

Marius Solsletten

# In-Between Two Ideologies

A Case Study Of Serbia ´s Foreign Policy Relations  
With The European Union And Russia

Bachelor's thesis in European Studies

Supervisor: Anna Brigevich

May 2023



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Science and Technology



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# Abstract

The purpose of the thesis is to identify why Serbian integration to the European Union (EU) has been slow-moving and how Russia affects this process. The research questions are the following: What are the challenges of Serbian EU accession and how does Russia pose as a threat to this transition. Research includes a review of the EU's Enlargement and Foreign Policy towards the Western Balkans; the effectiveness of the EU's strategy on enlargement policy and how successful the Western democratic values can be transported to another country. Through a case study analysis, the thesis discusses three challenges which Serbia face on their path become a member-state in the EU; Serbian identity, the Kosovo dispute, and Russian influence. The thesis encounters that Serbian identity is more aligned with Russia than the EU. It takes into consideration that Serbia and Russia both share Slavic and Orthodox heritage, and that the Yugoslav-conflicts based Serbian identity around ethnocentric nationalism. This is argued to make Serbian interpretation of EU's core values such as liberal democracy and the rule of law, challenging. Surveys supports the argument by showing that more than 50% of the Serbs feel closer to Moscow than the EU. In terms of Serbia-Kosovo relations, Serbia receives political support by Russia on their decision to not recognize Kosovo as an independent country. Serbia has reiterated that they will never acknowledge Kosovan independence, but would like to improve their affairs with Kosovo in order to shape their policies towards the expectations of the EU. However, Serbia has not been able to join EU sanctions towards Russia after their aggression in Ukraine as Serbia are dependent on Russian gas supply. It also argues that Russia are using Serbia's situation with Kosovo as an argument for justification of their actions in Ukraine. Overall, the thesis concludes that Russia is the greatest deterrent of Western Democracy in Serbia and the greatest challenge for Serbian accession to the European Union.

# Sammendrag

Hensikten med oppgaven er å identifisere hvorfor serbisk integrasjon til den Europeiske Union (EU) ikke har gått fortere, og hvilken rolle Russland spiller i denne prosessen. Forskningsspørsmålene er som følgende: Hva er utfordringene ved serbisk EU-tilslutning og hvordan utgjør Russland en trussel mot denne overgangen. Studiet inkluderer en gjennomgang av EU's utvidelse og utenrikspolitikk mot Vest-Balkan; effektiviteten av EU's utvidelsespolitikk og hvor suksessfullt vestlig liberale demokratiske verdier kan bli overført til et annet land. Gjennom et casestudie diskuterer oppgaven tre spesifikke utfordringer Serbia står overfor på veien til EU-medlemskap; serbisk identitet, Kosovo-striden, og russisk påvirkning. Oppgaven viser til at den serbiske identiteten har flere likhetstrekk med den russiske enn EU. Den tar i betraktning at både Serbia og Russland deler slavisk og ortodoks bakgrunn, og at Jugoslavia-krigene formet den serbiske identiteten rundt etnosentrisk nasjonalisme. Dette gjør at Serbias forståelse av EU's sentrale verdier som liberalt demokrati og rettssikkerhet, blir vanskelig. Tidligere undersøkelser støtter dette argumentet med å vise til at mer enn 50% av den serbiske befolkningen føler seg nærmere Moskva enn EU. Når det gjelder relasjoner mellom Serbia og Kosovo mottar Serbia politisk støtte fra Russland ved at russerne på lik linje som serberne ikke anerkjenner Kosovo som et uavhengig land. Serbia har gjentatt at de aldri kommer til å anerkjenne Kosovo, men ønsker å forbedre sine relasjoner for å forme sin politikk i forhold til EU's forventninger om god nabolitikk. Serbia har ikke hatt mulighet for å delta på EU sanksjoner mot Russland etter russernes invasjon av Ukraina ettersom de er avhengig av russisk eksportert gass. Oppgaven viser også til at Russland anvender Kosovo-striden som et argument for å legitimere deres handlinger i Ukraina. Totalt sett, konkluderer oppgaven med at Russland er den største avskrekkende faktoren for vestlig demokrati i Serbia og den største utfordringen for serbisk medlemskap i EU.

# Acknowledgements

Writing this dissertation has been an exciting, interesting and challenging task. Looking back at the process, I realize that I have gained a great deal of experience and knowledge. I would like to take this time to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Anna Brigevich, in providing me with much appreciated guidance and feedback.

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# List of Abbreviations

CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defense Policy
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
FRY	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
ICTY	Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SAP	Stabilization and Association Process
SFRY	Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

# 1 Introduction

*"I know that EU is our path. There are no other paths."*

– Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic (17<sup>th</sup> of January, 2023)

Source: (Slavic & Dudik, 2023)

Serbia has been on the path towards membership in the European Union (EU) for more than two decades, ever since the ousting of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. They formally applied in 2009, and was in 2012 granted official EU candidate status (European Commission, 2023a). Eleven years later they are still far away from their goal with only 22 out of 35 negotiation chapters opened (Council of the European Union, 2023). Why has European integration for Serbia been slow-going?

It is time for Serbia to choose between the West and the East. As former U.S deputy assistant secretary for European and Eurasian affairs in 2017, Hoyt Brian Yee said; *"You cannot sit on two chairs at the same time, especially if they are that far apart."* – (Bechev, 2023). In other words, it is not possible for Serbia to have close ties with Russia and become a member-state in the EU, as they are two poles as far away as they can be from each other.

