



## COMMENTARY

**Serbia: towards the EU or searching for another direction?**

**VOCAL**  
EUROPE

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## Introduction

Serbia and Russia have been allies for many years and Russia is constantly concerned about the relations between Serbia and the European Union (EU). Russia's interest has always been to keep the Western Balkans away from the influence of the EU, more importantly Serbia, which is the largest country in the region, and the only one which is a strategic ally to Russia.<sup>1</sup> However, Serbia has been balancing between the EU and Russia for years. On the one hand there is the accession negotiations with EU, and on the other hand Serbia's announcement of signing a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in October 2019.<sup>2</sup>

## Historical background

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was established in 2015 as an attempt by Russia to reintegrate the countries of the post-soviet space and counter the enlargement of the European Union in the Western Balkans. After the failure of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in promoting integration between its member states, the EAEU has become "Russia's most ambitious political program since the end of the Soviet Union".<sup>3</sup> Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the organization, which is expanding by adding new member states. Apart from Serbia, Iran<sup>4</sup> and Singapore<sup>5</sup> also declared that they will join the EAEU by October 2019.

Serbia has nurtured strong ties both with the East and the West for many years. To be more precise, Serbia applied for the EU membership in 2009 and the negotiation talks begun in 2014.<sup>6</sup> From the beginning of the EU accession negotiations in 2014 and until today, economic progress has been made, but still Serbia is not ready to acquire full membership.

In other words, the country is tackling with many issues regarding corruption, rule of law and freedom of expression.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Serbia needs more time to settle these key matters, one potential date projected by the European Commission regarding when Serbia can enter the Union is the 2025.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, this is an ambitious goal and Serbia is aware of that as well.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Secieru, Stanislav. "Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks," n.d., 8.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/28/eu-warns-serbia-to-cancel-free-trade-pact-with-russia-if-it-wants-to-join-bloc>

<sup>3</sup>Piotr Dutkiewicz, "EU-Ru-Asian Integration?", in Piotr Dutkiewicz and Richard Sakwa (eds.) Eurasian Integration – The View from Within, Routledge, 2015, Introduction.

<sup>4</sup><https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Eurasian-Union-Deal-With-Iran-To-Take-Effect-In-October.html>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2019/09/04/singapore-sign-free-trade-agreement-eurasian-economic-union-october-25th/>

<sup>6</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en)

<sup>7</sup>European Union. European Commission, COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, 2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, Brussels, 2019

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup><https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/news/serbian-prime-minister-admits-eu-membership-2025-may-prove-unattainable>

As a result, and parallel to the negotiations with the EU, Serbia has been tightening its relations with Russia. In 2016 Russia and Serbia signed an agreement on military cooperation.<sup>10</sup> One of the main issues regarding the accession of Serbia to the EU is the stalled negotiations with Kosovo and the incapability of the two parties to reach an agreement.

The central dispute is that Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, but yet Serbia does not recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state. Traditionally, Russia has always been an ally to Serbia and disapproved Kosovo's independence since from the very beginning, but for Serbia the situation is much more challenging, because it needs to solve peacefully its differences with Kosovo, in order to join the EU.<sup>11</sup>

Solving the Kosovo-issue is not only important for Serbia's EU path, but it is also crucial for Serbia's geopolitical aspirations. Serbia's geopolitical interests – apart from the preservation of Kosovo - are based on its strategic neutrality policy. Serbia declared military neutrality in 2007. Therefore, its military neutrality policy brought the country closer to the European Union and especially to Common Security Defence Policy to which Serbia contributed by taking part within the EU missions in Uganda and Somalia.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from its closer relations with the EU, there is one more advantage for Serbia regarding this policy as far as economic development is concerned. Because, having strategic neutrality policy means that there is no strict requirement for distributing certain amount of resources for defence.<sup>13</sup> In this case Serbia can also have close cooperation with other geopolitical contenders such as Russia, or organizations such as NATO and the EU.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding Serbia's relations with NATO, Serbia joined the "Partnership for Peace" program in 2006 and since 2015 both parties agreed on Individual Partnership Action Plan.<sup>15</sup> Serbia, however, is not interested in joining NATO<sup>16</sup> as a member for two main reasons. Firstly, Serbia's close cooperation with Russia excludes to some extent full membership to NATO. Secondly and most importantly the aversion Serbian people have towards NATO, as the bombings of 1999 cannot be forgotten by the public, acts as a massive restraint against a possible NATO accession.

