

FUTURE IMAGE OF EUROPE: PERSPECTIVES ON THE EU ENLARGEMENT OF SERBIA

Aleksandra Plazinić¹, Mitar Božić²

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore different outlooks of the future of the European Union, taking into the account EU enlargement project and current negotiations process with Serbia. The analysis focuses on the perspectives from the officials of the European Commission and the Republic of Serbia, as the key actors in the negotiations process of EU memberships of Serbia, as well as the perceptions of the Serbian citizens. Therefore, the purpose of the paper is to identify the motives and currents key topics in the negotiations process, which could affect the future image of Europe. Key words: enlargement process, negotiations process, EU membership, Serbia

INTRODUCTION

The European Union and Serbia entered the new phase of the enlargement process, with the start of the negotiations talks for the EU membership. Even though the negotiations process represents the final step in the final accession of the EU membership, the outlooks of European Commission and Serbia sometimes differ in the final membership of the EU perspectives. Also, the prospects of the Serbian citizens' play a major role in the negotiations process, as the citizens will make the final decision of Serbia becoming part of the EU on the envisaged referendum.

Outlook from the Republic of Serbia

Perspective of the Government of Serbia

On 14th October 2004, National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia adopted Resolution on the EU accession, which officially confirmed the European Union path for Serbia, as the strategic orientation. The Resolution was the result of the high commitment of the political elite for European integration, as underlined by the Parliament of Serbia: "full agreement about joining the European Union, as the highest and undisputed political authority" as well as its "readiness to meet the political conditions for joining the European Union"³

- 1 PhD candidate, European Center for Peace and Development- (ECPD), United Nations University for Peace, Belgrade, Serbia, aplazinic@msn.com
- 2 PhD candidate, Faculty of Applied management, Economy and Finance, University of Business Academy, Belgrade, Serbia, mitarb@hotmail.com
- 3 SEIO - News - Resolution On The EU Association, <http://www.seio.gov.rs/eng/news/8/189/335/details/resolution-on-the-eu-associati> (accessed 30th July, 2017).

(Dragišić, 2008) The strategic approach of all elected Serbian Governments until today follow the set strategic orientation of EU membership. However, the commitment in the actions of the Government of Serbia was not always followed, as demonstrated in today's negotiations process.

Almost two years after the official launch of the negotiations process, the Chapter 32 Financial Control and Chapter 35- Other business- normalization of relationship between Belgrade and Pristina were opened at the Second Intergovernmental meeting held on 14th December 2015 in Brussels. The result was marked as "the historical event" when the European Union became a reality for Serbia, as stated by the Prime Minister Vučić⁴. He further stressed that the goal for Serbia is to become EU member, following the even greater goal of alignment with European values and improvement of the quality of life in Serbia. Further, Serbia's Prime Minister Vučić and Foreign Affairs Minister Dačić stated that the Serbia is ready to complete negotiations by the end of 2019.⁵

After the positive attitudes regarding the opening of the first chapters, already in February 2016, European Union was not seen as the attractive goal, as expressed by Prime Minister Vučić who stated that the European Union "has lost its magic power." This statement was also articulated in the context of concerns of the UK leaving the European Union, which could negatively affect the citizens of Serbia regarding the EU membership, and the difficulty of migrant crises that requires management, by Serbian authorities. Despite seeing the European Union as not appealing objective as before, Prime Minister assessed that the European Union represents a good option for Serbia. Also, the determination of cooperation with Russia was emphasized.

Further, after the opening of ten negotiations chapters, the Government officials raised requests regarding the readiness the European Union to accept Serbia as the member. President of Serbia Vučić and Minister of EU integrations Joksimović, requested the European Union to provide the plan of Serbian membership, as Serbia could be ready in 2020-2021, but the Treaty of accession has to be ratified in the Parliaments of the each Member State⁶.

Russia as the alternative

Governments in Serbia adopted the EU orientation and until the end of 2012 followed the postulate as "Europe has no alternative." However, the alternatives to the EU emerged, as particular cooperation with Russia, which citizens perceive to have more tangible effects than with the European Union (as per Public Opinion-Russia is regarded as the primary donor in Serbia).

The dedication to the fulfilling of conditions for EU membership continued to be a priority for the Serbian Government from the beginning of the negotiations in 2014 until today, as confirmed by the political parties and identified in the political documents. However, the tendency to balance between EU Membership and cooperation with Russia is present, too. In the economic context, Free Trade Agreement with Russia is still in force, Russian investment by Gazpromneft and past collaboration in the South Stream project

4 Politika (2015) Nova poglavlja u srpskoj istoriji (New chapters in Serbian history) <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/345351/Politika/Aselborn-i-Vucic-otvorili-meduvladinu-konferenciju>

5 Second Serbia and EU Intergovernmental Accession Conference, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/statements/14953-second-serbia-eu-intergovernmental-accession-conference-held>

