

 Policy paper

# **SERBIA'S EU ACCESSION PATH: EUROPEAN INTEGRATION WITHOUT DEMOCRATIZATION?**

---

**Jana Juzová,  
Nikola Burazer,  
Oszkár Roginer**

December 2022

## Introduction

Serbia began its path towards membership in the European Union in 2000, after the overthrow of the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević. It took Serbia almost 12 years to be granted EU candidate status in 2012, during which time it faced major obstacles in the form of cooperation with the International Crime Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), breakdown of the state Union with Montenegro, and finally the issue of Kosovo, which declared independence in 2008. During this period, Serbia made important progress in reform and strengthening of democratic institutions, setting the EU membership as a strategic goal. After being granted candidate status in March 2012, Serbia opened accession negotiations in January 2014 and the first negotiating chapters in December 2015.

However, in almost 11 years of candidate status and almost 9 years of accession negotiations, Serbia has made very little tangible progress towards membership in the EU. By December 2022 it only managed to open 22 out of 35 negotiating chapters, provisionally closing only two, which were both closed on the same day in which they were opened. European Commission noted very small progress when it comes to preparedness for membership since 2015, and Serbia's own reports on adopting the necessary EU legislation show significant delays. Even more disturbingly, Serbia is arguably a less democratic state than it was at the time of opening accession negotiations, witnessing significant deterioration of its democratic institutions and major political crises, including a parliamentary and election opposition boycott from 2019 to 2022.

These developments raise a question mark over both Serbia's EU accession process and its future as a democracy. Despite an increasing focus on enlargement by the EU and attempts to reform the process by putting "fundamentals first" within the new methodology, the new approach is yet to bring any tangible results. The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 put

foreign policy concern at the forefront of Serbia's EU accession process due to Serbian government's reluctance to join EU sanctions on Russia. This has put the issue of democratic institutions down on the list of priorities, representing one more risk for Serbia's democratization through the EU accession process.

## Serbia's democratic decay: State of play

Under the revised enlargement methodology, Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) represents the mechanism for assessing the quality of democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the scope of the EU enlargement process. Besides referring to the functioning of democratic institutions, Cluster 1 also contains the negotiating Chapters 23 (*Judiciary and fundamental rights*) and 24 (*Justice, freedom and security*), which are both formally and in terms of substance at the centre of EU accession negotiations. These

**Furthermore, what is presented in Serbia as progress in the accession process are often mere technicalities, while generally the country is still lagging behind on substantial and structural reforms.**

chapters are joined by Chapter 5 (Public procurement), Chapter 18 (Statistics), and Chapter 32 (Financial control), under the "Fundamentals" Cluster.

While Chapters 23 and 24 were both opened in July 2016, the progress achieved by Serbia in the past years could largely be described as insular, moderate, and limited. Especially the stagnation in the negotiations within the two chapters between 2020 and 2022 provides cause for concern. Furthermore, what is presented in Serbia as progress in the accession process are often mere technicalities, while generally the country is still lagging behind on substantial and structural reforms. Although both governments of Ana Brnabić (2017–2020, 2020–2022) have persistently tried to persuade the EU about their commitment to the European values and present the achieved progress towards membership as a significant success, concrete examples (such as the September 2022 cancelation

of Europride, the “Jovanjica” affair or the controversial assignment of national frequencies to pro-government television channels)<sup>1</sup> make the commitment to Chapters 23 and 24 appear rather rhetorical.

Serbia is more than four years late with the legislative changes related to the constitutional amendments necessary for meeting the obligations under the Chapter 23 regarding **judiciary**. The original deadline at the end of 2017 was postponed until the end of 2021 within the Revised Action Plan for this Chapter and constitutional changes were finally enacted in late 2021 and confirmed on a referendum on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2022. However, legislative changes needed to implement the constitutional changes are still underway. Although the goal of these changes is to increase the judiciary's independence, by limiting the role of the parliament in appointing judges and prosecutors, the guarantees against potential political influence over the judiciary are still insufficient.<sup>2</sup>

The independence of the judiciary is closely connected to **corruption**. Although several corruption scandals recently shook Serbia as whistle-blowers and investigative journalists exposed links between organised crime, the private sector and high-level state and ruling-party officials, the prosecution of these cases remained slow, unsystematic, and insufficient.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Bilčik na Evroprajdu: Poštovanje ljudskih prava je suština moderne Evrope, *N1*, online at <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/bilcik-na-evroprajdu-postovanje-ljudskih-prava-je-sustina-moderne-evrope/>

