

“The fear that Serbia, after countless decades of armed conflicts, could never reconcile with Europe in peace is now a history”

บทคัดย่อ

Post-Yugoslav Serbia: a Time for Peacemaking and European Integration

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ในระยะเวลาเพียงไม่เกิน 20 ปี ภายหลังสิ้นสุดสงครามยูโกสลาฟซึ่งทำให้เชอร์เบียถูกนานาชาติประณามในฐานะประเทศที่ก่อความเสียหายมหาศาลกับประเทศเพื่อนบ้าน เชอร์เบียได้พยายามกลับมาสร้างความสัมพันธ์อันดีกับประเทศเพื่อนบ้านใหม่อีกครั้งควบคู่ไปกับการมุ่งสู่การบูรณาการกับสหภาพยุโรป หนึ่งในสิ่งที่เชอร์เบียประสบความสำเร็จในการทำงานได้รับการยอมรับจากสหภาพยุโรปคือ การเลิกปฏิเสธที่จะยอมรับโดยไม่ในฐานะรัฐอิสระ รวมไปถึงการให้ความร่วมมือของเชอร์เบียในการส่งตัวผู้ต้องหาชาวเชิร์บที่มีความผิดฐานการก่อสิ่งไม่ดีให้กับ คณะกรรมการอาญาระหว่างประเทศสำหรับอดีตยูโกสลาเวีย ณ กรุงเชก ประเทศเนเธอร์แลนด์ ผลคือเชอร์เบียได้รับการอนุมัติสถานะการเป็นประเทศผู้สมัครเข้าสู่สหภาพยุโรปได้สำเร็จในปี ค.ศ.2012 รวมถึงได้เริ่มมีการเจรจากระบวนการเข้าสู่สหภาพยุโรปในต้นปีค.ศ.2014 และมีความเป็นไปได้สูงมากที่จะเข้าร่วมสหภาพยุโรปในปี ค.ศ.2020 นี้ เนื่องด้วยเชอร์เบียได้มีความพยายามที่จะสร้างสันติภาพให้เกิดขึ้นอีกรอบพร้อมกับการบูรณาการกับสหภาพยุโรป ในปัจจุบันชาวเชิร์บส่วนใหญ่จึงสนับสนุนให้ประเทศของตนเข้าสู่สหภาพยุโรป และมองว่าสหภาพยุโรปเป็นหนทางสู่อนาคตที่ดีกว่าสำหรับเชอร์เบีย

Post-Yugoslav Serbia: a Time for Peacemaking and European Integration

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I. Introduction

The concepts of peace and European integration were rarely attributed to pre-2000s Serbia, which was often vilified as a war-hungry nationalist regime that sought to tear Europe apart. The atrocities of World War I and the Yugoslav Wars, both of which Serbia seems to have been held responsible for, still haunt Europe to this very day. Now, almost two decades since the end of the Yugoslav Wars in 1999 post-Yugoslav Serbia seeks to pursue a different path towards its neighbours and Europe. Today violence is never posited as a solution for the Serbs, and Serbia now looks to establish a clear path towards peacemaking and European integration. With the *EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA)* initialled in 2007, subsequent full EU membership candidate status granted in 2012 following the groundbreaking settling of the Kosovo issue, and a predicted accession before 2020, post-Yugoslav Serbia leaves its dark history behind and aims to establish perpetual peace with its neighbours and a closer-than-ever integration with the European Union.

II. Yugoslav Wars: the Balkan Tragedy and Serbia's Recipe for Disaster

Serbian nationalism and ethnic tensions in the Balkans had largely been underestimated before the Yugoslav Wars broke out in 1991. War had always been the solution for the Serb nationalists, who saw that only violence could put an end to the question of ethnic conflicts and reinforce Serbia's position in the Balkans. The horrendous news of systematised rape camps and outrageous massacres in Yugoslavia appalled the world; particularly the European Union, which stood next door to the Yugoslav regime and yet could not prevent the war from erupting, mainly due to its limited capacity of hard power. While the EU's concept of a near-federalist approach towards a union was successful in consolidating peace; Yugoslav Serbia's interpretation of supranational federalism, in which Belgrade stood as the authoritarian hub of all Yugoslavia combined with intense Serbian nationalism was a disaster for Serbia itself and a tragedy for the Yugoslav Balkans. Serbia viewed Kosovan and Croatian separatism from Yugoslavia as a severe threat to its territorial integrity. Fuelled by President Slobodan Milošević's outright nationalist ideology of a unified Yugoslavia under Serbian authority, the Western Balkans was soon filled with bloodsheds¹.

