

A DECADE OF SERBIA'S EU ACCESSION PROCESS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SINO-SERBIAN POLITICAL RELATIONS

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Abstract: A decade into Serbia's EU accession process, risk-prone contingencies have strained and stalled Belgrade's relations with Brussels. The question of the Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija, which most EU countries recognise as an "independent state", remained a fundamental stumbling block, just as it had been since the outset of Belgrade's "European path" a quarter of a century ago. Furthermore, within months of opening the accession talks in January 2014, Serbia's ambitions entered a "perfect storm". First, the EU introduced sanctions against the Russian Federation over the Crimean referendum, putting high pressure on Belgrade's (non-)alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Then, in July 2014, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, announced an EU "accession pause" due to "enlargement fatigue". These developments opened the door for Serbia's "eastbound hedging", which paved the way for unprecedented political and economic interaction with the People's Republic of China, particularly in light of the conflict in Ukraine. Serbia comprehensively boosted cooperation with China, resulting in the signing of the Free Trade Agreement and the elevation of the partnership status to the level of "China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era" in 2024. Nevertheless, for a country surrounded by the EU and NATO member states in the middle of global tectonic geopolitical tensions and transitions, strategic hedging has its limits. Western calls to Serbia for de-hedging, alignment, and bandwagoning multiply, setting high hurdles for Serbia's proclaimed policy of military neutrality and political independence.

Keywords: China, Serbia, European Union, EU enlargement, hedging.

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SERBIA'S STRAINED "EUROPEAN PATH"

Almost a quarter of a century after the beginning of its "European path" and a decade into official European Union accession, Serbia's relations with Brussels remain strained, stalled, and often only discursively self-gratifying.

Between the optimism depicted by the first EU-Western Balkans summit in November 2000 in Zagreb and the Thessaloniki Agenda in 2003 and the grim reality coated by Brussels' geopolitically restored ambition in 2024 lay two decades of slow progress, radical political conditioning, major setbacks, enlargement fatigue, and rising Euroscepticism, all spiced by a host of pan-European crises.

The 2005-2008 negotiations of the first step in EU integration—the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA)—took place in an atmosphere of harsh conditionality policy, severely damaging the EU's attractiveness in the Serbian public opinion. The EU required full and unconditional cooperation with the International War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, largely perceived in Serbia as biased; it mediated in setting conditions favourable for Montenegro's independence, creating a rift with the Belgrade authorities; finally, it masterminded the so-called "unilateral declaration on independence of Kosovo" in flagrant violation of the Constitution of Serbia and international law (Mitić, 2007).

With the beginning of Serbia's implementation of the SAA, Belgrade and Brussels have moved to the next phase, with the process aimed at opening EU accession talks. However, the next half-decade would prove particularly difficult due to the European economic and financial crises and Brussels' gradual abandonment of the policy stipulating that "EU talks and Kosovo status are two separate tracks" after it had served its strategic communication purpose in the May 2008 Serbian election campaign to downplay anti-EU anger in the Serbian electorate (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2008). Led by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the EU institutions sought to pressure Belgrade to abandon a policy of countering international recognition of an "independent Kosovo", minimise the importance of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 stipulating that the province of Kosovo and Metohija is an integral part of the Republic of Serbia, retire Serbia's institutions from the province, and instead enter into a "normalisation process" with the Albanian separatist political class in Priština with the goal of "legalising" the "unilateral

declaration of independence of Kosovo” and “legitimising” the 1999 NATO aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Al Jazeera, 2011).

Nevertheless, although Belgrade’s authorities often claimed that the “EU has no alternative”, they also vowed to pursue the Four-pillar policy—cooperation with the EU, the US, the Russian Federation, and the People’s Republic of China. In particular, the signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2009 boosted cooperation with Beijing (BBC, 2009). The agreement paved the way for Serbia’s increased cooperation with China on trade and investment, particularly after the announcement of the 16+1 (China-CEEC) cooperation network in 2012 and the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 (Zakić, 2020). However, combined with the US “Pivot to Asia”, the EU’s self-reflection on enlargement, and the reinvigoration of Russia’s geopolitical influence, China’s presence in the Balkans entered into fertile grounds, adding to the region’s complexity but also providing new hedging opportunities, particularly for Serbia, which had proclaimed military neutrality and vowed to pursue a foreign policy based on political independence.