Rakić Vodinelić: Užasna i opasna presuda Upravnog suda o Evroprajdu, *N1*, online at <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/rakic-vodinelic-uzasna-i-opasna-presuda-upravnog-suda-o-evroprajdu/>

Ivana Jeremić: Serbia Bans EuroPride Walk in Belgrade, *Balkan Insight*, online at <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/09/13/serbia-bans-europride-walk-in-belgrade/>

Slučaj Jovanjica: Politička pozadina prljavih znački, *Vreme*, online at <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/slucaj-jovanjica-politicka-pozadina-prljavih-znacki/>

Nacionalne frekvencije u Srbiji ponovo dobile TV Pink, Happy, Prva i B92 online at, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rem-frekvencije-srbija-pink-happy-b92/31965380.html>

<sup>2</sup>Sava Mitrović: Serbia's Constitutional Amendments – Towards Depoliticisation of the Judicial Branch of Government or Preservation of the Current State? *Centar za Evropske Politike*, Online at <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/serbias-constitutional-amendments-towards-depoliticisation-of-the-judicial-branch-of-government-or-preservation-of-the-current-state/>

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Serbia 2021 Report, October 19, 2021, for download at [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2021\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2021_en)

The widespread corruption in the country and the inability of the responsible bodies to deal with high-level corruption cases is largely caused by the highly politicised nature of these processes. Non-governmental organizations point out that police and prosecution fail “to investigate ‘politically sensitive’ cases of corruption unless they have a clear sign that the most influential politicians will support the action. Consequently, elements of institutions’ capture are highly visible in the sector.”<sup>4</sup> Such scandals, linking governmental actors and organised crime, resulted in a decline in corruption rating from an already insufficient 3,50 to 3,25 in 2022 according to Freedom House’s Nations in Transit.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the fact that the prosecution of these cases is often inconsequential and ambiguously communicated in the media furthers the wider mistrust of the population in public institutions. Corruption cases according to police statistics of arrests often cannot be linked to their outcome as regards the prosecution and courts. Furthermore, corruption is still not internally differentiated.<sup>6</sup> Thus, “grand corruption”, which would denote the irregularities in large infrastructure and urbanisation projects or in the particularly sore energy sector, does not differ categorically on the legislative level from small-scale corruption. Conclusively, although the Agency for Prevention of Corruption has followed up on the GRECO<sup>7</sup> recommendations, and new amendments to the law were adopted in September 2021, Serbia has still to prepare an Anti-corruption strategy, an action plan, and coordination mechanisms to properly address corruption. GRECO also requested the Head of delegation of Serbia to submit additional information regarding the

---

<sup>4</sup>Grand corruption and tailor-made laws in Serbia. *Transparency Serbia*, online at [www.transparentnost.org.rs/images/dokumenti\\_uz\\_vesti/Grand\\_Corruption\\_and\\_Tailor-made\\_Laws\\_in\\_Serbia.pdf](http://www.transparentnost.org.rs/images/dokumenti_uz_vesti/Grand_Corruption_and_Tailor-made_Laws_in_Serbia.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Annual Report on Serbia, *Freedom House*, online at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2022>

<sup>6</sup> Transparency Serbia, “Grand corruption and tailor-made laws in Serbia.” March 2021. Online at [www.transparentnost.org.rs/images/dokumenti\\_uz\\_vesti/Grand\\_Corruption\\_and\\_Tailor-made\\_Laws\\_in\\_Serbia.pdf](http://www.transparentnost.org.rs/images/dokumenti_uz_vesti/Grand_Corruption_and_Tailor-made_Laws_in_Serbia.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> GRECO - Council of Europe’s Group of States against Corruption, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/greco>.

partly implemented recommendations by 31 March 2023 in its latest compliance report.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of **fundamental rights**, although the formal framework is in place, exercising these rights in practice is often far from satisfactory. Individual cases of verbal and physical threats, intimidation, and violence against journalists, protesters, and civil society organisations remain a source of concern, especially at the local level.<sup>9</sup> MPs continue to comment publicly on ongoing court proceedings and to attack individual judges and prosecutors, often continuing their accusations in the media – usually without any further evidence – and are rarely sanctioned. Although the Commissioner for Equality was re-elected through an urgent procedure in November 2020 and the percentage of fulfilment of her recommendations remains high, hate speech, threats and violence continue to target human rights defenders and LGBTIQ persons, and there have been several attacks and threats against migrants organised by extremist and far-right groups, as well as attacks based on hatred and ethnic identity.<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, despite women leading a number of ministries, institutions and organisations, and the third term of Ana Brnabić as the Prime Minister, the role of women in governmental decision-making processes remains ambiguous.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CINS) concluded that although domestic violence is on the rise according to the number of victims, the annual amount of criminal charges is dropping.<sup>12</sup> This nevertheless also points

---

<sup>8</sup> GRECO, “Corruption prevention in respect of members of parliament, judges and prosecutors. Second Interim Compliance Report: Serbia.” 25 March 2022. Online at <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680a5ff19>.