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<sup>10</sup>Żakowska, Marzena. "Strategic Challenges for Serbia's Integration with the European Union." *Security and Defence Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (March 31, 2016): 3–29. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0010.5631>.

<sup>11</sup>European Union. European Commission, COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, 2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, Brussels, 2019

<sup>12</sup> Ejodus, Filip. "Serbia's Military Neutrality: Origins, Effects and Challenges." *Croatian International Relations Review* 20, no. 71 (January 2014): 43–69. <https://doi.org/10.2478/cirr-2014-0008>.

<sup>13</sup>Stojković, Dejan, and Miroslav Glišić. "Serbia's Military Neutrality: Is It Economically Beneficial?" *Defence and Peace Economics*, November 26, 2018, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2018.1trade547952>.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50100.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50100.htm)

<sup>16</sup> Ejodus, Filip. "Serbia's Military Neutrality: Origins, Effects and Challenges." *Croatian International Relations Review* 20, no. 71 (January 2014): 43–69. <https://doi.org/10.2478/cirr-2014-0008>.

Undoubtedly, Serbia's decision to declare strategic neutrality policy was guided by the memories of 1999. Moreover, the neutrality policy serves the geopolitical interests of the country. On the one hand, Serbia cooperates with NATO without being a member, and on the other hand Russia remains a strong ally for Serbia.

So, from a Serbian perspective, the success of countries such as Ireland or Austria that have also declared military neutrality, is the only way to protect national interests and national security.<sup>17</sup> To conclude, Serbia has the opportunity to maintain diplomatic influence in the international arena without yet being member in a core international or regional organization, such as EU or NATO.<sup>18</sup>

## Current debates

### *Serbia between EU and EAEU*

Serbia declared that it will be joining the EAEU by October 2019. The European Union, however, released several concerning statements to warn Serbia that closer economic ties with Russia may create an obstacle to the accession process to the EU.<sup>19</sup> According to the European Union's External Action Service: "In the context of its EU accession negotiations, Serbia committed to withdrawn from all bilateral free trade agreements on the day of its accession to the EU".<sup>20</sup>

For a plethora of reasons, it seems confusing that Serbia wants to join the EAEU. Firstly, from an economic perspective the EU represents the 63% of Serbia's total trade.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, Serbia has already free trade agreements with Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russia, so by joining the EAEU the free trade will just be expanded between Serbia, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>22</sup> Hence, some other reasons guided Serbia in taking that decision.

Serbia is probably trying to deliver a message to the EU about the long duration of the accession negotiations. To provide an illustrative example, according to a survey conducted by the Belgrade Center for Security Policy in 2016-2017, the majority of Serbians no longer believe that their country will join the EU.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, according to the following graph<sup>24</sup>, in 2009 when Serbia first kicked off the EU accession process, the majority of Serbians were in favor of accession to EU. However, as the time goes by the number of Serbians who prefer their country to join the EU has been declining tremendously.

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<sup>17</sup>Stojković, Dejan, and Miroslav Glišić. "Serbia's Military Neutrality: Is It Economically Beneficial?" Defence and Peace Economics, November 26, 2018, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2018.1trade547952>.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup><https://www.voanews.com/europe/eu-urges-serbia-not-stray-its-membership-path>

<sup>20</sup><https://www.voanews.com/europe/eu-urges-serbia-not-stray-its-membership-path>

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

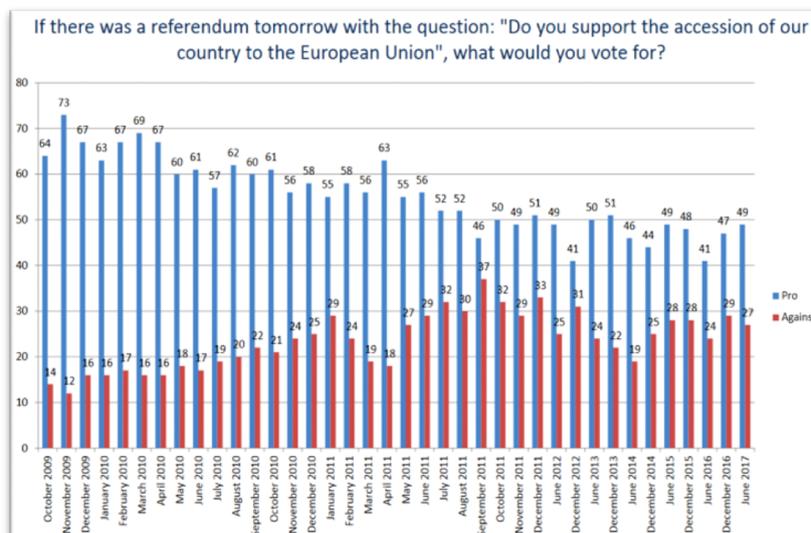
<sup>22</sup><http://jamestown.org/program/serbia-looking-west-going-east/>

<sup>23</sup>Pjevović, Dušan, and Strahinja Subotić. "EU-Sentiments-of-Serbia's-Citizens," n.d., 8.