6 Blic (2017) Joksimović: Naš plan je da do 2021. budemo spremni za EU (Joksimovic: Our plan is to be ready for the EU by 2021) <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/joksimovic-nas-plan-je-da-do-2021-budemo-spremni-za-eu/bv9c8s7>

were main points of a close partnership between Serbia and Russia. In the political context, Russia is perceived as the supporter of Serbia with its stance of not recognizing the independence of Kosovo and acting as the main supporter of the UN Security Council. Further, Russia is highly valued in the eyes of Serbian citizens as they perceived Russia to be the primary donor and the almost the same number of citizens would support Russia as the European Union⁷. All the Governments of Serbia since 2000 were confirming their EU orientation and at the same time aim to keep close cooperation with Russia. This trend continues even after Serbia started accession process with the European Union.

The position of close collaboration with Russia of the President of Serbia Vučić was never hidden, as he continues to point to the doctrine of trustworthy and open cooperation with Russia, and friendships with China. At the same time in the latest statement, the great importance of economic cooperation with the EU was praised, as well recognizing Russia for cooperation in international trade⁸. This approach complies with the agreed stance of the Government is to keep close collaboration with Russia and at the same time continue the EU accession process; overlooking the fact those two foreign policy goals could be in a collision. The decision of the Government not to impose sanctions on Russia represents the importance of strategic partnership with Russia, which could also interfere with the EU membership, as expressed by 2016 Common Foreign Security Policy, which expects Serbia to align its foreign policy with the EU one (2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy)

However, the answer regarding the definitive decision of Serbia regarding dilemma Russia or Serbia cannot be heard from the political elites. The response of the newly appointed Prime Minister was interpreted as the sign of Serbia choosing EU with the momentous If we are forced to choose between EU and Russia, we will choose EU, as reported by Bloomberg Media⁹. Talking about Russia and EU, she stated that the EU is a place where Serbia is going, acknowledging strong emotional ties with Russia due to tradition, culture, and religion which are present in Serbian public, however pointing that EU is Serbia's strategic partner. However, this statement caused the great surprise to the public and resulted in the end in justification to the Russian Ambassador in Belgrade, to whom Prime Minister Brnabić handed out the stenographic notes from the interview, assuring him that she was wrongly interpreted¹⁰. Therefore, the ambiguity of the Serbian foreign policy regarding EU and Russia is confirmed.

Perspectives from the Serbian citizens

When asked How do you see the future of the European Union, in 2014¹¹ almost one third (28%) of the citizens of Serbia believed that the European Union would encounter

7 Blic (2017) Istraživanje Rusija ili Evropska Unija, Ovako bi izabrali građani Srbije (Research Russia or the EU, This is how citizens of Serbia would choose) <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/istrazivanje-rusija-ili-evropska-unija-ovako-bi-izabrali-gradani-srbije/neyxxhx>

8 Sputnik (2017) : Prodavali su nam trik da su Rusi dobri samo u umetnosti (Vučić: They were selling us a trick that Russians are only good in art) <https://rs.sputniknews.com/politika/20170710111873821-Vucic-rusija-amerika-odnos/>

9 Bloomberg (2017) Serbia will choose EU over Russia if forced, Premier says, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-07-03/serbia-will-pick-eu-over-russia-if-made-to-choose-premier-says>

10 N1 (2017) Zaharova: Ana Brnabic predala Čepurinu transkript intervjuja za Blumberg (Zaharova: Ana Brnabic handed over the interview transcript for Bloomberg to Cepurin) <http://rs.n1info.com/a281360/Vesti/Vesti/Ana-Brnabic-predala-Cepurinu-transkript-intervjuja-za-Blumberg.html>

11 Kancelarija za Evropske integracije Srbije (2014). *Istraživanje javnog mnjenja, decembar 2014, Evropska orijentacija građana Srbije*. Beograd: Republika Srbija, Vlada, Kancelarija za evropske integracije

bigger problems in the future and probably will completely close, or even disintegrate, more than further expand and strengthen. In the same year, only 13% of the citizens believed that the European Union will overcome current problems and that it will further expand, while 22% does not have a stance on this. However, 38% of the citizens still believed that the EU would overcome current problems. Conversely, 11% of them believed that despite this, EU would change and Serbia's membership will not be significant to Serbia as today, while 27% believe that the European Union will be more closed in the future and will not be open for the new members.

In 2015¹², distrust in the EU enlargement project of the citizens grew to 34% and in 2016, slightly fell to 33%, representing that today even more than third of citizens believe that EU will close or disintegrate and face more problems in the future. Also, the number of the ones thinking that EU will overcome current challenges, but will not expand, or Serbian membership will not have the same value, grew to 40% of citizens in 2015 and to 45% in 2016¹³.

Accordingly, the data represent that citizens have less trust in the future of the enlargement project and openness of the European Union in the future.

