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2017**Presidential election in Serbia: A boost or setback for EU accession?***By Antun Krševan Dujmović***Introduction**

As Serbia braces itself for the presidential election on 2nd April 2017, the international community finds itself puzzled with the prospect of future political orientation of this Balkan country. The biggest republic of ex-Yugoslavia, Serbia still bears the burden of the wars in the nineties, undefined relations with Kosovo and NATO bombing of 1999, due to which the country is still somewhat cautious toward Euro-Atlantic integration and the United States. It seems that Serbia seeks to join the European Union (EU), and at the same time to foment its relation with its traditional ally, the Russian Federation. In that respect, the current trends of foreign policy in Serbia are also visible in other Balkan countries, namely Macedonia and Montenegro, which like Serbia have strong links to their big Orthodox patron in the East, while striving to make progress on the path to the EU. This

dichotomy between pro-European and pro-Russian forces in Serbia was exacerbated to a new level with Brexit and stalemate in the EU enlargement process, growing Russian influence in the region and expectations in Serbia that the newly inaugurated US president Donald Trump will bring a thaw in relations with Russia and allow a regionally more dominant Serbia, while curbing ambitions of Kosovar Albanians. This dichotomy has created a division in the country torn between its Western and Eastern ambitions that is visible in many aspects of Serbian society, where the presidential candidates bare a European or Russian hallmark, or in some cases both. Boško Obradović, the leader of the Serbian Movement Dveri (Srpski pokret Dveri) is a clear example of a pro-Russian politician in Serbia, while independent candidate Saša

Janković represents the voice of a civil and pro-European Serbia. The rest of the presidential candidates are positioned on a wide spectrum dividing Obradović and Janković, thus contributing to the rather short but at the same time very electrified presidential campaign.

A sluggish progress toward the EU

Serbia's accession to the EU has been to a great extent mitigated by the fact that the country, for a plausible reason, has no intention to join NATO. Even though it has not been written as a condition by the EU, all of the Eastern European post-communist countries have first joined NATO, and then the EU. In this respect, the legacy of NATO's intervention against Serbia 18 years ago makes Serbia a unique case in Eastern Europe. Notwithstanding, the country has traversed a long and solid path of aligning itself with the EU during the tenure of the unequivocally pro-European President Boris Tadić from 2007 to 2012, and Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković, whose cabinet was composed mainly by members of the For a European Serbia alliance. However, the impeding factor on Serbia's road to the EU had occurred just months before Mirko Cvetković was named Prime Minister, when in February 2008 Kosovo declared its independence. Although the country signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2008, and a year later applied for membership in the Union, Serbia was quite adamant in refusing to accept Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence.

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Kosovo was soon recognized by most of EU member states and the countries in the Western Balkans. In other words, Serbia found itself at loggerheads with Brussels and with some of its neighbors over its break-away province at the very begging of its EU accession process, a legacy that still burdens Serbia's relations with most European countries. Notwithstanding, Serbia proceeded to pursue its European future steadfastly, and by the end of Cvetković's cabinet term, the country was granted membership candidate status in March 2012. Cvetković was succeeded by Ivica Dačić in July 2012, and two months before Tomislav Nikolić assumed the Office of President of Serbia. Dačić is an apt politician with an extensive experience, but the fact that he is a member of the Socialist party of Serbia (Socijalistička partija Srbije – SPS), the political party that ruled Serbia in the nineties, meant that Serbia would not be

prone to make great concessions to Priština in order to appease Brussels. At the same time, the incumbent president Tomislav Nikolić who is overtly and unwaveringly a Russophile has never shared the same enthusiasm for integrating Serbia into the EU as his predecessor Tadić.