<sup>9</sup> Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2022: Serbia, online at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2022>.

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, “Serbia 2021 Report.” October 19, 2021, for download at [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2021\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2021_en).

<sup>11</sup> Zorana Dimitrijevic: Zastupljenost žena u vladi Srbije: Korak ka rodnoj ravnopravnosti ili marketinški potez?, *European Western Balkans*, online at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/zastupljenost-zena-u-vladi-srbije-korak-ka-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti-ili-marketinski-potez/>.

<sup>12</sup> Jovana Tomić: Nasilje u porodici sve prisutnije, ali broj krivičnih prijava opada, *CINS*, online at <https://www.cins.rs/nasilje-u-porodici-sve-prisutnije-ali-broj-krivicnih-prijava-opada/>.

toward the larger mistrust in the institutions, and the confidence of women and children to search for help.

In regard to **security**, Serbia has achieved some progress in the fight against organised crime, terrorism, narcotics and human trafficking. Nevertheless, as in other cases, this progress does not reflect a structural approach. Notorious in this respect are the more recent Jovanjica affair, the Belivuk and Šarić cases, which do not demonstrate a clear systematic attempt to fight organized crime but rather links between the fight against organized crime and intra-party conflicts.<sup>13</sup> The fight against organised crime is further hindered by frequent instances of tampering with evidence, intimidation of witnesses and even police officials, jeopardising the investigation by publishing information in the pro-governmental press, smear campaigns in the tabloid newspapers, and also the public discussions on the details of the cases in parliament or on television.

Although the PrEUgovor Alarm report notes that there has been significant success in battling human trafficking and terrorism, it also points out the lack of strategic engagement in the fight against organised crime, interference in the processes by government executives, and the non-transparency of results. The report also concludes that while there has been some progress in terms of dealing with human trafficking, a strategic and operative following of EU frameworks should be a priority for the upcoming period.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Osvrt na 2020: Ključni događaji u vezi sa korupcijom i kriminalom, *KRIK*, online at <https://www.krik.rs/osvrt-na-2020-kljucni-dogadjaji-u-vezi-sa-korupcijom-i-kriminalom/>.

Jelena Veljković: Tužilac zbog moguće opstrukcije traži spajanje predmeta Jovanjica 1 i 2. *BIRN*, online at <https://birn.rs/tuzilac-zbog-moguće-opstrukcije-trazi-spajanje-predmeta-jovanjica-1-i-2/>.

Ivana Jeremić: Gang Leader's Rise, Fall Paints Damning Picture of Serbia, *Balkan Insight*, online at <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/22/gang-leaders-rise-fall-paints-damning-picture-of-serbia/>.

Sasa Dragojlo: Serbia Court Annuls Verdict Against Saric for Drug Smuggling, *Balkan Insight*, online at <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/06/16/serbia-court-annuls-verdict-against-saric-for-drug-smuggling/>.

<sup>14</sup> Izveštaj koalicije prEUgovor o napretku Srbije u klasteru 1 - maj 2022., PrEUgovor, online at <https://preugovor.org/Alarm-izvestaji/1746/Izvestaj-koalicije-prEUgovor-o-napretku-Srbije-u-shtml>.

The situation regarding **media freedom** in Serbia continues to be worrying. A recent example is the decision of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) to grant national frequencies to the same four pro-government television channels (B92, Happy, Pink and Prva) which had them in the previous period and which are documented by REM itself as not fulfilling their obligations. Although it was preceded by an open call, during which the REM was approached by fourteen applicants, this independent regulatory body granted national frequency to the same four channels mentioned above. Consequently, the decision was followed by a lawsuit by the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation and CRTA against REM for granting the frequencies to channels which had failed to comply with the criteria in the previous period.<sup>15</sup> Another example are the attempts of majority state-owned Telekom Srbija to achieve dominance on the media and cable network market and push out their competitor United Group, which owns and broadcasts main critical news channels in the country, N1 and Nova S. Aside from regime-absorbed local media outlets, the television channels with a national frequency as well as most daily newspapers (including the widely available tabloids) are mostly aligned with the governmental power structures.