Besides, it is evident that both parties are essential for Serbia's survival in international politics. The EU is the main trade partner and investor, and moving closer to the bloc could improve democratization and the rule of law in Serbia (EEAS, 2021b). On the other hand, Serbia receive political support from Russia on their stance with Kosovo, as Russia does not recognize the former Serbian province as an independent country (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Recently, Serbia signed a deal with Russia on importation of gas for the next three years, which makes them dependent on the Russians for survival (Bechev, 2023). Hence, the main question for Serbia is which partner is the most essential for their interests.

This paper will execute a case study of Serbia's foreign policy towards the European Union and Russia. It seeks to understand what the Serbian case can tell us about the effectiveness of the EU's strategy on enlargement policy and how successful the Western democratic values can be transported to another country. It will do so by looking at three challenges which Serbia face in order to speed up their process towards EU accession; Serbian identity, the Kosovo dispute and Russian influence. These are reviewed as some of the issues where Serbia fails to align with the EU's demands for membership, delaying EU accession for Serbia. The research questions are accordingly: *What are the challenges*

*for Serbia in their accession to the European Union? How does Russia pose as a threat to this transition?*

It will consider EU's Enlargement and Foreign Policy towards the Western Balkans, and EU's leverage as conceptual framework for the analysis. Additionally it takes into account Serbia-Russia relations by looking at the Slavic and Orthodox heritage they share. Furthermore, it will briefly explain the use of case study as method and why the Serbian case is important to consider. Moving on into the analysis, the thesis will discuss three specific challenges for Serbian accession to the EU. It will highlight EU-Serbia relations in terms of the break-up of Yugoslavia during the 1990s and how this turbulent period has made Serbian accession to the EU demanding. The first challenge is Serbian Identity, which is argued to be closer to Moscow than the EU. The next is the Kosovo situation where the Serbs do not recognize their independence. The last challenge is Russia as Russian influence is present in most policy areas of Serbia, affecting the population's attitude towards the EU. The thesis concludes that Russia is the greatest deterrent to Western democracy and that is what the Serbian case demonstrates.

## 2 Literature Review

The thesis will apply the concepts of EU Enlargement and Foreign Policy towards Western Balkans in order to discuss the challenges Serbian face on their road to become a member of the European Union (EU). It will also consider the EU 's passive and active leverage towards Serbia and how it affects their path towards European integration.

### 2.1.1 EU Enlargement Policy Towards the Western Balkans

EU Enlargement Policy is referred to the process of a candidate country to become a member of the EU. According to the Council of the European Union, enlargement is defined as the following:

*"Enlargement is the process whereby states join the European Union, after they have fulfilled a set of political and economic conditions."*

*(Council of the European Union, 14.04.2023)*

The EU Council state that any European country who respects EU democratic values and is committed to promoting them may apply for EU membership (Council of the European Union, 2023). The conditions are defined as the Copenhagen criteria, which are the original conditions that all countries who desire to become a EU member state must fulfill. These are the criteria (Vachudova, p 121, 2005):

- (1) The candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities;*
- (2) The existence of a functioning market economy, as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union;*
- (3) The ability to take on the obligations of membership (the *acquis*), including adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union.*

Moreover, another important consideration is the EU 's capacity to take in new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration (Council of the European Union, 2023). What is important to highlight is that the political criteria allows the EU to judge the quality of democracy, the treatment of ethnic minorities, and the profoundness of candidates foreign policy, even when existing member have embraced only superficial measures to regulate and conduct their own political behavior in these areas.

In Serbia there has been a high degree of corruption and organized crime, which presumably was facilitated during the wars of the 1990. This delved deep into the administrative apparatus in most former Yugoslav successor states as one of the reasons why democratic values and rule of law has not been fully integrated in Serbia today (Dinan, p 321, 2014). Serbia is also alongside eight countries which has been granted candidate status for EU membership. On their official website, The Council of Europe express that they are committed to the European perspective of the Western Balkans, and that it has close links with its partners and cooperates from the region in a number of important areas (Council of the European Union, 2023).

Furthermore, conditionality has been applied in the EU's policy towards the region in order to stabilize it, which has taken the focus away from the Copenhagen Criteria. It refers to the requirement that potential EU member-states such as Serbia must comply with EU conditions in order to advance in the accession process. This is regarded as one of the most important driving forces for EU enlargement, and when considering the Western Balkans, this policy has the aim of restoring the EU's reputation in the Balkans after they failed to stop the war in the former Yugoslavia (Juncos & Borrigan, p 271, 2019).

The conflicts in the Western Balkans during the 1990s led to the establishment of the Stability Pact and the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), which is the EU's policy towards the region in order to prepare the partners for EU membership in the future (Council of the European Union, 2023). Moreover, the EU has through this process displayed political and economic objectives for Serbia and the rest of the region with the target to stabilize it and establish a free-trade area (Nelaeva & Semenov, 2016). The EU Enlargement Policy towards Western Balkans can be regarded as what Bernhard Stahl (2013) refers to as "strategic accession", which means that instead of focusing solely on the Copenhagen Criteria and Europeanization, it emphasizes prevention of war and conflict in the region. This is understandable when considering the recent break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and how ethnic nationalism has shaped the Serbian people's attitudes towards the West.

According to Juncos & Borrigan (p 269, 2019), EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans differs from other region in three regards. First, the Western Balkans is a region with a great history of conflicts and instability, where it has been difficult to establish democratic principles and governance due to ethnic conflict and political polarization. Secondly, the EU is being challenged from different fronts by the effects of multiple crisis over last decades such as the economic crisis, rise of Euroscepticism populist parties, migration crisis and Brexit as the latest confrontation of European integration, and lastly the previous experiences of enlargement which has made the EU being more tentative towards expansion (Juncos & Borrigan (p 269, 2019). Altogether, these challenges makes enlargement in the Western Balkans more challenging than any other enlargement-process the EU has experienced.