HEDGING THEORY – FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA TO THE WESTERN BALKANS

With the weakening of the US “unipolar moment” and the rise of multipolarity since the 2000s, the concept of “hedging” has gained prominence in IR scholarship, albeit at times criticised for vagueness or blurriness. The concept is defined as an “alignment strategy, undertaken by one state towards another, featuring a mix of cooperative and confrontational elements” (Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019) to ensure “against sudden changes in the behaviour of great powers and general insecurities in the international system”, that is, to strengthen strategic autonomy and reduce at the same time vulnerability through “diversification of political, economic, and security relations” (Gerstl, 2022).

While some more restrictive understandings of the concept focus only on one of the areas—political, security, or economic (Lim and Cooper, 2015)—a mixed policy approach calls for combining policies of the three to mitigate risks and maximise opportunities comprehensively (Gerstl, 2022; Goh, 2005; Koga, 2018; Kuik, 2008).

In his assessment of why states hedge, Gerstl points to the perception of risks (territorial integrity, economic dependency, autonomous decision-making) and opportunities (increased security, exchange, and legitimacy due to socioeconomic development), as well as the perception of the strategic value of other great powers and international organisations (Gerstl, 2022).

An essential element is trust. As argued by Stiles, hedging is a “strategy common to states and other actors that may be willing to commit to substantial agreements involving such fundamental issues as security and human rights but also want to protect themselves from too open-ended or permanent a commitment” (...) a stand which stems “from uncertainty about the future conditions of the world or the fact that the agreement itself is resistant to enforcement, but a key element is almost certainly a fear that your partners will betray you” (Stiles, 2018, p. 12).

The concept of “hedging” originated in the application of cases of China’s neighbourhood (Goh, 2005), and this area remains relevant today (Gerstl, 2022; Kim, 2023; Nedić, 2022). Nevertheless, it has also applied to the Middle East (Salman and Geeraerts, 2015; El-Dessouki and Mansour, 2020; Fulton, 2020). Recently, “hedging” has been increasingly mentioned as a feature of Serbia’s foreign policy (Bechev, 2023; Dettmer, 2023; Ejodus, 2023; Nikolić, 2023; Vuksanović, 2024).

SERBIA-EU ACCESSION TALKS 2014-2024: A “RISKY” DECADE

The article delves into the first decade of Serbia’s EU accession talks to search for critical political contingencies, that is, events or actions that can influence the rise of political risk: a situation or development that arises and has the potential to negatively impact a state’s diplomatic and foreign interests, such as a shift in policy direction or political instability that could disrupt diplomatic standing and overall governance. These contingencies include the effects of policy documents, agreements and arrangements, official meetings and visits, joint statements and declarations, and overall trends and political processes. The article will then examine the consequences of these contingencies for political relations between China and Serbia, including hedging opportunities and risks.

Chapter 35: pushing for a “de facto” recognition of “Kosovo”

The political conditionality of Serbia’s EU accession with the status of Kosovo and Metohija has manifested itself in the background and at all stages of negotiations, formal or informal (Zakić et al., 2024).