In the light of these developments, the media monitoring report of the European University Institute and Centre for Media Pluralism and the Media Freedom Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies categorised the fundamental protection and political independence of Serbian media as “medium risk”, while market plurality and social inclusiveness as “high risk”.<sup>16</sup> Serbia recorded improvements

---

<sup>15</sup> „Slavko Ćuruvija“ i Crta podnele tužbu protiv REM zbog nacionalnih frekvencija, *N1*, online at <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/slavko-curuvija-i-crta-podnele-tuzbu-protiv-rem-zbog-nacionalnih-frekvencija/>.

<sup>16</sup>Irina Milutinović: Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era, Application of the media pluralism monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia & Turkey in the year 2020, Country report: Serbia, European University Institute 2021, online at, [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/71966/serbia\\_results\\_mpm\\_2021\\_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/71966/serbia_results_mpm_2021_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

on the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index in 2022, due to change of methodology, but the 2022 report still points out that there is a cause for distress. “Award-winning, quality journalism, which investigates crime and corruption, is caught between rampant fake news and propaganda. While the legal framework is solid, journalists are threatened by political pressures and impunity of crimes committed against them.”<sup>17</sup>

Aside from these structural obstacles prohibiting the media landscape from exercising a control function against executive

**Aside from these structural obstacles prohibiting the media landscape from exercising a control function against executive and legislative branches of power, hate speech and discriminatory terminology are not only used but also tolerated.**

and legislative branches of power, hate speech and discriminatory terminology are not only used but also tolerated. Smear campaigns, verbal and physical attacks, and unfounded accusations against journalists, NGOs, and CSOs are common. In comparison with outlets closely aligned with the regime which dominate conventional, electronic, and digital media, independent media play only a peripheral role.

## Serbia as an example of the EU’s failed conditionality?

The continued democratic backsliding in Serbia has been noted with concern also by the EU institutions. Apart from the European Commission’s annual report on Serbia which warns about the state of the rule of law and democratic standards, the European Parliament adopted in July 2021 a resolution on Serbia in which the MEPs condemn concrete practices by the Serbian government leading to undermining the rule of law and EU values.<sup>18</sup> The European Parliament further

---

<sup>17</sup> Reporters Without Borders Index, <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2022>.

<sup>18</sup> European Parliament resolution of 6 July 2022 on the 2021 Commission Report on Serbia, online at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0284\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0284_EN.html).

addresses the approach of the government and president Vučić during the COVID-19 crisis when they disproportionately praised the assistance and purchases of medical equipment and vaccines from China and Russia, while criticizing the EU, and the document further explicitly mentions the conditionality tied to the EU funds available to Serbia.

Despite this acknowledgment of the deteriorating situation in Serbia, the EU Member States did not act upon the assessment by European Commission or European Parliament nor upon warnings coming from the civil society in Serbia. On the contrary, last year the EU agreed to open the Cluster 4 in accession negotiations dealing with the green agenda and sustainable connectivity. This cluster is comprised of four negotiating chapters: Chapter 14 on Transport policy, Chapter 15 on Energy, Chapter 21 on Trans-European networks, and Chapter 27 on the Environment and climate change. The decision was widely criticized by civil society and nongovernmental experts because it was adopted while the country had a parliament without opposition and environmental protests were held across Serbia.<sup>19</sup>

Only Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and Serbia's refusal to join EU sanctions against the Russian regime led to a harsher stance of EU Member States towards the Serbian government. Some experts and part of the European Parliament called for freezing accession negotiations, and the pressure on Belgrade increased significantly. It was clearly communicated that in the EU's view the long-overlooked alignment with the EU's foreign policy, a condition for EU accession under the negotiation Chapter 31, had been elevated in importance and together with the Fundamentals is now at the centre of Serbia's EU accession

---

<sup>19</sup> Opening of the "green" Cluster – Proof of progress or an undeserved award for Serbia?, *European Western Balkans*, online at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/12/29/opening-of-the-green-cluster-a-proof-of-progress-or-an-undeserved-award-for-serbia/>.

process. However, concrete actions from the Union are still lacking and while no progress has been achieved in the accession negotiations, mostly due to the lack of willingness on the Serbian side, there has neither been any visible sign of the

**the long-overlooked alignment with the EU's foreign policy, a condition for EU accession under the negotiation Chapter 31, had been elevated in importance and together with the Fundamentals is now at the centre of Serbia's EU accession process.**

EU drawing consequences (e.g. in reduction of funds or application of the reversibility principle in the negotiations). The European Commission report from 2022 noted “backsliding” in Chapter 31, which is the first time that backsliding was officially recorded in any of the negotiating chapters.

