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Serbia

AT A GEOPOLITICAL CROSSROADS

Study Trip Report

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CONTEXT

Serbia is bracing itself for presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in April 2022. With authoritarianism and corruption on the rise, Serbia is drifting further and further away from its road to the EU. The current president, Aleksandar Vucic, continues to lead the country with authoritarian and anti-democratic policies that serve to strengthen his position and autocratic rule. At the same time, Serbia's opposition must deal with limited media coverage, unstable cooperation between parties, and challenges in monitoring the electoral process. However, after 10 years of Vucic's rule in Serbia, it seems that the elections in 2022 could bring some change to the political spectrum in Serbia.

The ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine has put Serbia in a difficult and strained geopolitical position – it finds itself sitting on two chairs, one being the EU integration process and the other being its close historical and political ties to Russia. While the West immediately condemned and sanctioned Russia after its invasion, Serbia remained silent for several days. Although Serbia voted in favor of the UN General Assembly resolution on Ukraine on March 2, Vucic and the Serbian government still refuse to join the EU in its sanctions against Russia. The calculation by Serbia's leading politicians is clear: avoid damaging relations with Russia because of its support on the Kosovo issue but remain on the path toward EU integration. This newly-emerged crisis leaves Serbia in a challenging geopolitical position. It appears that Serbia will have to commit to one side or the other and that political neutrality is no longer an option. How will Serbia position itself?

Despite all the difficulties and challenges Serbia is currently facing, it is important to maintain hope and look for alternatives. From March 15-16, 2022, a group of young experts from the region – in cooperation with a team from the Austrian-based International Institute for Peace, Karl-Renner-Institut, and Austrian Institute for International Affairs as well as the Serbia-based Belgrade Centre for Security Policy – went on a study trip to Belgrade to meet diplomats, politicians, and civil society representatives in order to assess the current political and social situation.

MEDIA FREEDOM

Freedom House has labeled Serbia as “partly free,” and in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, Serbia was ranked 93 out of 180 countries in total. Over the last decade, both media freedom and the independence of journalists in the country have deteriorated. The number of attacks on journalists and outlets that report on the key challenges in Serbia (rule of law, corruption, organized crime, freedom of media, state capture, etc.) has been consistently rising. Leading state officials, including Vucic, openly attack and target journalists and outlets that are critical of the government. The authorities and the ruling SNS party equate independent media outlets with the opposition parties in order to question their work and credibility. N1 Serbia -- which is often described as the main independent cable news channel covering the actions and work of the ruling SNS-SPS coalition and the president – has faced a continuous targeted campaign of pressure and threats by the ruling coalition and members of the regime. Journalists who work for N1 and other independent media outlets are labelled as traitors and receive threats on a daily basis. The ruling SNS party has taken control of all TV stations with national coverage, and these stations – together with private tabloid newspapers that are directly linked to the ruling elite – represent the main instruments of the SNS propaganda machine. Political interference in the media and censorship appear to have reached a new high since the overthrow of Slobodan

Milosevic and the introduction of democracy in Serbia. Since the last parliamentary elections in 2020 and the opposition boycott, some political debates between the ruling parties and the opposition did take place, but they were organized on TV stations that are considered to be under the influence of the ruling elite (including RTS, TV Happy, TV PINK, B92, and TV PRVA). As a result, it seems that these debates were staged to paint a false picture of media freedom and freedom of speech in the country. Serbia's opposition thus faces a major obstacle when it comes to the promotion of their political programs and ideas. Their access to mainstream media is severely limited, and they have therefore turned to other means, including social media, cable TV stations, and the few independent newspapers. Vucic has not participated in a political debate since 2012 and still refuses to participate, even before the upcoming presidential elections on April 3, 2022.

There has been little to no progress when it comes to media freedom in Serbia, with the latest European Commission report finding that progress has been limited.

RULE OF LAW

Recent reports on the political situation in the country – including those by the EU and its institutions, NGOs, and other civil society organizations – have one main finding in common: Serbia has showed no progress in areas such as the rule of law, judicial reform, and the fight against corruption. This also seems to be the primary reason for Serbia's stagnation in the EU integration process. The transition from authoritarian to democratic governance in Serbia has been ongoing since 1991 and has faced constant setbacks. Every time a new set of elites comes into power, their first step has been to capture the state and its institutions in order to consolidate their power.

The EU accession process is of great importance in furthering democratic reforms that will lead to the dismantling of state capture and corruption. Nevertheless, the EU has “supported” the autocratic regime of the ruling SNS party in Serbia in order to promote broader stability throughout the Western Balkans. The result of this policy is that several states in the region are considered “stabilocracies” rather than democracies.

Throughout Serbia's history, there has yet to be a strong and independent judiciary, which is the main precondition for the fight against corruption, organized crime, and state capture. The selection and appointment of judges is a largely political process, and there is a complete lack of political will to reform the judiciary and strengthen the rule of law. All the limited progress to-date has only been undertaken to satisfy the needs of the EU accession process, especially Chapters 23 and 24. However, even this limited progress has been insufficient to fulfil the expectations and obligations for Serbia's accession to the EU. Since Serbia's ruling elite does not appear to have the will to reform, the EU could leverage its foreign policy tools to pressure the Serbian government to proceed with reforms. For example, the EU is the biggest provider of foreign aid and investment to Serbia, which could be used as an incentive for reform.