The European Commission recommended to the Council of the European Union the opening of talks with the Republic of Serbia on April 22, 2013, only after the signing, three days earlier, of the “First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations”, also known as the “Brussels Agreement” between Belgrade and the provisional authorities in Priština (European Commission, 2013). The Council of the European Union gave its green light two months later, on June 28, setting the stage for the beginning of talks on January 21, 2014, when the First EU-Serbia Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) opened in Brussels, marking the beginning of accession talks at the political level. At the IGC, the EU presented its negotiating framework, containing principles and procedures for accession talks. The focus was on the *acquis communautaire*, which Serbia, as a candidate state, has to adopt, divided into 35 thematic chapters, with Chapter 35 being related to the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. On one side, the negotiation framework was based on Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), arguing that the pace would depend on Serbia’s progress in meeting the requirements for membership. The EU pointed out that the shared objective of the negotiations is accession, but “by their very nature, the negotiations are an open-ended process whose outcome cannot be guaranteed beforehand” (Council of the European Union, 2014). However, unsurprisingly, a reference was included to the conditionality of EU accession talks on the “visible and sustainable improvement of relations with Kosovo*” (Council of the European Union, 2014). Such a process would avoid the blocking of the “European paths” of both Belgrade and Priština. It would “gradually lead to the comprehensive normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, in the form of a legally binding agreement by the end of Serbia’s accession negotiations” (Council of the European Union, 2014). Such formulation from the outset meant that the focus of the accession talks would, to a large extent, be based on Serbia’s readiness to accept “Kosovo” as a “separate entity” and, as such, placed an almost insurmountable obstacle (Zakić et al., 2024).

Belgrade was dragged into the “Brussels Agreement” on two promises. First, it would pave the way for faster EU negotiations. Second, under the

Agreement, a “Community of Serbian Municipalities” would be formed in Kosovo and Metohija. None of the two have materialised. Throughout the decade, despite incessant discussions and alleged pressure, the Albanian authorities in Priština refused to form the “Community of Serbian Municipalities”, exposing the impotence or collaboration of the European Union, its division, incoherence, and dependence on Washington’s policy. Instead, pressure was put on the five non-recognising EU states: Spain, Slovakia, Greece, Romania, and Cyprus. At the same time, the plight of the Kosovo Serbs was ignored, and Priština’s hybrid pressures (imposition of tariffs, banning of Serbian products, press, currency, and license plates) were tolerated and normalised through statements of “appeals to all sides” (Tanjug, 2024).

Furthermore, in the fall of 2022, the cabinets of French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz prepared a plan for the “normalisation of relations” between Belgrade and the Priština authorities, under which Serbia is supposed to abandon its policy of preventing “Kosovo” from joining international organisations and opposing “Kosovo statehood symbols”, such as passports, diplomas, and vehicle registration plates (N1, 2022). This plan was backed by an ultimatum of EU and US envoys in Belgrade on January 20, 2023, requesting Serbia to accept the process or face political and economic consequences (RTV, 2023). Although there were different interpretations of its content and its acceptance, the EU considered the plan and its roadmap as accepted (as the “Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia” and its “Implementation Annex”, also known as the “Ohrid Agreement”). Throughout 2023, it pushed for acceptance of this plan in an atmosphere of rising tensions and incidents inside Kosovo and Metohija. On the other hand, Belgrade insisted it opposed several elements of the proposal, saying it does not agree with “Kosovo” membership in the UN and its bodies. Nevertheless, in further pressure against Serbia, the Council of the European Union adopted in December 2023 conclusions requesting amendments to the benchmarks of Chapter 35 of Serbia’s accession negotiations to reflect Serbia’s obligations stemming from the “Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia” and its “Implementation Annex” (Euronews Serbia, 2023). If implemented, such a process would preclude Serbia from completing talks with the EU without at least *de facto* recognising “Kosovo” as a separate entity (Zakić et al., 2024).

Chapter 31: Aligning with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy

Two months after the start of Serbia's EU accession talks, in March 2014, the EU introduced sanctions against the Russian Federation over the Crimean referendum. Serbia did not align with the restrictive measures, as one of its principled foreign policies is to oppose such measures against the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, two of its main allies in the UN Security Council, over the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. However, Article 26 of the EU negotiations position states that "in the period up to accession, Serbia will be required to progressively align its policies towards third countries and its positions within international organisations with the policies and positions adopted by the Union and its Member States" (Council of the European Union, 2014). This meant that Chapter 31, regulating the issue of foreign policy alignment, would prove to be very contentious in the negotiations. As the crisis over Ukraine progressed and escalated following Russia's operation in February 2022, so did the EU pressure on Serbia to align with sanctions packages. Serbia supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine, in parallel asking Western countries to support Serbia's territorial integrity in Kosovo and Metohija.