Existing research has noted and analysed the connection between “stabilitocracy” and the EU's failing conditionality.<sup>20</sup> The recent publication by the Dutch Clingendael Institute identified eight shortcomings in the EU enlargement policy: too technical approach; lack of clarity on rule of law conditions; inadequate reporting; failure to act upon standstill or backlash; failure to reward progress; predominantly leader-oriented approach; party political affiliations; and lack of timelines in the process.<sup>21</sup> Despite the decision to apply the new methodology also to Serbia, the EU's approach so far has not changed and continues to solidify the state capture in several ways. The opening of Cluster 4 in the context of serious environmental issues and a parliament without opposition could be viewed as rewarding only technical progress on Serbia's side, with some believing it represented more of a sign of new momentum in the enlargement

---

<sup>20</sup> Solveig Richter and Natasha Wunsch, “Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans.” *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 1 (2020): 42, Marko Kmezić and Florian Bieber, “The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion,” *The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group*, March 1, 2017, Wouter Zweers et al., “The EU as a promoter of democracy or ‘stabilitocracy’ in the Western Balkans?,” *The Clingendael Institute*, February 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Wouter Zweers et al., “The EU as a promoter of democracy or ‘stabilitocracy’...”, 12-16.

policy than an acknowledgment of Serbia's progress.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the European Commission's progress report on Serbia in 2021<sup>23</sup> had a disproportionately softer tone considering the deteriorating political reality. Furthermore, just two weeks before the publication of the 2021 Enlargement Package, open accusations of Commissioner Várhelyi siding with the regime in Serbia appeared.<sup>24</sup>

The political endorsement of Serbian leadership by some European leaders was present also before the 2022 elections in the country. When Angela Merkel was the German Chancellor, she was criticized by the civil society for her unjustified praise of Vučić. Similarly, Johannes Hahn, the former EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, showed at times unfounded optimism towards the situation in Serbia. Furthermore, an illiberal alliance was formed in 2020 consisting of Victor Orbán, Aleksandar Vučić, former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, and former Slovenian PM Janez Janša. The group was most visible and vocal during Slovenia's EU Presidency in the autumn of 2021 on several occasions, for example at the Bled Strategic Forum 2021 or the Demography Summit (together with the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Milorad Dodik). The EU members of this alliance repeatedly called upon the EU to speed up Serbia's EU accession, seemingly oblivious of the existing problems as well as better progress achieved by other countries in the Western Balkans and expressed their unconditional support to Serbian leaders.

---

<sup>22</sup> Opening of the "green" Cluster, *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/12/29/opening-of-the-green-cluster-a-proof-of-progress-or-an-undeserved-award-for-serbia/>.

<sup>23</sup> European Commission, Serbia 2021 Report, October 19, 2021, for download at [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2021\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2021_en).

<sup>24</sup> Zosia Wanat, Lili Bayer, Olivér Várhelyi: Europe's under-fire gatekeeper, *Politico*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/oliver-varhelyi-eu-commissioner-enlargement-western-balkans-serbia-human-rights-democracy-rule-of-law/>.

All the above-described shortcomings in the EU's approach to Serbia and its obligations under the accession process

**The EU is continuously failing at addressing the democratic backsliding in Serbia and openly naming those responsible.** unintentionally contribute to preserving of the state capture and the phenomenon of "stabilitocracy". The EU is continuously failing at addressing the democratic backsliding in Serbia and openly naming those responsible. Instead, some of the EU leaders and especially some EPP party members cater their relationship with Aleksandar Vučić, with the political and civil society opposition feeling left aside. While there are undoubtedly many critical voices within the EU calling out the regime in Serbia and for Union's tougher approach toward the country's leaders, clear and resolute actions are still lacking.

## Conclusion

While the enlargement policy remains the most effective tool the EU has to enhance democratization in its neighbourhood, the normative aspect of the policy seems to be shaky, if not failing. In the past decade, the EU often supported Western Balkan leaders with autocratic tendencies, providing their regimes with legitimacy and funding used to only strengthen their grip on power, at the cost of actual reform and democratization.