The country made a step closer to EU membership in January 2014 when the EU launched accession negotiations with Serbia. Just months later the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka – SNS) has won the snap election and Aleksandar Vučić became prime minister. While officially pursuing Serbia's EU accession, Vučić upheld strong Serbian ties with Russia and met the Russian president Vladimir Putin on many occasions, regardless of the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014. In spite of European sanctions that quickly followed the Russian intervention in Ukraine, Vučić invited Putin to Belgrade in October 2014 as a guest of honor at a military parade marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade from Nazi troops which were annihilated by the advancing Soviet army. This military parade and the subsequent joint flexing of muscles by Serbia and Russia in military exercises held in Serbia sparked protest in both Brussels and Washington. Upon this, Serbia never introduced sanctions to Russia and, unlike the EU, maintained strong trading relations with Russia.

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The Obama administration was a vocal advocate of a stronger European integration, and saw European future for Serbia rather than harvesting its relation with its "big ally" in the east. In that respect Vučić was striving to nourish both Serbia's EU ambitions and its partnership with Russia, and this Serbian foreign policy of balancing between the two poles was not his invention, but was rather deeply rooted in the vision of non-aligned Yugoslavia. Even though Vučić's Progressive Party joined the Group of European People's Party, the fact is that the SNS was founded in 2008 by former members of the Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka – SRS) which is a far-right party founded by the nationalist Vojislav Šešelj. The incumbent Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić, founder of the SNS and Vučić's predecessor at the helm of the party, stated that Serbia was ready to send its military to Kosovo, after a train with signs saying 'Kosovo is Serbia' was intercepted before it even reached the Kosovo border. This indicates that the ruling Serbian party is not united on issues like Kosovo and cooperation with the EU, as many SNS members support Nikolić's hardline rhetoric.

Presidential candidates

The date for Serbian presidential election (April 2nd 2017) was announced by the Speaker of the Serbian Parliament just a month ahead of the election day, thus providing the presidential candidates with only 30 days of election campaign. Along with a very short campaign, the Parliament also decided to put its regular sessions on hold until the election process is completed. The presidential candidates also had to deal with a new nomination procedure which requires that the lists with signatures of citizens supporting a candidate have to be verified by public notaries, which are less in number than courts that were in charge of the verification process before March 1st this year. These facts instigated an outcry by the opposition which was claiming that the ruling party SNS was doing everything in its power to impede the efforts of opposition presidential candidates while favoring the prospects of the incumbent Prime Minister and President of SNS Aleksandar Vučić.

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The decision of Vučić to run for the presidency was quite a surprise, even for members of his

own party, as Vučić was decisively dismissing all speculations that he would be a candidate until just few months ago. Vučić's public announcement of presidential candidacy provoked a disarraying reaction of the incumbent president Nikolić, who had been hoping for another term at the Presidential Palace. In spite of the full backing of the SNS leadership to nominate Vučić, Nikolić decided to publicly announce his own candidacy and it took a lot of Vučić's 'persuading efforts' before Nikolić finally decided to step out of the presidential race. In the final row between incumbent Prime Minister and President, Vučić once more demonstrated his power and position of the sole leader in Serbia.

The presidential candidacy of Aleksandar Vučić raises the question of his motives to transfer to the post of the President in a political system where the Prime Minister is the most influential person in the country. Opinion polls suggest that Vučić stands the greatest chance of winning the presidential race, and it is believed that if elected, he would preserve control over the SNS, and thus try to rule Serbia through the President's Office and at the same time as the leader of the ruling party. Vučić's decision to run for president shows even more political shrewdness in the light of the last year's snap election, when his SNS lost twenty seats in the Parliament in comparison to the National Assembly of 2014 when Vučić became Prime Minister for the first time.