The wars dragged on for almost a decade; and put Serbia's neighbouring countries, most notably Bosnia and Herzegovina and

¹ based on Vesna Pesić, *Serbian Nationalism and the Origins of the Yugoslav Crisis*. (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1996), v-vi, 14-15.

Kosovo, in the darkest straits of the entire history. Finally, it was Serbia that suffered the most. The NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 destroyed not only the lives but also the spirits of the Serbs, who would in time see that violence should never have been deemed a plausible solution to their problems. As the economy of war-torn Serbia and public opinion towards the deadly conflict were on the verge of falling apart in 2000, President Milošević was finally ousted and indicted for war crimes. Wars had exhausted the Serbs, and this time they would choose anything but violence as a solution.

III. Post-Yugoslav Serbia: Time to Make Peace

Overthrow of the Balkan Butcher and the Change of Regime in Serbia

The ousting of President Milošević by the people of Serbia in a series of nationwide protests in 2000 was seen as a prelude to Serbia's moves towards European integration. Referred to as the "Balkan Butcher" for his instigation of brutal ethnic cleansings throughout Yugoslavia, Milošević was charged with war crimes, murders, and electoral fraud, and handed over to the *International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)* in the Hague, Netherlands in 2001. Although Milošević died from a heart attack before his final verdict was due in early 2006, his overthrow and extradition to the ICTY by the Serbs was a milestone for Serbia. For the first time in many decades, Serbia cooperated with the EU on a national issue, and the extradition of Milošević symbolised 'new' Serbia's return to Europe.

As soon as Milošević was out of power; Vojislav Koštunica, the winner of the Yugoslavian general election of 2000 and leader of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, assumed the position of the President of Yugoslavia. The EU, together with the United States, quickly set up a road map for institutional reforms and a path to normalisation of relations with other Balkan countries, with which Serbia willingly complied. The change of the régime in Serbia after Milošević had been extradited was marked for being a change of régime in Serbia without the use of violence or force. With the lifting of U.N. sanctions on Yugoslavia following the general election, Serbia gained an improved reputation and was granted re-entry to many of the trade organisations from which it had been barred during the years of the Yugoslav Wars².

The ‘Kosovo’ Issue and Brussels Agreement: Towards a Normalised Relation

Serbia also demonstrated its commitment towards making peace in a neighbourhood it had once rampaged with military forces. While Serbia officially recognised Montenegro’s declared independence following a referendum in 2006 – a symbolic departure of another once-Yugoslav neighbour from Serbia – Kosovo was by far the best example of a post-Yugoslav country with which Serbia has made tremendous effort to normalise relations. Although Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008 was initially met with opposition from Serbia on grounds in terms of

² based on Gregory L. Schulte. “Regime Change Without Military Force: Lessons from Overthrowing Milošević.” *PRISM* 4, no.2 (2013): 46-50.

legality; Serbia accepted in full the ruling of the International Court of Justice, which ruled that Kosovo's declaration was not in any way a violation of international law. Thanks to the newly elected Serbian government under the leadership of pro-EU MirkoCvetković, the changing sentiments within post-Yugoslav Serbia, and pressure from the EU, where 22 out of 27 had already accepted the independent status on Kosovo; Belgrade gradually began to abandon its tight grip of Kosovo. This would only be one of the first landmark steps in Serbia-Kosovo relations, for since 2008 both countries have been holding talks and negotiations, with the EU present as a mediator. Though Serbia's changed approach in dealing with the issue of Kosovo was in the beginning perceived by some as merely an approach to foster the acceleration of its EU accession process, Belgrade's continued commitment to settle the issue of Kosovo though unprecedented peaceful method finally convinced the EU that the Serbia-Kosovo Balkan grudge now belonged firmly to history. So far, talks have been held in Brussels, Belgium which aim to establish freedom of movement between borders and further cooperation within the EU context. Negotiations have proved satisfactory for both sides, and while Serbia still does not recognise Kosovo as an independent state, it now prefers to use the term 'status neutral' – the term known to be the term denoting EU's achievement in the Serbia-Kosovo *Brussels Agreement*.³ The agreement reached, which allowed Kosovo to take part in all forms