Civil society and non-governmental organizations from the region and the rest of Europe have been warning about the consequences of the EU not fixing its approach to the enlargement and the EU itself has made some attempts to address the problem. The new enlargement methodology puts a clear emphasis on the "fundamentals", the democratic governance, rule of law and human rights and fundamental freedoms, and while its provisions are promising, the actual effects are still awaited.

With the war in Ukraine and the unprecedented need within the EU and beyond to find unity, Serbia's ambiguous stance on its foreign policy orientation as well as

the nature of its internal regime has become a pressing issue that cannot be ignored any longer. Furthermore, as new ideas on the integration of European countries are emerging, it is time to ask whether Serbia is showing a credible commitment to its European future and whether its accession process still has relevance. The new methodology provides more interesting rewards for the countries which are progressing well but also forms of “punishment” for countries derailing from their European and democratic paths. If the EU is serious about making the enlargement process credible and delivering, it should explore the practical application of these principles.

Serbia’s regime has repeatedly proven itself as an unreliable partner for the EU, recent examples being the biased presentation of the assistance provided during the COVID-19 crisis and the reluctance to align its foreign policy with the one of the EU even in the context of a

**The EU has not been successful nor very active in combating these negative narratives and in consequence, the popularity of the EU among the Serbian population is steadily declining.**

war on the European continent. Similarly, the discourse around the EU created by Serbian officials is alarming in its misinterpretation of facts and even hostility. The EU has not been successful nor very active in combating these negative narratives and in consequence, the popularity of the EU among the Serbian population is steadily declining. In 2022 it was recorded for the first time than there are more than 50% of Serbian citizens who would oppose EU membership. This can be seen as a consequence of EU’s pressure on Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia, but it certainly represents an accumulated effect of years-long anti-EU and pro-Russian propaganda promoted by members of the government and key pro-government tabloids.

Unfortunately, the mainstream media in Serbia are complicit in creating this atmosphere as the biggest media outlets are financially dependent on the government and serve as its mouthpiece. In this environment, there is almost no

objective reporting on the EU and most importantly on Serbia's EU accession process and the actual reasons why it is stalling, only being further misused by the government to blame the EU and avoid its own responsibility.

## Recommendations

- The EU representatives have to be more outspoken about the problems with democracy in Serbia, clearly stating what they are and naming those responsible. A more objective and honest assessment of Serbia's (lack of) progress should be provided also during joint press conferences aimed at the domestic audience. Repeated strong messages that Serbia has to align with EU foreign policy are a clear precedent that pressure can be applied even without the use of formal mechanisms.
- The EU Member States together with the European Commission should explore more the ways in which the provisions of the new methodology ("carrots and sticks") can be applied. (For example, further progress on more "technical" chapters should be put on hold until there is tangible progress on the "fundamentals". However, this also needs to be clearly communicated, especially towards the Serbian public.
- A more profound monitoring and reporting on Serbia's progress on the "fundamentals" by the European Commission is needed together with clearer language and articulation of concrete steps which are expected to address the problems. Special reports such as "Priebe report" in North Macedonia could be useful in this regard, especially focusing on democracy and media freedom.
- The EU should differentiate its approach to partners in Serbia and involve more local civil society, NGOs and pro-democratic political opposition.

- Independent media need to be supported more robustly to gain more space in the media landscape in Serbia. However, this needs to be complemented with pressure on the government to enable functioning of a media market and establishing genuine media pluralism.
- Simultaneously, the EU representatives (Commissioners, EUSR Lajčák, representatives of the country presiding in the EU, Head of EU Delegation to Serbia etc.) need to be more visible in the public space in the country and use this space to clearly address the main problems in Serbia's EU accession.
- The EU should be more rigorous in requirements of the visibility of all investments and insist on transparency. More disclosed information on investments in the country would help not only to increase the visibility of the EU but also to expose the relative economic importance and actual influence of other actors.
- The EU should strengthen its monitoring as regards the use of funds from the EU financial instruments in order to assess whether the resources are used in line with EU goals. Civil society and non-governmental organizations as well as independent media would be crucial partners for the EU on this.

## EUROPEUM

**EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy** is a non-profit, non-political and independent think tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. **EUROPEUM** contributes to the strengthening of democracy, security, stability, freedom and solidarity across Europe and to the active participation of the Czech Republic in the European Union. **EUROPEUM** conducts original research, organises public events and educational activities, and formulates new views and recommendations to improve domestic and European policies.