EU enlargement reached the Balkans in 2013 when Croatia was the first country joining the bloc (Juncos & Borrigan, p 269, 2019). The process was shaped by the preceding EU expansion rounds, characterized by an asymmetrical relationship between member states and the countries desiring to join, and the internal adaptation of the EU to endure larger membership. However, even as the EU has faced multiple crises and challenges they are still willing to work for the membership process (Cancela & Lamoso, 2020). This is mainly due to geopolitical consequences such as preventing Serbia and the other states in the region in the hands of China or Russia as it might provoke destabilization of the southern EU neighborhood.

### 2.1.2 EU Foreign Policy Towards the Western Balkans – Politics Of Accession Of A State Joining The EU

The EU has close links with its partners in the Western Balkans. The purpose is to secure stable, prosperous and well-functioning democratic societies on a balanced path towards EU membership (EEAS, 2022). By aiming at effective political and economic governance, putting much emphasis on high standards of adherence to the rule of law, media freedom and a vibrant civil society, the EU facilitates democratization within their partners in the region.

At the center of EU-Western Balkans affairs is the process of EU accession (EEAS, 2022). Josep Borrell, High Representative/Vice President of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has implied that European integration in the region is of great interest for the EU (Borrell, 2020) :

*"The European Union is not complete without the Western Balkans. A credible enlargement policy is an investment in peace and security for the whole of Europe."*

- Josep Borrell (6<sup>th</sup> of October, 2020)

Furthermore, the EU's policy towards the region is also an integral part of their Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Defense Policy (CSDP). In 2018, the European Commission adopted the Western Balkans Strategy with the aim of improving CFSP and CSDP dialogues, involving EU's partners in the region in deeper cooperation on EU missions and operations (EEAS, 2022). In addition, the EU facilitates the dialogue on the comprehensive normalization of Serbia-Kosovo affairs as stable diplomatic relations between Belgrade and Pristina would be beneficial also for the security, stability and prosperity of the region, as well as promoting further progress on the two countries respective European paths.

One of the guiding principles of the EU's affairs with its neighborhoods is differentiation. This principle recognizes the different aspirations of the partner-states relations with the EU and offers individual partnerships to its neighbors in order to meet the particular purpose of a state (EEAS, 2021a). Differentiation is regarded as the most important



innovation in EU's foreign policy and is highly related to the EU's use of conditionality in its enlargement policy in the sense that it allows more careful use of political conditionality (Balfour & Rotta, p 10, 2005). The EU has several economic, political and aid tools which can be applied to exercise conditionality towards a specific region or partner-country, and they can be both positive and negative, such as involving incentives or forms of "punishment" like withdrawal of aid, postponement of a summit, or suspension of an agreement.

What is more, the EU's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans is a strong signal that the EU is trying to accumulate its position as a regional power. Their attention on the neighborhood makes explicit a trend that has been changing over the past decades as the EU's hierarchy of interests is clearly based on geographical proximity. On this note, the EU is seeking influence in order to prevent further large-scale conflicts which the region has experienced (Balfour & Rotta, p 19, 2005).

Moreover, for East European states to be considered a potential candidate for membership in the EU, it is essential they are able to prevent importing "foreign policy issues" into the union (Vachudova, p 120, 2005). Serbia's strong relations with Russia can be seen as such an issue, which affects Serbian EU accession because there are such controversies having strong relations with the greatest counterpart of the bloc. However, the EU possess leverage which could make the Serbs consider strongly whether they should ease their political affairs with Russia.

### 2.1.3 EU Active and Passive Leverage

EU leverage can be regarded as influential means that are of great interest for countries seeking EU membership. It can be divided into two categories; active and passive leverage. According to Vachudova (p 65, 2005), "passive leverage" can be explained as the suction that the EU has on the domestic politics of candidate-countries by virtue of its existence and its usual conduct. It includes both political and economic advantages of becoming a member-state, as well as the costs of exclusion, and how the EU treats nonmember-states. For the bloc to have leverage on domestic politics, a country must be a acknowledged and credible potential member of the EU.

Moreover, the most important reason for a European country to seek membership is argued to be regulation of affairs with powerful neighbors inside a specific framework centered on a clear and well-established set of rules (Vachudova, p 66, 2005). EU membership has brought in previous enlargement processes such as economic modernization, access to export markets and improvements in other economic areas, which has speeded up the democratization of countries. Examples are Portugal, Spain, Ireland and Greece as all four experienced a great transition with the economic benefits of EU membership.

However, there are also costs of not pursuing EU membership. According to Vachudova (p 72, 2005), one of them could be that if Serbia let the illiberal policies of restricted political competition, economic corruption and ethnic nationalism grow within the their society, they will continue to stay powerful. Another reasons is that EU accession can act as a catalyst for domestic reform to fight these antidemocratic values. With the process of accession, Serbia has to apply certain reforms, which will make them greater aligned to the EU and its values. These reforms can then act as motivation for a country with weak democratization and rule of law to fight the illiberal movements within the society, and eventually emerge as a greater and stable liberal democracy.

Moving on, active leverage can be defined as the EU 's deliberate efforts to promote domestic reforms in countries seeking EU membership (Vachudova, p 108, 2005). Two factors contribute to these efforts; the significance of the advantages of membership, and the significance of the entry requirements. In other words, the greater the benefits of membership, the greater the potential political will in applicant states to amuse intrusive political and economic requirements. EU accession puts very substantial demands on the executive, legislature and the judiciary of the country, and affects most aspects of the functions of a national government.