Nevertheless, in November 2022, the European Parliament recommended continuing accession talks with Serbia only if it aligns with the European Union sanctions policy against Russia. The European Parliament, in a resolution on the "New EU strategy for enlargement", adopted with 502 votes in favour, 75 against, and 61 abstentions, recommended other EU bodies to "advance accession negotiations with Serbia only if the country aligns with EU sanctions against Russia and makes significant progress on the EU-related reforms" (European Parliament, 2022). While the EP resolutions are not legally binding, they indicate political will and a considerable pressure point on other EU institutions. The EP decision also meant that, regardless of the support at the level of the Council and among the member states, the EP would not support Serbia's progress without sanctions against Russia. That further hardened the EP position on Serbia, as, under Chapter 31, a candidate country is nominally only obliged to fully adhere to the EU foreign policy declarations on the day of formal accession (Zakić et al., 2024).

EU enlargement fatigue

In addition to the “normalisation process” over Kosovo and Metohija and the CFSP alignment over sanctions against the Russian Federation, Serbia’s accession process was at its outset caught in a “perfect storm” when, six months into talks, in July 2014, at the beginning of the mandate of the new European Commission, EC President Jean-Claude Juncker said in a speech in front of the European Parliament that “in the next five years, no new members will be joining us in the European Union” (Juncker, 2014). Furthermore, on August 28, in response to Juncker’s five-year moratorium on enlargement, Berlin announced the creation of the “Berlin Process”, an intergovernmental cooperation initiative. Linked to the future enlargement of the European Union, the “Berlin Process” aimed at revitalising the multilateral ties between EU candidate and potential candidate countries of the former Yugoslavia and Albania and selected EU member states (Berlin Process, 2014). However, it was also perceived as a form of “waiting room”, an interim yet subpar substitution for genuine progress in EU enlargement. Following years of economic and financial crisis, the EU entered a migration crisis, and enlargement fatigue among EU countries, most prominently in Western Europe, was on the rise, particularly in France.

Thus, when the European Commission adopted in February 2018 its strategy “A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”, there were doubts about its acceptance and implementation (European Commission, 2018). The document explained the steps Serbia and Montenegro must take to complete the accession process by 2025. EC President Juncker had indicated such a vision in a reversal of his 2014 non-enlargement policy. However, Juncker said during his subsequent visit to Belgrade that “2025 is not a promise; it is a perspective, an indicative date, an encouragement” (EU in Serbia, 2018). Three months after the proposal, it was disregarded by the EU member states when the Council of the European Union, at the May 2018 EU-Western Balkans in Sofia and further summits, refused to endorse the EC strategy, dealing a further blow to the accession process (Zakić et al., 2024).

French President Emmanuel Macron said in Sofia that thoughts of enlargement have “weakened Europe” and that he was “not in favour of moving towards enlargement before having all the necessary certainty and

before having made a real reform to allow a deepening and better functioning of the European Union” (Gray, 2018).

Following France’s suggestion, the EC presented a year and a half later, in February 2020, a revised enlargement methodology to “reinvigorate the process” by compiling chapters into clusters. However, once again, it was perceived as a delaying tactic (Varhelyi, 2020).

The same was true of France’s idea of a “European Political Community”, a pan-European cooperation debate club, which resembled more a “Berlin process”-type geopolitically-anchoring “waiting room” than a genuine contribution to the accession process (Nemeth, 2023).

Finally, with the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, a “geopolitical turn” in Brussels promised yet another fresh start for enlargement. However, this became especially true for the geopolitical spotlights, Ukraine and Moldova, while the Western Balkans, particularly Serbia, was left grudging about the unfairness of shortcuts for Kiev and Kishinev.

