate itself from. It found that it had inherited in 2000 a devastated state, society and economy and that it was at the end of the queue to Europe, a laggard. The ten years of the 1990s were very long in the lives of people and yet historically they were an aberration in Serbian history. Serbia had found itself for one "brief" but destructive historical moment on the wrong side of its allies, friends and itself.

On the territory of Europe, countries, societies and citizens observe each other, communicate and interrelate. Serbia at one moment found itself excluded and ostracized. The effect of communicating vessels played its beneficial effects. To have seen neighbouring countries Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria firmly on the path to the European Union in the late 1990s and then their entry into the EU; to have witnessed Slovenia's entry and Croatia's advance in negotiations as well as Macedonia becoming a candidate for entry into the EU –all these examples have defined the effect of what European Union is capable of. It must be repeated, without any idealization or naive expectation, that the EU is a panacea.

### **Enlargement Fatigue**

As in previous years, but probably more so in 2008, the question of the EU's readiness and disposition to enlarge further has been a much debated issue. An EU older than 50 in which many young generations have little recollection of World War II, in which in prior years the French and Dutch electorate for differing reasons had rejected the new Constitutional Treaty, in which growing economic problems and finally the global financial and economic crisis have hit hard and created much unemployment –all lead to an inward-turning of domestic publics, to temptations of protectionism, to fear of immigrant workers, to opposition to enlargement.

Nevertheless, the next enlargement of the EU will happen and it will be to the Western Balkans. The EU, at its June 2003 Thessaloniki Summit under the Greek Presidency, made the decision to enlarge to the Western Balkan countries when they meet the required criteria. This decision has been subsequently and consequentially reconfirmed. It thus behoves the countries of the Western Balkans, and Serbia among them, to continue first of all at home the hard work of wholesale reform in all societal domains so as to advance on the path of full membership.

The work on visa-free travel to the EU in Serbia has been a strong motivating force for the overall EU integration process. And the recommendation (in July 2009) of the EU Commission to move forward on visa-free travel for Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro by the beginning of 2010 will be a most significant additional incentive on the road to Europe.

But there is also the need for these countries and Serbia in particular to communicate much more intensely not only with the capital of the EU, Brussels, but with all the capitals of the 27 Member States on the issue of enlargement and what it signifies for the future members involved but also for the continuation of the European political peace project and its further deepening. The Western Balkan countries all in all constitute in volume about 20 million citizens. This is smaller in size than for example the population of Romania. And thus, although among some publics and leaders in EU Member States enlargement may seem, very often because Turkey is a candidate (which I believe should join in future), as a foreign, unwanted prospect, the need to "complete" Europe is a historical task that relates back to the original post-World War II project of a Europe whole and free and at peace; Europe as a political project only if it moves forward toward future challenges.

Serbia needs to show others the progress that it has achieved and to be candid about the challenges that lie ahead. It needs to allay by its reform efforts the fears that further enlargement will import problems into the EU rather than successful responsible

members. In the region Serbia has a leadership role to play by demonstrating good neighbourly relations and cooperation in a true European spirit.

There are numerous regional cooperation frameworks such as the South East European Co-operation Process and the Regional Co-operation Council, as well as the coordinated combating of organized crime and trafficking of people, narcotics and weapons, or the cooperation on infrastructure such as energy, roads, or cities networks. The region already has a life onto itself linked to other European regions. Much more remains to be done.

The EU is also a pole of attraction because it plays such a supportive role in the difficult work of reforming a post-communist, post-conflict society. Although the effort of change and reform is principally domestic, the visible helping hand of Europe in this work is a fundamental burden-sharing dimension that demonstrates a crucial European value: solidarity.

In turn, the countries that have undergone the process of democratic transition and EU membership bear an obligation to show solidarity with others on the European continent and beyond it who are in need and in difficulties.

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