One of the characteristics of the pre-accession process is enforcement, which can be explained as the process of ensuring that EU rules are implemented (Cini & Borragan et al, p 446, 2019). The EU apply means for making states comply with EU law such as monitoring, sanctions, capacity building, rule interpretation and social pressure (Tallberg, p 614, 2002). In other words, when potential member-states seek membership in the EU, they apply on the understanding that compliance with the demands will be more or less enforced. Particularly, this is an effect which candidate countries must be aware of as they are subjecting their domestic policy to the EU for the examination and evaluation in accordance with EU criteria.

# 3 Methodology

## 3.1 Single Case Study

This thesis will apply the method of single case study in order to examine the mechanisms that affect Serbia's accession to the EU. It allows us to deep-dive into the chosen case and research a set of independent variables which we argue hypothetically are affecting the dependent variable that is Serbian integration to the EU. It will apply a congruence procedure in order to explore the Serbian case in order to look for within-case correlation between the study variable and other phenomena (Van Evera, p 69, 1997). On that account, we seek to examine the conceivable factors behind Serbia's path to European integration with the EU, focusing on three independent variables, which are believed to have an impact on Serbia's accession to the EU. These are the following:

### Dependent Variable (DV)

1. Serbian Integration Into The European Union

### Independent Variables (IV)

1. Serbian National Identity
2. The Kosovo Dispute
3. Russian Influence

The thesis does not imply that these variables are the only factors behind the slow-going process of Serbian EU integration. It desires to study the case of Serbian EU accession by looking specifically at these three challenges in order to gain knowledge on Serbia's complicated road to European integration, which is believed to be like no other enlargement process the EU has experienced.

## 3.2 Why Serbia Is An Important Case To Consider

It is reasonable to state that the EU's enlargement policy has not been effective on the Balkans. Even as there has been an awareness of the historic importance of Balkan-expansion, there has been major misunderstandings between the EU and Serbia specifically (Dinan, p 255, 2014). Serbia has always been an important case for the EU. The collapse of Yugoslavia had a remarkable effect on Serbian Identity, as they were the largest ethnic group within the republic (Wyganska, p 64, 2021). This created an issue of identity when the dissolution took place and ethnic nationalistic views awakened as a consequence for preserving their memories of Yugoslavia.

On this note, the EU has failed to deliver specific criteria which Serbia must fulfill in order to become a member-state. They do not demand that Serbia recognize Kosovo as an independent state, but instead expects good neighborly relations and regional

cooperation, which can be interpreted as that EU's foreign policy is not clear enough and lacks credibility towards Serbia in the way that they have not demanded clear criteria which the Serbs has to fulfill on their relations with Kosovo. Especially when Kosovo is regarded as a potential EU member-state (European Commission, 2023b)

In such a circumstance, it can be argued that the EU seeks "strategic accession" in order to stabilize the region (Stahl, 2013). This was also the case with Romania, Greece and Cyprus, and these experiences has shown to decrease the effects of EU's external governance and foster enlargement fatigue in the long run. On this note, the EU is not forcing compliance with Serbia on accession, as exemplified with the Kosovo dispute. This is why the Serbian path to European integration is a special case, and intriguing to dwell into as there are several aspects which plays a role in Serbia's EU accession.

## 4 Analysis

In this section the thesis will discuss three specific challenges Serbia are facing in terms of becoming a member-state in the EU. The first is Serbian identity, which can be argued to align more with Russia than the EU. The second being the Kosovo dispute, and finally Russian influence. All of them are affecting one another, and how Serbia deals with them will affect where their path to further integration will eventually lead them to. I begin the section by explaining EU-Serbia relations and then discussing the challenges.

### 4.1 EU-Serbia Relations

The disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was the start of a difficult period in recent history for Serbia (Ionita, 2015). It led to multiple conflicts where Serbia has been the aggressor, particularly the Kosovo dispute and the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The conflict in Bosnia marked the beginning of the Yugoslav wars when ethnic Serbs declared the independence of Republika Srpska in 1992, which led to a war that took around 90 000 lives in four years. Moreover, in 1997 when Slobodan Milosevic became the president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), he immediately targeted separatists in Kosovo which wanted the province to break out of the republic. The conflict resulted in around 1500-2000 deaths of military forces and civilians.

It could be argued to be a result of geopolitical changes and rise of ethnic nationalism which eventually led the United Nations Security Council to declare the cease of existence of SFRY in 1992, but arguably a person responsible for the break-up was former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic (Ionita, 2015). Ever since the ousting of Milosevic in 2000, Serbia has been on the path towards European integration (Wochnik & Wochnik, 2012). During his reign, when in the 1980s the countries of Western Europe were heading towards greater economic and political integration such as the Single European Act in 1986, Milosevic and other leaders of the Yugoslav Republics decided to take the opposite path, the one of fragmentations and territorialization on the basis of a radical ethno-centric nationalistic criteria (Cancela & Lamoso, 2020).

However, current Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic which has been the leader of Serbia for more than a decade, has been pro-EU membership. In an interview at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2020, he outlined that joining the EU was of the "utmost significance" (Euronews, 2020):

*"We don't see the real alternative to that path...But, you know, we have been on that path for 20 years already. I think, apart from Turkey, not a single country has been waiting so many years."*

During the last two decades the negotiations has been slow-going. Serbia became an official candidate for membership in 2012, but have faced several implications with their EU accession, especially in the light of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 the Russian economy has been hit greatly by sanctions, which has lead President Vucic to shift their focus on deeper and stable relations with the EU (Dettmer, 2023). However, the Serbian transition towards further European integration has not been uncomplicated, as will be discussed moving on.

## 4.2 Serbian Identity

As mentioned earlier, Serbia and other Eastern European countries share a culture and history which differs greatly from the Western part of the continent. With Serbia it is important to consider that Serbia and Russia share both Slavic and Orthodox heritage which culturally makes Serbia more aligned with the Russians (Moon, p 15, 2021). Serbia pushing towards the West while simultaneously being attached to the East and the Russians, can be argued to create an East-West polarity which makes the Serbian identity less clear for the EU.