³ based on Filip Ejodus, *The Brussels Agreement and Serbia's National Interests: a Positive Balance Sheet?*. (Belgrade: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2014), 2-3, 7-8.

of regional integration without opposition to its declared independence, has resulted in the elevated status of Serbia in the EU's perception. The Serbs may still have a strong opinion on the Kosovo issue; however, one can be assured that the aggressive "Kosovo is Serbia" policy long pursued in the Milošević era has now died out, and from it comes strong hopes for Serbia's return to Europe⁴.

The EU as a Better Future for the Serbs

Negotiations and promises alone cannot bring about successful membership of the EU. As a government usually represents the general views of the majority in a democratic society, it is the support of the people that truly makes European integration possible. In the case of Serbia; the Serbs have shown quite positive attitudes towards Serbia's EU membership, particularly the younger generation. As in most Western Balkan countries, positive perceptions of the EU are on the rise, including the Serbs'. Even though earlier ICTY proceedings in the Hague proved to be rather unpopular among some Serbs, the general perception of the EU in Serbia remains positive, and support for EU accession continues to exceed the 'against's'. In a nationwide opinion poll conducted by the Serbian European Integration Office in 2012, more Serbs were in favour of

⁴ based on JelenaObradovic-Wochnik, *Serbia, the EU and the Kosovo Issue: No Reason for Pessimism*. (Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2010), 3-4.

⁵ based on GALLUP, "Perceptions of the EU in the Western Balkans," *GALLUPBalan Monitor – Insights and Perceptions: Voices of the Balkans* (2009), http://www.balkan-monitor.eu/files/Gallup_Balkan_Monitor-Focus_On_EU_Perceptions.pdf

Serbia's accession to the EU than those who were not, with 41% going for 'for' and 31% for 'against'. Although one could note there was not much difference between the percentage for 'for' and 'against', it was a good sign of the general attitude of the Serbs towards the EU. The opinion poll also revealed that the top three statements that best described the majority of the Serbs' personal view of the EU were: "Road towards a better future for young people", "More employment opportunities", and "Possibility to travel wherever I want within the EU"⁶. Remarkably, despite the fact that the Euro zone crisis has had a negative impact on Serbia, the general attitudes of the Serbs towards the EU remain positive – a clear indication of Serbia's optimistic path to the EU.

IV. Serbia's Path to EU Integration: Closer-Than-Ever Cooperation

War Criminals Extradited and Visa Liberalisation Realised

Serbia has continued to make efforts to integrate with the EU that are not perceived as concessions. Rather, these efforts are seen as Serbia's clear commitment towards a closer cooperation with the EU and a clear dedication to the pursuance of peacemaking. Earlier enthusiasm from Serbia towards a closer integration with the EU was demonstrated through the establishment of the

⁶ Government of the Republic of Serbia, Serbian European Integration Office, 2012. *European Orientation of the Citizens of Serbia: Trends*. [online] Available at: <http://www.seio.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnenja/opinion_poll_13.pdf>

Serbian EU Integration Office (SEIO), based in Belgrade, in 2004. Prior to the formation of the SEIO, the tasks of dealing with EU matters had been managed by the Department for EU Integration within the Ministry of International Economic Relations. Once EU integration had become one of Serbia's top priorities early in 2000s – the post-Yugoslav Wars period – the department within the ministry was revamped into the SEIO, which has since continued to report directly to the Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, indicating Serbia has recognised the importance of EU integration. The SEIO's activities were not only designed to ensure Serbia's adherence to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement of 2007 but also to bring about the best prospect of EU accession for Serbia.

