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Belgrade needs a new foreign policy

Serbia is moving closer to Russia and China. The accession candidate is on a collision course with the EU

In 2024, almost a quarter of a century after the last major conflict in the Balkans, Serbia is still captive of the disastrous policies of the country's former president Slobodan Milošević that led to the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and ultimately the loss of the de facto sovereignty over its former autonomous province Kosovo. As a consequence, Serbia's foreign policy is still held hostage by the Kosovo issue. Such policy puts Serbia on an inevitable collision course with its proclaimed goal of EU membership and needs to be changed.

In the early days of President Aleksandar Vučić's rule, Serbia's foreign policy was characterised as one of balancing between the East and the West. Ever since the fraudulent December 2023 elections, Serbia has been increasingly sliding towards Russia and China. Although officially presented as a strategy to defend Serbia's national interests, the main driving force behind Belgrade's foreign policy approach remains to secure the particularistic interests of the ruling party, in other words, to secure international support for keeping the present regime in power as long as possible. Like other ministries and independent state institutions, Serbian foreign policy, too, has been captured by the regime. Twelve years of Vučić's rule prove that a change in the foreign policy course is only possible under a new democratic regime.

To build a credible alternative to the present regime, democratic forces in Serbia need to define their foreign policy strategy having at its centre a change in four crucial areas: Kosovo, the future EU integration of the country, the place of Serbia in the European security architecture and relations with other countries in the Western Balkans.

A full normalisation of relations with Kosovo

When it comes to Kosovo, the future democratic government in Serbia should do a total restart to the normalisation talks with Pristina. This

means ending the daily sabre-rattling through Vučić's government-sponsored anti-Albanian propaganda. To produce lasting results, normalisation talks must be conducted in good faith creating a climate of trust between the two parties. When negotiating, unlike the present government, a new democratic government should exercise absolute restraint when it comes to possible nationalistic moves coming from Kosovo. Normalisation also requires honouring all agreements made by previous Serbian governments, meaning not opposing Kosovo's membership in international organisations, including its future EU membership. A full normalisation equally intends taking big internal political risks.

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However, no political force in Serbia can accept a *de jure* recognition of Kosovo's independence now or in the foreseeable future. The propaganda campaign led by the present regime in the past 12 years of its rule created a social climate whereby including a *de jure* recognition of Kosovo in the program of any political party would be tantamount to political suicide. Demanding a formal recognition of Kosovo's independence by Serbia would present an unnecessary national humiliation that would permanently derail Belgrade's EU integration path. This, of course, creates a huge challenge to the present principle of the EU not wanting to import new members with unresolved territorial and sovereignty issues.

Alignment with the EU's CFSP

Another obstacle to Serbia's future EU membership is its lack of willingness to align with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Serbia remains isolated in Europe, refusing to introduce sanctions to Putin's Russia because of its aggression on Ukraine. The EU and the US have been turning a blind eye to Belgrade's non-alignment with the sanctions mainly because of its exports of ammunition to Ukraine. The foreign policy of a future democratic Serbia must be built on an understanding that alignment with the EU's CFSP is not only a formal pre-condition for progress in the accession talks but also a necessary tool to protect other country's national interests. Serbia cannot be perceived as Putin's Trojan horse in Europe by the majority of the EU member states, for the political cost of non-alignment directly weakens its position in the negotiations with the authorities in Pristina.

As a result of the agreement with Belgrade, the talks on the normalisation of relations with Kosovo have been moved away from the auspices of the UN to that of the EU. Thus, playing on the Russian or Chinese card bears few dividends for Serbia which wishes to remain on the EU membership track. It is much more important for Belgrade to solidify relations with its European and American allies, many of which are also members of NATO.

The Western Balkan Pact

Due to the 1999 NATO bombing, Belgrade has a thorny relationship with the military alliance. In 2007, Serbia's parliament adopted a Resolution in which it proclaimed Serbia a military-neutral country. The passage of time did not heal the wounds amongst the population. On the contrary: Today, quite paradoxically, Serbs are significantly more opposed to the country's NATO membership than they were in the years after the bombing. This is largely due to a constant daily drip of anti-Western propaganda spread to pro-government media (which hold more than 90 per cent of the media share) ever since Vučić came to power in 2012. As a consequence, younger generations are significantly more right-wing and anti-Western than the generation of their parents. This makes Serbia's formal adherence to the Transatlantic military alliance politically unimaginable, even though it may be in the country's national interest to join the block.

A solution to the problem would be for a new democratic government in Serbia to start the initiative of expanding the already existing regional economic cooperation with other countries of the Western Balkans within the Berlin process to the sphere of defence. Building a regional military alliance would give all the countries of the Western Balkans mutual safety assurances. Most importantly, it would reassure others that no future government in Belgrade presents a threat. On the other hand, it would indirectly place Serbia under the NATO and European security umbrella.

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When it comes to relations with other countries of the Western Balkans, any government in Belgrade is politically bound to look after the interests of the Serbian community living in them, along with the interest to keep its dominant position in the economy of the region. To achieve this, a new democratic government in Serbia would have to abandon the current regime's policy, dubbed 'Serbian

World', realising that it hurts relations with its neighbours and, ultimately, similar to the 1990s nationalistic policy of 'Greater Serbia', works to the detriment of the Serbs living in these countries.

Ever since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Serbia is constantly tempted by a revisionist desire that all Serbs live in the same state again. Abandoning the policy of attempting to change the internationally recognised borders in the region since it would inevitably lead to a new war, the new political leadership in Belgrade must recognise that only the EU offers a ready-made solution for all Serbs to once again live under the same political umbrella. The best way for Serbia to reach this goal is to work through the capitals of the neighbouring countries, not its allied (often irredentist) parties in them.



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