As Yugoslavia disintegrated during the 1990s, it left a big hole in the Serbian Identity. It had to reconstruct its identification, which reflected the uncertainty of this period as the future of the republic was unknown. Ethnic nationalism, which were given roots after the disruption of Yugoslavia, led Serbia on a path further away from European integration (Moon, p 1070, 2021). The decade shaped the Serbian identity into being anti-EU, especially with the Kosovo dispute, which has still not been resolved. Serbia view Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia and Kosovo being recognized as an independent state would be anti-ethnonationalist act from the Serb, and could threaten their identity.

Moreover, ethno-centralism in Serbia makes the notion of democracy and rule of law difficult to interpret in the same manner as the West does. What characterizes the EU's ideas of integration and democratization are not understood in Serbia, which makes enlargement a great challenge. This can be attributed to what Wygnanska (p 64, 2021) refers to as "Titoism", when communism and nationalism were great forces in the Yugoslav society. During these times, Serbia was the most influential republic and it is reasonable to claim that there still exists an "Yugoslavian identity" in the Serbian society that makes it even more difficult to pursue EU membership.

The distinctive memory of Yugoslavia is affecting the Serbian population's attitude towards membership in the EU. EU membership would mean that they are giving up sovereignty to a supranational organization, which means less power to Serbia. The sacrifice of sovereignty can therefore be said to not be understood within the Serbian population. This can be supported with statistics showing Serbian support for EU membership (Dettmer, 2023). It was conducted four months into the war in Ukraine in 2022. See Table 4.1.

*If it were a national referendum on Serbian membership in the EU, what would you vote for?*

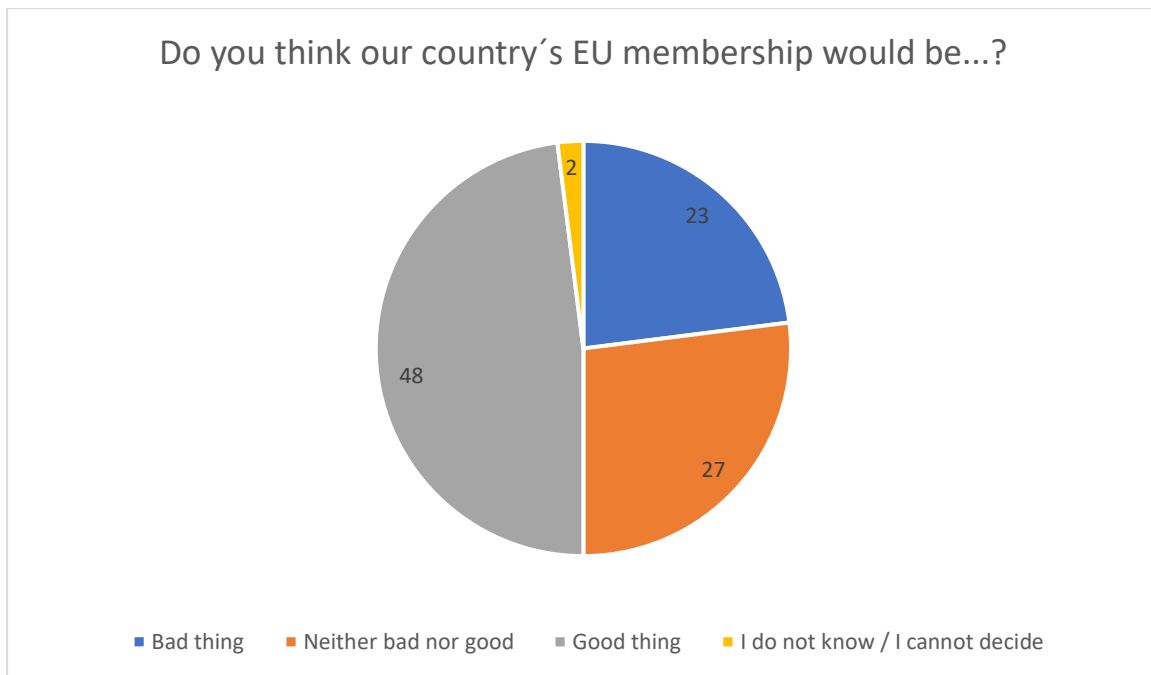
Against EU membership	51%
In favor of EU membership	34%
I would not take part in this vote	11%
I don't know	4%

*Table 4.1 demonstrating Serbian support for EU membership as of 2022 (Dettmer, 2023)*

The Yugoslav era has without doubt become an integral part of the Serbian identity. Its reality has been rooted firmly in the biographical memory of many of its inhabitants. This means that this challenge is present at all times for the Serbian government when pursuing EU membership. The same refers to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) bombing of Belgrade in 1999 over the Kosovo conflict, where destroyed buildings are still standing to symbolize what occurred (Wynanska, p 39, 2021). This suggests that Serbia has a different identity with different world views, perception of state, political cultures and meaning of international conflicts than their Western counterparts.

Additionally, by taking "Titoism" into account makes it evident that there are internal conflicts in Serbia about identity. On one hand it is specifically linked to the Yugoslav era and ethnic nationalism, the Kosovo dispute being an example, and on the other hand a pro-European, anti-nationalist, democratic Serbia. The latter can be argued to have emerged ever since the breakup of Yugoslavia, and since 2000 when they have pursued the path of European integration instead.

This creates a divide in the Serbian population, and as the Kosovo Dispute and Serbia-Russia affairs demonstrates, these are powerful forces which affects their EU accession. A survey in 2021 conducted by the Serbian Ministry of European integration supports this claim; showing that 50 % thought that it would be bad or neither a good nor a bad thing joining the EU, while 48 % believed it was a good thing (Republic of Serbia, 2021). See Figure 4.1.