By August 2024, ten years into the EU accession process, Serbia had opened 22 negotiation chapters, temporarily closed two, and had not opened new chapters since December 2021.

A May 2024 survey by New Serbian Political Thought found that in responding to the question of what the chances were that Serbia would enter the EU in the next ten years, 10.3% answered “big”, 41.1% “very small”, and 37.7% “none” (NSPM, 2024).

IMPACT OF SERBIA’S EU ENLARGEMENT HURDLES ON POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH CHINA

In May 1999, the killing of three Chinese journalists in the bombing of China’s Embassy in Belgrade during the NATO aggression transformed Beijing’s foreign and security policy. Some US scholars, such as Peter Gries, considered that the impact of the bombing of the Embassy on Chinese foreign policy perception was such that one could talk about a “post-Belgrade China” (Gries, 2001). It is believed that the attack made Chinese officials change their policies regarding the threat of the US unilateral actions and “coalitions of the willing”, including in the Asia-Pacific (Ghiselli, 2021). On the 25th anniversary of the bombing of the Embassy, in May 2024, President Xi Jinping visited Belgrade during his first European tour since the end of the COVID-19

pandemic. He pointed out that “the China-Serbia friendship, forged with the blood of our compatriots, will stay in the shared memory of the Chinese and Serbian peoples” (Mitić, 2024). Indeed, memory culture, related to suffering during the NATO aggression in the 1990s, is one of the cornerstones of China-Serbia “iron-clad friendship”, a naming used to celebrate the linkage of political and economic cooperation at the highest level. The level of cooperation has been substantially strengthened by positive political communication from leaders of the two countries and sectoral ministries. China’s position on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija and its respect for Serbia’s territorial integrity are highly valued in Serbian public opinion. From the elections in Taipei in 2000, Beijing saw similarities in attempts to create conditions for the “unilateral declarations of independence” in the cases of Taiwan and “Kosovo” (Mitić, 2022a). When the EU and the US masterminded the “unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo” in 2008, China-Serbia positions strengthened on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. From the mid-2010s, Beijing and Belgrade pursued parallel processes of de-recognition of Taiwan and “Kosovo”. Both China and Serbia were successful in reducing the number of recognisers. Although these two processes are not directly related, they raised alarms in the political West. Second, in 2020 and 2021, when the European Union approved sanctions against China concerning Hong Kong and the position of the Uyghurs in the Chinese province of Xinjiang, Serbia refused to align and emphasised its principled support for China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, raising further Western criticism and diplomatic pressure. Third, Beijing representatives explicitly supported Serbia’s territorial integrity in all UN fora, particularly in the UN Security Council. The same can be said regarding China’s position over the issue of the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia, as Beijing refused to accept in the UN Security Council the nomination of German diplomat Christian Schmidt as so-called “High Representative” to Bosnia-Herzegovina, a stand hailed by Serbian public opinion.

These political processes were upgraded by economic cooperation, military cooperation, and people-to-people cooperation (Stekić, 2024; Trailović, 2020). Economic cooperation has dramatically improved since President Xi’s first visit in 2016, based on the Belt and Road Initiative. China was the number one investor in Serbia in 2023, and the three top Serbian exporters are Chinese companies. Serbia is the first European country to acquire Chinese weapons (FK-3 anti-aircraft missile systems and drones) and the first Central and Eastern European country to have a free trade agreement with China. The FTA, signed

in October 2023 in Beijing at the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, entered into force in July 2024 and became part of the upgraded status of relations between China and Serbia. The elevation of relations from “comprehensive strategic cooperation” to build the “China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era”, agreed upon during President Xi’s visit in May 2024, also indicated a shared vision of the global geopolitical transition towards multipolarity. This means a world order based on international law and the UN Charter and not a “rules-based” system based on the Western interpretation of international agreements and resolutions, which has had destructive consequences for Serbian national interests from the end of the Cold War up to today (Mitić, 2024).