ENVIRONMENT

Serbia currently faces many environmental challenges. During the winter months, the severity of air pollution in the country becomes dangerously apparent. The main sources of air pollution in Serbia include the energy sector, waste dump sites, heavy industry, and the transportation

sector. Serbia also struggles with water pollution, deforestation, and the effects of climate change. While Serbia is a party to the Paris Climate Accords, it continues to invest in coal-fired power plants and until now has failed to pass an environmental strategy or laws in accordance with the EU's climate change policy. The general impression is that the ruling elites do not take these issues seriously.

Nevertheless, after the Anglo-Australian mining company Rio Tinto received its exploration licenses from the Serbian government to operate lithium mines in the country – which risks devastating environmental impacts in western Serbia – citizens took their anger to the streets and organized demonstrations across many cities in Serbia. Main roads were blocked, and the government was pressured for weeks to revoke the permits. As a result of the mass demonstrations, the government ultimately revoked the permits, but it is still unclear if the permits will be reissued after the elections are over. As a result of this uncertainty, many environmental activists and groups are pressuring the parliament to pass a law that would ban all lithium and borate mining in Serbia.

Since the demonstrations, it appears that the broader public in Serbia is deeply concerned about environmental issues in the country. At the same time, the government has no clear or constructive plan on how to tackle Serbia's environmental challenges. Still, it is notable that environmental issues in Serbia were able to unite and motivate all sorts of groups and individuals to put aside their differences and fight for the green future of their country.

EU INTEGRATION PROCESS & GEOPOLITICS

There is a general impression that the EU has not supported Serbia when it comes to democratic reforms and improving the overall level of democracy in the country. Many feel abandoned when it comes to the fight against state capture, corruption, and organized crime. Support from the EU has largely targeted stability as its main priority, rather than the democratic reforms or values that the EU should be working to promote. The credibility of EU enlargement policies has been questioned by many in the region. At the same time, Serbia has not accomplished much on its way towards full EU membership. It is obvious that the political climate in the region and EU enlargement policies would need to change in order to speed up Serbia's EU accession.

There have been several proposals for new potential accession methods, including the concept of "Staged Accession," which was drafted by the Centre for European Policy Studies and the European Policy Centre. The main idea of this proposal is to move away from the present procedure of "in" or "out" and instead focus on the individual needs and concerns of candidate and EU member states. Candidate states would gain a sense of increased affiliation with the EU family, and current EU members would gain a feeling of safety when it comes to the stability of the EU and its institutions, given concerns that new members might harm the EU's stability. Throughout four stages of accession, candidate countries would advance step-by-step toward EU institutions and ultimately work towards becoming permanent and full members of the EU. This would be a potential way to integrate the Western Balkan countries into the EU family before being rewarded with full membership. On the one hand, there would be rewards for states that complete reforms and fulfill obligations. On the other hand, reversibility would also play a crucial role in this process if necessary: countries could lose access to funding and institutions if they backslide.

The overall opinion over recent years is that the EU has not focused on the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU, but with the Russia-Ukraine war ongoing, there is great potential for things to change. The EU has emphasized that the Western Balkan region is of great importance for the EU and that its future is within the EU. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, German Federal Foreign Minister Annalena Bärbock and the Austrian Federal Chancellor visited Serbia and stressed the importance of its accession to the EU. This could be interpreted as a clear sign of a shift in the EU's policy in the region from passive to active.

The geopolitical positioning of Serbia is of the highest priority for the country and its ruling elite. For several years, Vucic has tried to balance between the West, Russia, and China, which has proved to be an impossible foreign policy to maintain successfully. The war in Ukraine has united the West and all EU member states against the brutal and aggressive foreign policy of Russia. Serbia as a candidate country should have joined the sanctions regime of the EU towards Russia and clearly positioned itself. Nevertheless, Vucic seems to have postponed the decision to either join or reject the sanctions in order not to influence the outcome of the upcoming elections in April 2022. With the presence of a strong Russian influence in Serbia and the notion that Serbs and Russians are brother nations, Vucic knows that implementing sanctions against Russia would cost him votes and jeopardize his electoral victory.

Meanwhile, the influence of China in Serbia has increased significantly in the last five to ten years. Through financial investments and lucrative contracts, China has expanded its sphere of influence in Serbia as well as the Western Balkan region more generally. It provides credit and funds for infrastructure projects and deploys its own companies as contractors for those projects. China has mainly focused on financial control as a means of influence in the Western Balkans, while other actors have sought to win political influence across the region.

It has become increasingly difficult for Serbia to remain politically neutral and balance between the West, Russia, and China. With the war in Ukraine ongoing, Serbia will have to realign itself geopolitically much faster than previously expected. The pressure on Serbia from all sides will increase exponentially.

CONCLUSION

Serbia faces many difficult decisions in the near future. The issue of Kosovo, the EU accession process, the question of neutrality, the reform process, democratization and the strengthening of state institutions, the fight against corruption and organized crime, and the dismantling of state capture are just a few of the issues that the government must address in order to develop Serbia into a democratic and prosperous state. Over the last decade, more than 500.000 people have left Serbia, many of them never to return. Many citizens have lost all trust in state institution and politics – this being a primary reason for giving up and leaving the country. Since the break-up of communist Yugoslavia, citizens have hoped and fought for the country's transition to a democratic system. Thirty years onwards, the transition is still ongoing, and many issues have neither been resolved nor even addressed.

All the issues mentioned above can be solved, and there should be much more direct involvement and support from the EU. Serbia and the other countries of the Western Balkans are part of the European family and should be rightfully considered as future members of the EU.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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