*Figure 4.1 Serbian citizens attitudes towards EU accession (in %), data collected from the Serbian Ministry of European integration (2021).*

It is evident that the identity issue is a great challenge for Serbian EU-accession. A pro-EU identity could be beneficial for preventing conflicts, as if Serbia were to improve diplomatic relations with Kosovo, it could also improve the living conditions for its citizens. What is clear is that Serbia has shown signals that they would like to discuss with Kosovo on how to interact in policies in order to normalize life of their inhabitants, which will be taken into account in the next section analyzing Serbia-Kosovo relations.

### 4.3 The Kosovo Dispute – Acknowledgment is key for Serbian EU membership?

Another challenge Serbia is facing when it comes to accession to the EU is the unresolved dispute with Kosovo. The core of the issue is that after Kosovo declared themselves unilaterally as an independent country in 2008, Serbia has not recognized them so (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2015). The EU itself does not demand that Serbia acknowledge Kosovo, but demands good neighborly relations and regional cooperation (Wochnik & Wochnik, 2012).

The Kosovo conflict erupted after former Serbian President Milosevic became president of the new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) in 1997. The new federation consisted of Serbia and Montenegro after the remaining former Yugoslav states like Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Slovenia became independent. When Milosevic ceased power, he gained direct control over the military and Yugoslav security, which he took advantage of and targeted separatists in Kosovo (Ionita, 2015). Paramilitary forces in Kosovo, "Kosovo Liberation Army" (KLA), initiated the war by attacking Yugoslav



authorities stationed in the region. This led to an increase of Serbian conventional and paramilitary forces which triggered vengeance against KLA and it resulted in several thousand deaths of fighters and citizens (Ionita, 2015).

Furthermore, NATO decided to intervene in 1999 after diplomatic attempts to resolve the crises failed. They bombed Belgrade during three months, which ended with President Milosevic retreating his paramilitary forces and gave NATO permission to enter territory of Kosovo. In total, around 3 000 died during the conflict and more than 200 000 ethnic Serbs were forced to leave their homes (Ionita, 2015). Afterwards, Kosovo was placed under UN protection and NATO's presence became permanent with peacekeeping forces staying in Kosovo in order to protect them from further attacks. Moreover, Kosovo declared independence in 2008, and are recognized by some of the most important international actors, the EU for instance, but not from China, Russia, Spain and most of Africa and Asia (Wochnik & Wochnik, 2012).

From a Serbian point of view, Kosovo is *de jure* domestic policy, it is treated as a constituent part of Serbia, which is prescribed in Serbia's constitution. Serbia has as well failed to comply with International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) conditionality, claiming that the ICTY was established in order to get Serbia to recognize Kosovo (Wochnik & Wochnik, 2012). Moreover, Serbia has always reaffirmed that they will never recognize Kosovo as an independent country and this perception is troublesome for the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans.

In this sense, the actions of Serbia sends a signal to the EU that they are not willing to negotiate on the EU's demands. What is more, Serbia has experienced sanctions for 10 years after the Kosovo conflict in 1999 and is additionally a reason for why they don't support EU sanctions (DW News, 2023, 1:25). This was expressed by Serbian Minister for European Integration; Tanja Miscevic in an interview, where she underlined that they are condemning the Russian aggression in Ukraine and takes part in meetings and discussions of expelling Russia from international committees (DW News, 2023, 2:15).

Furthermore, Miscevic stated that Serbia will never recognize Kosovo's independence, which creates poorer facilities for their EU accession (DW News, 2023, 3:25). Many EU states rapidly recognized the new state, but five members decided not to do so – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain. This disagreement between the member states meant that the EU could not demand Serbian recognition as an pre-requisite for EU-membership, which has made their accession complicated. In this case, what makes Serbia-EU-Kosovo affairs even more tangled is that Russia does not recognize Kosovo. Serbia receives political support from Russia on this matter, which makes them an essential partner in international affairs. This is argued to be contradictory to Serbia's goal of European integration as the gap between the East and the West has become even greater after Russia's invasion in Ukraine in February 2022. By way of explanation, it is not possible for Serbia to become an member of the EU with strong political and cultural ties to Russia.

On this note, it is reasonable to state that there are many potential risks for Serbia if they do not resolve their dispute with Kosovo. On one hand exists the risks of not complying with the demands of good neighborly relations as the EU expect Serbia to establish with Kosovo. If these requirements are not fulfilled, then EU can interpret it as lack of commitment from Serbia, which makes the accession more complicated than necessary. Another aspect for Serbia is that Kosovo is also an potential candidate for membership in the EU. Kosovo is one of the five countries of South-Eastern Europe which are part of EU's Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), alongside Serbia, and as well an official potential candidate for EU membership. After they declared dependence in 2008, the EU reiterated its desire to assist the development of the country:

*"In 2008 the EU repeated its willingness to assist the economic and political development of Kosovo through a clear European perspective." – (European Commission, 2023b)*

Additionally, Russia does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state. Even as the topic of the Russians influence in Belgrade will be covered later in this thesis, it is however reasonably to claim that their support for Serbia in this situation makes it even more troublesome for the Serbs to pursue EU membership. This can be argued with the fact that Russia are in some sense using the Kosovo situation as an active reason for their intervention in Ukraine, which will be explained later.

#### 4.4 Russia's Hegemonic Aspirations in the Western Balkans

Arguably the biggest challenge for Serbia on their road to become a member-state of the EU is their relations with Russia. They are of much importance to Serbia both economically and politically. As implied earlier, Serbia-Russia affairs dates back many centuries, the 12<sup>th</sup> century specifically, strongly integrated into the Serbian identity with Moscow's presence is highly visible and underlined by symbolism such as high-level meetings between President Putin and Vucic (Pavicic, p 118, 2019).