<sup>24</sup>European Union, Publications Office of the European. "Serbia's Cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America." Website, May 28, 2018. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ab5192c5-de27-11e7-a506-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

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On the other side, the percentage of those who are against to accession to EU, reached a peak in 2011 (37%) and then declined, but yet more people since 2017 are against joining the EU compared to the figures in 2010.<sup>25</sup>



Furthermore, Serbia's economy is much more advanced than it was twenty years ago due to the fact that since 2000 the EU has been providing financial aid to Serbia and becomes Serbia's most important economic partner.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Serbia cannot only rely on the Union to eliminate the sentiment of insecurity about its future economic perspectives. For Serbia, it is also necessary to achieve cooperation with countries outside the EU as well. For Serbians, the Russian Federation is a big market that ensures economic development.<sup>27</sup>

Notwithstanding, Serbia's most important geopolitical goals remain as the accession to the EU and preservation of Kosovo in its territory.<sup>28</sup> The fact that the EU is putting pressure on Serbia to solve its differences with Kosovo—as a requirement to become a member state—has created negative feelings for Serbians towards EU, especially following the case of Catalonia. The Foreign Minister of Serbia, Ivica Dačić “accused the world of double standards in Kosovo and Catalonia.”<sup>29</sup> According to Serbia, the referendum in Catalonia<sup>30</sup> is considered to be unconstitutional, but the secession of Kosovo from Serbia is considered to be justified even without a referendum.<sup>31</sup> Serbia and Kosovo have not

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Pjevočić, Dušan, and Strahinja Subotić. “EU-Sentiments-of-Serbia’s-Citizens,” n.d., 8.

<sup>27</sup><https://jamestown.org/program/serbia-looking-west-going-east/>

<sup>28</sup>European Union, Publications Office of the European. “Serbia’s Cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America.” Website, May 28, 2018. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ab5192c5-de27-11e7-a506-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

<sup>29</sup>European Union, Publications Office of the European. “Serbia’s Cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America.” Website, May 28, 2018. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ab5192c5-de27-11e7-a506-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

<sup>30</sup><https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/catalan-referendum-live-updates-results-polls-spain-catalonia-independence-votes-a7975901.html>

<sup>31</sup>European Union, Publications Office of the European. “Serbia’s Cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America.” Website, May 28, 2018. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ab5192c5-de27-11e7-a506-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

managed yet to reach a peaceful solution regarding their dispute. Their relationship worsened in November 2018 due to Kosovo's decision to put a 100% tax on Serbian and Bosnian commodities. Kosovo's goal is to retaliate against Serbia and Bosnia for not recognizing the territory as an independent country.<sup>32</sup>

### *Russia's influence on Serbia*

Russia's influence on Serbia is based on three pillars. Firstly, Russia's support to Serbia over Kosovo is really important, minding that Russia is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, these two countries are sharing the same orthodox tradition. Thirdly, Russia is Serbia's largest energy supplier. According to a survey by the Publication Office of the European Union, 94% of Serbians believe that their country should maintain strong relations with Russia and the reason for the mentioned Serbians is that "Russians are our Orthodox brothers".<sup>34</sup>

Serbia is not only taking advantage of Russia's support for the Kosovo case, but Serbia also provides help to Russia in various political and economic domains. Serbia, unlike the member states of the EU, did not put sanctions on Russia following the annexation of Crimea.<sup>35</sup> More surprisingly, Serbian mercenaries also fought in Ukraine alongside Wagner Group, a "Russian illegal Private Military Company" to destabilize Ukraine<sup>36</sup>, meaning that the Wagner Group was discovered to have "taken part in some of the separatists militias and contributed to the fighting".<sup>37</sup>

The use of Private Military Companies provides plausible deniability to Russia, the country can refuse the blame, regardless of having participated or not in the outbreak of the fighting.<sup>38</sup> This involvement of Serbians in Crimea-crisis indicates that Serbia is not willing to break its ties with Russia, even if that means that its choices come in contradiction with the EU policies.