Two further events also strengthened Serbia's new position and approach towards the EU: the success of the Visa Facilitation Agreement and its compliance with the ICTY. Talks on the Visa Facilitation Agreement commenced in 2006 after the EU had consented to the mandate. The signing of the agreement in 2007 brings about a visa exemption for holders in certain categories, such as holders of diplomatic passports. Additionally, citizens of the EU travelling to Serbia receive visa exemption and vice versa for Serbian citizens travelling to the EU. This was seen as a major step towards a liberalised border control which Serbia must be entirely ready for when it implements full freedom of movement upon possible EU accession in the near future⁷.

⁷ based on Mihailo Crnobrnja and Ana S. Trbovich, *Relations Between Serbia and the European Union*. (Budapest: FEFA Institute and the Centre for Enlargement Studies, Central European University, 2007), 15-16, 33-34.

In addition to visa liberalisation, since the fall of Milošević; Serbia has continued to extradite those involved in the crimes and massacres directed at the people of former Yugoslavia, much to the satisfaction of the EU. In 2011, Goran Hadžić became the last remaining fugitive to be arrested by the Serbian authorities. He was handed over to the ICTY. Hadžić's extradition further confirmed Serbia's willingness to comply with the requests of the EU, which saw Hadžić's fugitive status as undesirable given Serbia's attempts at European integration. Following these two significant events, both marking EU-Serbia cooperation, in 2009 Serbia formally submitted its application for EU membership. Consequently, the EU began to grant Serbia a considerable amount of financial assistance to help strengthen the country's capacity for its integration in the future. The amount of financial assistance has already reached €200 million as of 2013⁸. As in most candidate-status countries, Serbia has implemented judicial, anti-corruption campaigns, and harmonisation with the EU *acquiscommunautaire*. More than €750 million has efficiently been spent from 2007 to 2011 on investment on over 250 projects of cross-border cooperation, infrastructure, and refugees' housing problems, and education reforms to meet with EU standards. Among these efforts are a variety of projects to help marginalised groups of people in Serbian

⁸ European Commission, 2013. *Serbia – Financial Assistance*. [online] Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/instruments/funding-by-country/serbia/index_en.htm>

society, particularly the Roma community⁹, as to both help create a society equal for all with respect for human rights and people of other ethnicities – a total transformation from the Serbia seen during the nightmarish days of the ethnically-fuelled Yugoslav Wars.

2014: Accession Talks Now in Place and on Full Speed

The prospect of EU membership for a post-Yugoslav Balkan country is not an impossibility, as shown by the accession of Slovenia in 2004 and Croatia in 2013. The initial process of negotiations for Serbia may have been hindered by its style of approach when dealing with the EU; but as Belgrade has agreed to extradite Serbian war criminals and relinquished its grip on the Kosovo issue, Serbian accession is no longer just a possibility. The fear that Serbia, after countless decades of conflicts, could never reconcile with Europe in peace is now a history. At present it is an anticipated, upcoming event. Following the EU's satisfaction at the Brussels Agreement on the Kosovo issue, accession negotiations have taken place and are progressing at full speed. On 21 January 2014, the EU Council held its first accession conference with Serbia on the issue of Serbian membership. The Council expressed Serbia's confirmed position as a close partner of the EU that had achieved satisfactory compliance with EU membership criteria. It also complimented Serbia's significant effort in normalising relations with Kosovo as well as Serbia's sufficient actions in establishing a market-oriented economy.

⁹ Božidar Djelić, 2011. *Four Years of Serbia's Path to the European Union and a Knowledge-Based Economy: Key Accomplishments and Perspectives*. [online] Available at: <www.djelic.net/en/pdf/Presek%20stanja%20ENG.pdf>

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Most importantly, the Council stated that Serbia is now in an efficient enough position to implement the EU's *acquiscommunautaire* – a statement that usually precedes successful accession to the EU. While some certain *acquis* chapters still need considerable efforts and time from Serbia in order to reach the EU standard, membership of the EU is what Serbia can celebrate when it looks back in the future – that the country has managed to put all the violent years of wars behind it and move forward to a brighter future, as part of Europe.