Indeed, China’s global political role has received increased attention in Serbian public opinion. China’s positions on the issues of Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa are addressed in various formats, including political TV shows with expert guests. Crucial issues are related to the issue of the transformation of world order into a multipolar one: cooperation with Russia; possible confrontation with the US over Taiwan seen in the context of Serbia’s territorial integrity regarding Kosovo; China’s multilateral efforts within BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation; and Beijing’s role in de-dollarisation and technological competition with Washington. Recently, aspects of China’s Global Security Initiative (GSI) have also shown compatibility with Serbian positions. Beijing’s 12-point plan for resolving the conflict in Ukraine, based on the GSI, is compatible with Serbian interests. It is against double standards regarding the territorial integrity of states; it is against expanding military alliances; and it is against unilateral, non-UN sanctions. Given Serbia’s challenges regarding territorial integrity in Kosovo and Metohija, its military neutrality and opposition to join NATO, and sporadic Western sanctions against particular political actors in Belgrade, it is understandable why these postulates resound well in Serbia.

CONCLUSION

Risk-prone contingencies have slowed Serbia’s EU accession (dialogue on Kosovo and Metohija, CFSP harmonisation, and EU enlargement fatigue) and opened the door for Belgrade’s “eastbound hedging”. With the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis and the rising confrontation between the collective West

and the Russian Federation, Belgrade refused to bandwagon and sanction Moscow. However, it also had to face severe limitations in its cooperation with Moscow since 2022 (oil, military, the level of political interaction, transportation, and worries about avoiding sanctions over the export of dual-use equipment). Such a position gave a more prominent “hedging role” to Beijing. Serbia comprehensively boosted cooperation with China, resulting in unprecedented levels of political interaction, the signing of the FTA, and the elevation of the partnership status to the level of “China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era” in 2024.

Nevertheless, for a country surrounded by the EU and NATO members, in the middle of global tectonic geopolitical tensions and transitions, strategic hedging has its limits. Regarding Kosovo and Metohija, Beijing remains as firm as ever in supporting Serbia’s territorial integrity, fully supports UNSC Resolution 1244 and condemns the unilateral escalation moves of the Kosovo Albanian authorities in Priština. Yet, it cannot do more on the ground given the Kosovo Albanian animosity towards China’s presence and the local constellation of international organisations, which are almost exclusively Western-staffed. Furthermore, the EU and the US continue to perceive Beijing’s presence in the Balkans as a “third-actor malign influence”. They have thus boosted through their influence assets the negative strategic framing towards China’s political and economic role and its investments in the energy and mining sector (Mitić, 2022b).

Western calls to Serbia for de-hedging, alignment, and bandwagoning multiply. Whether purely rhetorical or part of official declarations, policies, and white papers, these calls impact the expectations and the trust of local and regional actors. Among these is the signing of the deals with France over the purchase of 12 Rafale warplanes (while Serbia previously focused on Russian MIGs and Chinese anti-aircraft) (Ruitenbergh, 2024); the European Commission’s offer to partially finance the Corridor X Belgrade-Niš high-speed railway (while the Belgrade-Subotica railway, on the same Corridor X and the BRI route, has been completed with Russia and China) (Kovačević, 2023); as well as the EU-Serbia agreement on strategic partnership regarding sustainable raw materials, battery value chains, and electric vehicles (with the EU’s aim to limit Belgrade’s energy dependence on Russia and China’s access to lithium and other critical minerals in Serbia) (Hodgson, 2024). For the EU and the US, these initiatives are part of the process of rooting out

strategic rivals from the Balkans. Brussels would call it a return to the “normal” incentives for EU accession: positive signals to investors, motivation for internal political reforms, and gradual and partial integration into the Union’s sectoral policies.

However, the first decade of Serbia’s EU accession, just as the quarter of a century of its “European path”, has been anything but normal. In the second decade, the perspectives of the accession process, just as of Serbia’s hedging, will again depend on multiple factors, including global geopolitical changes, European economic trends, the Balkans’ regional stability, and domestic public opinion. Warning: hurdles down the road.

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