Russia is interested in obstructing another expansion of the EU or NATO in the Balkans. But the main issue is that Russia is running short of options.<sup>39</sup> To begin with, North Macedonia and Greece resolved the "name issue" and now North Macedonia is going to become a member of NATO and continue with the negotiation talks with the EU.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Montenegro has already joined NATO.

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<sup>32</sup><https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/all-political-parties-in-kosovo-support-tax-on-serbian-goods/>

<sup>33</sup>Lars Hänsel, Florian Constantin Feyerabend, Walter Glos, Karsten Dümmel, Johannes D. Rey, Martin Sieg, Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes, *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans A map of geopolitical players*, Berlin, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2018

<sup>34</sup>European Union, Publications Office of the European. "Serbia's Cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America." Website, May 28, 2018. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ab5192c5-de27-11e7-a506-01aa75cd71a1/language-en>.

<sup>35</sup>Ene, Angela-Mihaela. "Enlargement of the European Union in the Western Balkans and Russia's Geopolitics in the Region." *European Integration*, 2019, 6.

<sup>36</sup>Secieru, Stanislav. "Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks," n.d., 8.

<sup>37</sup><https://www.csis.org/nfp/russian-private-military-companies-syria-and-beyond>

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Secieru, Stanislav. "Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks," n.d., 8.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

Consequently, Russia has to put more effort in keeping Serbia away from the influence of NATO and EU, for Russia to continue exercise its influence in the Western Balkans.<sup>41</sup>

To summarize, Serbia aspires to join the EAEU to exert pressure on the EU to move forward with the accession negotiations, even without the solution to the Kosovo case. However, it is also likely that Serbia wants to maximize its power by joining the East-bloc too. Serbia's neutrality policy has given the opportunity to be "sitting in two chairs", but that will not improve its relations with the EU, and it also shows no strong commitment to the European family.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of Serbia joining the EAEU

Serbia may maximize its economic and political power by joining the EAEU. Becoming a member of a regional organization provides certain advantages; Serbia is going to acquire commercial relations with more states, namely the members of EAEU. Yet, the economic profit that Serbia will gain by joining EAEU is limited. The reason is that EAEU offers access to 180 million potential customers, but EU offers to Serbia 510 million customers.<sup>42</sup>

But, if Serbia's decision to join the EAEU causes a negative impact on the relations with the EU, then this small economic advantage may become a strong disadvantage. According to the World Bank, Western Balkan countries have to increase their GDPs by 4%, in order for unemployment levels to remain stable<sup>43</sup>, and that may be one reason why Serbia is joining the EAEU, even though the country is not going to advance its economy much.

Still, besides the economic motivations, Serbia does not want to stand alone in the international arena as it happened in 1999, which led to the NATO-bombings.<sup>44</sup> Serbia thinks that is unlikely to become a member state in the EU before 2025.

Moreover, Iran will also sign a free trade agreement with the EAEU in October 2019. Iran aims at boosting its economy following the US sanctions, and despite the fact that its exports will be negligible, Iran has only a few options left to improve its economy.<sup>45</sup> But the main question is, how Serbia is going to benefit by its membership in EAEU, while two of its members are facing sanctions. So, joining the EAEU may damage Serbia's regional and international aspirations.

## Possible scenarios about the reaction of the EU

In principle, the reactions of the EU, if the agreement between Serbia and the EAEU actually takes place, cannot be predicted. Nevertheless, some remarks can be made from previous examples. In

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup><https://jamestown.org/program/serbia-looking-west-going-east/>

<sup>43</sup>Čeperković, Marko, Florence Gaub, Donika Emini, Zoran Nechev, Isidora Stakić, and Europäische Kommission, eds. *Balkan Futures: Three Scenarios for 2025*. Chaillot Paper, No 147-August 2018. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018.

<sup>44</sup><https://exit.al/en/2019/09/09/serbias-increasing-closeness-to-russia-strains-its-eu-ambitions/>

<sup>45</sup><https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Eurasian-Union-Deal-With-Iran-To-Take-Effect-In-October.html>

2016, when Serbia signed the military cooperation agreement with Russia, EU became suspicious about Serbia's commitment to join the Union. Taking into consideration the fact that, Serbia did not impose sanctions on Russia, then signed the military agreement and now is going to join the EAEU, it makes sense for the EU leaders to be concerned about the future of the accession negotiations. However, the EU had never before expressed so openly its disagreement to Serbia for its relations with Russia, as it did regarding Serbia's upcoming agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union.