European Union outlook

The commitment to the overall enlargement project by the European Union can be probed. Despite the fact that the European Union has never given up on the enlargement, the introduction of the new institutional setting of the Directorate General responsible for enlargement, with the statements so of the High European Union officials point to the enlargement fatigue. In 2014, European Commission Directorial General Enlargement was re-organized and placed under new formation DG NEAR, which responsibility is neighborhood policy and enlargement negotiations. With this formation, there is no exclusivity of focus on the expansion process by the European Union as it becomes the part of the larger strategy dealing with, the wider geographical area within and outside Europe. (Minić, 2015) Also, this approach can be defined as shifting from enlargement topic to address security and stability threats identified near the borders of the European Union, which feeds into the overall Global EU Strategy (Global Strategy, 2016)

The particular concern regarding the enlargement fatigue was raised as a result of the inaugural speech of European Commission President Juncker. He stated, "The EU needs to take a break from enlargement so that we can consolidate what has been achieved among the 28". (Juncker, 2014). As a result of the need to address internal challenges with the EU, Juncker stated that there would be no further enlargement in the next five years. Even though, he also pointed that ongoing negotiations will continue and highlighted the importance of the Western Balkans keeping the European perspective; the hope of soon membership despite the possible was shaken. The speech raised considerable doubt in the authority of enlargement process, in particular among countries which started negotiations process as Serbia and aiming to be ready to join the EU by 2020. This stance was reinforced in 2016, in Juncker's annual addressing to the European Parliament, when the focus of the European

12 Kancelarija za Evropske integracije Srbije (2015). *Istraživanje javnog mnjenja, decembar 2015*, Evropska orijentacija građana Srbije. Beograd: Republika Srbija, Vlada, Kancelarija za evropske integracije

13 Kancelarija za Evropske integracije Srbije (2016). *Istraživanje javnog mnjenja, decembar 2016*, Evropska orijentacija građana Srbije. Beograd: Republika Srbija, Vlada, Kancelarija za evropske integracije

Union on the inward matters is confirmed rather than a commitment to the enlargement process when there was no mentioning of the enlargement what so ever¹⁴.

With the Thessaloniki Agenda in 2003 the stability and association process has started for the Western Balkan countries; with the goal to ensure security in the Balkans due to the past conflicts, and in addition to offer European perspective to the Western Balkan countries. (Lopandić, 2007) However, the continuation of the dialogue on the higher political level did not follow. As the similar format of inclusion of six countries of the Western Balkan, European Union introduced Berlin process in August 2014, which represents conferences between Western Balkan countries and the most interested countries of the EU (Germany, Austria, France and from 2015 Italy). With this action, as noticed by Minić (2015) the European Union provided mitigation of the statements of President Juncker that there will be no enlargement by the year 2020.

Still, the end of the enlargement and negotiations process of Serbia has never been clearly voiced out by the European Union. When negotiations development has been praised, the EU officials pointed to the made progress using the analogy of important or breakthrough steps, at the Intergovernmental conferences¹⁵ however not indicating how many steps are there or offering the exact timing of the finalization of the membership for Serbia. Further, the assessment of the normalization of relations with Kosovo as it does not provide exact criteria is usually at the discretion of the individual Member States opinions, which adds to the ambiguity of the EU approach and uncertainty to the overall negotiations process. (Mišćević, 2015)

Chapter 35 is seen as the crucial one, from the both perspective of Serbia and the European Union. As the position of the European Union reads if progress in the normalization of relations with Kosovo significantly lags behind progress in the negotiations overall, the Commission could slow down the negotiations process, by not recommending the opening or the closing of the negotiations chapters. Also, the common position of the EU envisages the regular monitoring twice a year and potential changes of the interim benchmarks according to the results of the dialogue with Pristina (Council of the European Union, 2015) Therefore the demonstrated approach of the European Union in the negotiations process with Serbia is dominated by the progress on Chapter 35, without placing the same emphasis on the reform process or prosperity of Serbian citizens. Therefore, the policy of EU conditionality is still very much present in the negotiations process, as a tool to achieve the EU goals of peace, security, and stability, stated at the Global Strategy and demonstrated through evaluation of progress in Chapter 35-normalization with Kosovo and management the migration crises.

Conclusion

While the Republic of Serbia officially follows the strategic EU orientation of Serbia, preparing for the EU membership in 2020, there are no official confirmations from the EU side of the finalization of the negotiations process. The evaluation of the EU regarding the

14 Balkan Insight (2016) Juncker's Silence on Enlargement Alarms Balkan Watchers

15 Press Release (2015) *Second meeting of the Accession Conference with Serbia at Ministerial level - First two chapters opened*, Council of the European Union, Brussels,

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Serbia's is driven by the assessment of Chapter 35, motivated by the fulfillment of the EU security goals. At the same time, Serbia keeps the close relationship with Russia, which hinders the alignment with the EU policies. On the other hand, Serbian citizens display a lack of enthusiasm for the future of the European Union and the enlargement process, which does not add to the current positive outlook of the Serbia's EU accession.

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