In addition, there exists the emotional connection between the Serbs and the Russian people as they share Slavic and Orthodox heritage. This gets emphasized in Russia's political rhetoric towards Serbia as the fundamental attributes of national identity such as historic territory, common legal rights and duties for all members, common economy with territorial mobility for members, are playing an important role (Pavicic, p 112, 2019). In other words, Russia approaches Serbian citizens in ways that regards their common background and similarities. Alongside with Putin's soft power in the media, Russia policies reaches easily the Serbian people and strengthens emotional connections between the two Slavic populations. Serbian then feel more positive sentiments towards Russia as they share common values.

Furthermore, Serbia is on paper more aligned with the Russians than Western Europe. On this note, their path towards the EU could on one side said to be contrary to their nature. The NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999 during the Kosovo conflict was seen as

an attack from the West and as Russia has supported Serbia by not recognizing the former Serbian province as an independent state, which demonstrates the strength of their relationship. This is what makes Russian influence a great issue for Serbia. Russia possess soft power in Serbia, stemming from the acid memories of the 1990s: feelings of betrayal and rejection from the West, as well frustration with Kosovan independence led to create a framework for Russia to gain great influence in Serbia. Further on, the slow transition to democracy and a market economy does as well boost pro-Russian narratives as the transition is associated with the Western democratization.

Another example is Russia's presence in Serbian media. The Russian state-owned news agency, Sputnik, opened a large office in Belgrade in 2014 and has shared comprehensive pro-Russian material to all media free of charge (Brey, 2022). Additionally, President Vucic has recently been reluctant to the accusations from the West that Putin is "a lunatic", as he has clearly confirmed that he does not agree with the accusation and also criticized openly the arrest warrant for Putin which is accused of war crimes (Preussen, 2023; AP News, 2023). What is unquestionable is the role of the media in building public opinion.

The evidence implies that Serbia's strong cultural and historical ties with Russia are still strong despite President Vucic desire to become a member of the EU. What is more, a survey by New Third Way in July 2022 encountered that 66 percent of Serbs felt closer to Moscow than to the West and 40 percent wanted to stop the discussion on membership talks with the EU (Tanjung, 2022). The survey did as well point out that more than 40 percent believe that NATO is to blame for the war between Russia and Ukraine, implying strong support for Russia in Serbia.

As previously discussed there seems to exist an "Yugoslavian" part of the Serbian identity which arguably has survived among the older generations, implying a positive image of the Russians. This is a great concern for the Serbian government's hopes for EU membership in the future, especially with the aggression Russia are applying towards Ukraine. Having strong ties with Russia is not an advantage when seeking closer relations to the West, as Russia represents a different ideology and set of common values than the EU. It is therefore evident that Serbia has to one way or another loosen their affairs with Putin if they are to pursue EU membership, which they have not been able to do yet.

Another policy field where this is problematic is in Serbian energy policy. Serbia are heavily dependent on Russian gas and energy and has not been able to join the sanctions from the EU towards the Russian economy. In 2022, Serbia signed a three-year gas supply deal with Russia, which could argued to be a controversial deal in the light of the ongoing war in Ukraine (McBride, 2022). In an interview after signing the deal with Russia, President Vucic stated the following (Dettmer, 2023):

*"What I can tell you is that we have agreed on the main elements that are very favourable for Serbia." – President Vucic, (29<sup>th</sup> of May 2022)*

The Serbian President has also acknowledged that despite Russia's atrocities in Ukraine, him and other Serbian leaders have been complaining of Western pressure to join sanctions against Moscow (Al Jazeera, 2022). On the other side, when the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen visited Belgrade in October last year, she stated clearly that dependence on Russian gas is not good (Jelasnica, 2022):

*"...We see that dependency that is too much focused on Russian gas is not good. We have felt it bitterly during the last months. So the diversification away to reliable suppliers is paramount for us." – Ursula von der Leyen, (28<sup>th</sup> of October, 2022)*

In this case it is evident that Serbia has acted contrary to the wishes of the EU. Moving away from Russian gas and energy has been one of the most important parts of the bloc's response to Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the fact that Serbia has not been able to follow other EU member-states, which can be interpreted as the Union has not enforced clear demands on Serbian accession. This makes EU-Serbia cooperation on potential membership for Serbia more difficult. Moreover, Serbian Minister for European Integration Tanja Miscevic has stated that Serbia were not clever enough to diversify in terms of the energy sources when agreeing upon a three-year-gas supply deal with Russia (DW News, 2023, 2:10).

From a Serbian perspective, it is reasonable to view the deal as a temporary solution to the energy crisis. There has been few signals that Russia's aggression in Ukraine will end in the near future, and for President Vucic it is important to have access to energy during these times. The surveys previously presented in the analysis also indicate that the energy deal is not considered to be an issue, as many Serbians do not possess a bad image of Putin and his empire. However, it is still a decision which has not gotten Serbia closer to the EU, but instead delaying their own accession to the bloc.

However on the other hand, Serbia is an important ally for Russia. What is of great importance for Russia in the new European context where most of the continent are against them, is that they are able to slow down Serbia's negotiations on EU membership. With their ongoing aggression in Ukraine, Russia created a situation where Serbia had a urgent need for energy supply and have been able to prevent sanctions from their Serbian ally, being their main source of energy. In other words, Russia have been able to demonstrate great influence in Serbia and further decreased the process of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. If Serbia were willing to withdraw their dependence on Russia economically and politically, it could enhance greater ground for democratization.