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Other presidential candidates range from pro-European leaders like Saša Janković and Saša Radulović or nationalists like Vojislav Šešelj and far-right and pro-Russian candidate Boško Obradović. Saša Janković stands the greatest chance along with Vučić to make it to the eventual second round of the presidential race. Janković, who was Serbian national ombudsman for ten years and human rights activist, is an independent candidate and is backed by a broad alliance of center-left parties and civic platforms, mostly from urban areas in Serbia and in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. Janković represents the European voice of Serbia, and he builds his campaign on issues like democratization, better living standards and civil society development. Similar to him is Saša Radulović, a former Minister of Economy and President of the Enough is Enough (Dosta je bilo) political movement. Radulović is a vocal critic of Aleksandar Vučić and portrays himself as a harbinger in the fight against widespread corruption in Serbian society, while advocating Serbia's membership in the EU. Close to Janković and Radulović stands another

independent candidate Vuk Jeremić, who has an extensive international experience, having served as Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs for five years and also as President of the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly. Jeremić's experience in foreign affairs would be indispensable for a country like Serbia which strives to be the regional leader, and in his case also seeking to adhere to Serbia's European path, while maintaining close relations with its Russian partner.

Vojislav Šešelj is the founder and president of the nationalist far-right Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka – SRS) and was indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for crimes committed against Croats and Bosniaks during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. After 11 years of detention in The Hague, Šešelj returned to Serbia in 2014 and after being acquitted by the ICTY, his party won 26 seats at the snap election held in Serbia in April 2016. The successful return of Šešelj and his SRS to Serbia's political arena meant that the SNS, a party rooted in the SRS, won less seats in the Parliament than anticipated by Vučić. Thus Šešelj had unintentionally and indirectly influenced the decision of Aleksandar Vučić to run for presidency.

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Šešelj and his party enjoy a stable support in Serbia, and his election to the presidency would mean cutting ties with the EU, which was showcased during the March visit of EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, who was booed in the Serbian Parliament by Šešelj and his radical MPs shouting "Serbia, Russia, we don't need the EU." Boško Obradović, the president and founder of Dveri, a far-right party, stands in line with this position towards the EU. Obradović's political views on regional cooperation are ultra-nationalist as he denies the genocide in Srebrenica and supports the independence of Republic of Srpska, (Serbian entity within B&H) and its unification with Serbia. If elected president of Serbia, Obradović would probably scrap the negotiation process with the EU and instead pursue Serbian membership within the Eurasian Economic Union administered from Moscow.

Conclusion

Serbia's EU accession process has been a painstaking one and after more than three years of negotiations it looks like the country is slogging on its European path as it managed to open just 8 out of 35 negotiation chapters. This slow pace opens the door for Eurosceptic politicians, including some presidential candidates for the April 2nd election, as the body politic seems more and more divided between Serbia's European perspective and forging stronger ties with Russia. The United States' annual message to Serbia issued just before the Serbian national holiday on 15th February and signed by the new US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson makes no mention of

Serbian European ambitions and consequent EU accession, in stark contrast to previous letters issued to Serbia during the Obama administration. This wording raises hopes in Belgrade that the new US administration will shift its sight away from the Balkans allowing Serbia to conduct a more assertive regional policy, including its relations with Kosovo.

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The multi-tier vision for the post-Brexit Europe endorsed by the European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker's white paper triggers fears among Eastern European member states that Europe's periphery would be left lagging behind Europe's core countries, with Serbia and the Balkans lingering in limbo of EU's unfulfilled promises and Russia's growing regional presence. As Europe seems to be summoning itself for a new "reflection period" and putting on hold its enlargement process, the gap seems to be filled by some presidential candidates in Serbia, who are wary toward European values and EU's influence on regional stability, invoking memories from the

nineties. At the same time, it seems that the civic pro-European opposition is retracting ever since the European alliance failed to meet the expectations of Serbian citizens five years ago. The result is a dwindling support for EU membership and a growing support for ever closer ties with the Russian Federation. Still,

just days before the election, the opinion polls suggest that Aleksandar Vučić will win the election by a landslide. Amidst growing concern in Europe that instability in the Balkans could have a spillover effect in the rest of the continent, it seems that Brussels will welcome Vučić's tightening grip over Serbia.

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