One possible future scenario is that, the EU will continue the accession negotiations with Serbia, but the negotiations will not advance further. The fact that improvements still need to be made from Serbia's part, such as to align its foreign and security policy with the European Union<sup>46</sup>, then the threat of closer ties with Russia, will not reduce the duration that the negotiation-talks require. Serbia's Minister of Trade affirmed that Serbia's goal is not to sabotage the European integration of the country, but the concerns that the EU has so far expressed are not going to prevent Serbia's upcoming free trade agreement with EAEU.<sup>47</sup>

The member states of the EU are similarly not pleased with Serbia moving away from its commitment to the EU by joining a Russian-led organization. Miroslav Lajčák, Slovakia's minister of foreign affairs made a statement, that Serbia cannot be going at "two directions at once".<sup>48</sup> Serbia needs to be certain about its accession to the EU, committed to European values and willing to promote the European identity and integration.

However, the worst-case scenario could include the EU to postpone the accession talks with Serbia. The reason for that might be that the EU is facing enough internal problems, such as Brexit, the rise of populist sentiment in most of member states, while trying to promote further integration between its member states. So, negotiations with a state, that is not committed to the values of the EU and appears unwilling to harmonize its policies with that of the EU, will not promote accession.

To provide an example, in 2005 the EU postponed the entry talks with Croatia, who did not appear committed enough to European values. The EU decided to suspend the accession negotiations with Croatia due to Croatia's failure to arrest a suspect who committed war crimes in 1995 following the break-up of Yugoslavia.<sup>49</sup>

In the case of Serbia if the scenario that includes postponement of the accession talks becomes reality, it is possible that peaceful dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo will end, normalization of their relations will not be achieved, and violent conflicts could arise inside Kosovo.<sup>50</sup> As a result, a domino

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<sup>46</sup>European Union, Publications Office of the European. "Serbia's Cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America." Website, May 28, 2018. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ab5192c5-de27-11e7-a506-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

<sup>47</sup><https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-11/serbs-ignore-eu-warning-over-plan-to-join-russia-led-trade-union>

<sup>48</sup><https://emerging-europe.com/news/slovakia-urges-serbia-to-reconsider-eaeu/>

<sup>49</sup><http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4351357.stm>

<sup>50</sup>Čeperković, Marko, Florence Gaub, Donika Emimi, Zoran Nechev, Isidora Stakić, and Europäische Kommission, eds. *Balkan Futures: Three Scenarios for 2025*. Chaillot Paper, No 147-August 2018. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018.

effect can arise in Western Balkans and the enlargement process of the EU might be further deteriorate.<sup>51</sup> In order for the relations between the EU and Serbia not to weaken, EU should manage the risk that Serbia can become a member of EAEU and it should try to keep Serbia closer to its values before the situation becomes unmanageable.

### Conclusion

Following Serbia's decision to join the EAEU, many questions are arising as to where Serbia's policies are closer to: closer to EU or closer to Russia? Serbia's primary goal remains to be the accession to the EU, however that does not mean that it will lose a strong ally, as Russia. Serbia needs Russia's diplomatic support for the Kosovo case, for Kosovo not to become a "fully fledged member of the international society of states".<sup>52</sup>

By joining the EAEU, Serbia firstly becomes a member of a community led by a longstanding ally such as Russia and secondly, sends a message to the EU that the accession process needs to be completed sooner. Nevertheless, Serbia needs to understand that unless it fulfills the Copenhagen criteria, it cannot become a member state. So, the country needs to put effort in improving key sectors of democracy and rule of law that still need to be transformed. The next couple of years will be crucial for the European future of Serbia and Western Balkans in general.<sup>53</sup>

To conclude, Serbia seems to be reaching both directions at once, the East and the West, but further cooperation with EU means less with Russia and vice-versa. Serbia's position between the East and the West creates a series of questions, for instance: How is Russia going to react if the EU accession process moves forward? What will happen if Serbia becomes a member state of the EU? Does the latter also mean that Serbia will put sanctions on Russia for the annexation of Crimea and what impact will this have on Serbia's Kosovo issue?

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Kovačević, Marko. "Understanding the Marginality Constellations of Small States: Serbia, Croatia, and the Crisis of EU–Russia Relations." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, February 20, 2019, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1580564>.

<sup>53</sup>Čeperković, Marko, Florence Gaub, Donika Emimi, Zoran Nechev, Isidora Stakić, and Europäische Kommission, eds. *Balkan Futures: Three Scenarios for 2025*. Chaillot Paper, No 147-August 2018. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018.

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