Likewise is the Russian influence on the matter of Kosovo for Serbia. In the controversial dispute it is clear that Russia has been an important ally for the Serbs in not recognizing Kosovo as an independent state, and this makes it more difficult to loosen ties to Russia.

It could be therefore argued that the dispute has become more sour after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Putin has consistently used Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence as legal justification for military interventions into other former Soviet republics (Pineles, 2022). In the eyes of Putin, these republics are part of Russia as Kosovo is believed to be a part of Serbia for the Serbs. As Russia has been supporting pro-Russian regions of the former Soviet republics such as the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and Donbas in Ukraine, it can be viewed that by supporting Serbia in not recognizing Kosovo, Putin builds his argument for seeking power in the Pro-Russian parts of Ukraine.

In the same manner, both Serbia and Russia share the hostility towards NATO, which for Serbia is important for their stance on the Kosovo dispute. For Russia, they interpreted the military intervention of NATO in Belgrade as a breach on the very foundational principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity (Surzhko-Harned & Nykodym, 2023). Hence, Russia justifies their intervention in Ukraine to support the province of Donbass as they did with Crimea in 2014; supporting pro-Russian regions which at a certain time was a territorial part of the Soviet Union. On this note it could therefore be important for Serbia to seek greater diplomatic relations with Kosovo in order to weaken the argument for Putin and Russia to intervene militarily in other sovereign countries as this would possibly be a statement towards the EU that they are willing to shape their foreign policy towards the EU's values.

However, the political support Serbia receives from Russia in this matter are of great importance. With Serbia's ethnocentric nationalistic view, they are not reluctant to state that Kosovo is still a part of Serbia, but on the other side diplomatic improvements has improved during the last decade. Several academics such as Economides & Ker-Lindsay (2015), Guzina (2022) and Wochnik & Wochnik (2012) are arguing that Serbia have softened their standpoint on Kosovo as an attempt to shape their foreign policies towards fitting the expectations of the EU, but still relying on Russia for political support in their decision to recognize Kosovo.

On that note, it seems that Serbia are working around the problem of Kosovan independence, by trying to find other areas where they are able to change their policy towards EU criteria. In addition, while the EU seeks enlargement in the region, Serbia are working in the opposite direction; trying to keep territory which they believe are unilaterally theirs. And it is in this situation where Russian support in not recognizing Kosovo is argued to be crucial for Serbia.

Russian support does not only facilitate an argument for Russia to invade Ukraine, but can also be argued to be an important source for Serbian support for Russian influence in Serbia and this is what we see in the statistics indicating that more people are in favor of Moscow instead of the EU, which is a highly complicated aspect of accession to the Western bloc, when only roughly 30% are supporting Serbia's chosen path (see previous Table 4.1).

Finally, for the EU it is important that they are able to facilitate stronger democracy and stabilization in the region. Russia is making their "strategic stabilization" process problematic, and is conceivably one of the main reasons behind the slow speed of Serbian EU accession. What we see is that Russian influence is clear in most areas in Serbian and is a great threat to the EU's hopes for stable liberal democracy and rule of law in Serbia, and in the rest of the Western Balkans.

## 5 Conclusion

During the analysis we have discussed three challenges Serbia are facing on their path towards EU membership. Firstly, the thesis has considered Serbian identity as a demanding provocation for Serbian EU accession as their identity is argued to be more aligned to Russia with the fact that both share Slavic and Orthodox heritage. It have also looked at the "Yugoslavian" part of their identity as conflictual due to a significant amount of Serbs nostalgically looking back at the Yugoslav-era when Serbia were the leading republic.

This ethnocentric nationalism Serbia has built their identity around after the disintegration of the SFRY has been granted room to grow during the last decades. This conflicts greatly with the EU's shared liberal values, especially where Serbia is lacking in democracy and strength of rule of law. It could therefore be reasonable to state that this can be partly explained by the Serbian identity not sharing the same values. On the other hand this has created space for Russian influence in the Serbian sphere, where Russia has taken advantage of the EU's failed attempts for influence in the Western Balkans, as they first failed to help Serbia during the Yugoslavia-wars, but also the NATO bombing in 1999. Russia has then applied a rhetoric towards the Serbian people, which emphasis the Russians as a greater ally. This is arguably what we have seen in recent surveys, indicating that the support for Russia is greater than for the EU in Serbia.

Another challenge the thesis has considered is the Kosovo dispute. As long as Serbia has been standing still on their point that Kosovo is not an independent state, and additionally Russia supporting the same claim, makes it more difficult for the EU to pursue enlargement in the Western Balkans. It maintains the risks of conflict and weakening of democratic rule in the region, which are preventing EU values to "spill-over" into Serbia. On the other hand the controversial relations between Kosovo and Serbia is used by Putin as an argument for Russia's intervention in Ukraine, which makes strong Russia-Serbia relations even more problematic for Serbian EU accession.

Third threat to EU membership for Serbia is Russian presence in the country. As indicated, Russian influence is present in both the preceding challenges discussed and it is evident that their influence in Serbia is holding the Serbs back on their path to European integration. They are politically supporting Serbia in not acknowledging Kosovo's independence and they have as well slowed down accession negotiations because of the situation in Ukraine. This has led Serbia isolated as they have not able to join EU sanctions on Russia because of Serbian dependency on Russian energy. Overall, the thesis concludes that Russian influence is the greatest deterrent to Western Democracy, and the greatest challenge Serbia faces on their path towards membership in the European Union (EU).

Finally, it will be interesting to study Serbian foreign policy in the aftermath of the ongoing war in Ukraine. How Serbia responds to Russian aggression in the future, and how improved relations with Kosovo will affect their accession to the EU, will show if Serbia are ready to become an EU member-state. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that Serbian membership in the European Union is not around the corner, but instead a long term perspective for President Vucic.



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