





POLICY PAPER

Serbia between the EU, China, and Russia: How Should the EU Respond to Belgrade's Foreign Policy Misalignment

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I- Background

The European Union and Serbia have repeatedly stated that they shared a strategic goal: for Serbia to join the EU¹², and this ever since Serbia was granted EU candidate status in March 2012 and started accession negotiations with Brussels in January 2014³. However, despite this shared objective, the progress made since the opening of negotiations has been rather slow: 22 out of 35 chapters have been opened, two of which have been provisionally closed.⁴ Therefore, a lot still needs to be done before Serbia can be invited to join the bloc.

Issues of concern related to Serbia are discussed extensively in the *Serbia 2022 Report*.⁵ They are wide ranging. Little or moderate progress was made on the economic criteria, fight against corruption and the judicial system. Areas such as elections favouring the incumbent or freedom of expression are problematic. According to the Commission's assessment, there is definitely room for improvement.

One of the fields in which Serbia is increasingly at odds with the EU is its foreign policy alignment with Brussels. Alignment with the EU's foreign policy is a requirement for candidate countries to join the bloc. The Commission's report is damning on Serbia in this regard, even noting that Serbia was backsliding in this area. Indeed, Belgrade's alignment rate with relevant High Representative declarations on behalf of the EU and Council decisions dropped from 64% in 2021 to 45% in 2022⁶. Other candidate countries in the Western Balkans all had an alignment rate of way over 90%⁷.

One of the reasons behind this drop is Serbia's refusal to align with sanctions on Russia and Belarus after the outbreak of the war against Ukraine. Belgrade's proximity with Moscow in particular raises several issues and is completely at odds with the EU's strategic security interests. Meanwhile, Serbia has also been developing increasingly closer links with China at a time when the EU is slowly changing its stance on Beijing, calling China as a systemic rival.⁸

Meanwhile, Belgrade still relies a lot on the EU which remain by far Serbia's largest foreign donor and overwhelmingly the largest supplier of development aid. The EU is Serbia's largest trade partner in both imports and exports. Serbia also benefits from additional funds because of its status as an EU candidate.⁹

The current situation – with Serbia refusing to align itself with the EU on Russia in the wake of the war in Ukraine and its numerous shows of friendship with China – seems to be increasingly untenable

¹ EEAS, "the EU and the Western Balkans: towards a common future", 16 March 2022

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-western-balkans-towards-common-future_en

² European Commission, "Serbia Report 2022", 12 October 2022 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022_en

³ European Commission, "Serbia membership status" https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/serbia_en accessed on 25 November 2022

⁴ European Commission, "factograph Serbia", https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/factograph_serbia_0.pdf accessed on 25 November 2022

⁵ *Op. cit.* "Serbia Report" https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022_en

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ ISAC fund, "An analysis of Serbia's alignment with the European Union's foreign policy declarations and measures: Semi annual review for 2022", September 2022 <https://www.isac-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/ISAC-CFSP-Analysis-2022.pdf>

⁸ EEAS, "EU-China Relations factsheet", 1 April 2022 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-relations-factsheet_en

⁹ *Op. cit.* "Factograph Serbia" https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/factograph_serbia_0.pdf

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as it threatens the EU's strategy vis à vis China and endangers the security of the continent by supporting Russia. It calls for action from the EU, and for the avoidance of complacency.

The nature of the EU's response to Serbia's misalignment with Brussels' foreign policy considering its status as a candidate country will be discussed in the following paper.

II- Current State of Play

1- A problematic proximity with Moscow

In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Serbia's misalignment with the EU on issues related to Russia is particularly noticeable. In its *Serbia 2022 Report*¹⁰, the Commission assessed that Serbia had only aligned with a small number of declarations by the High Representative (HR) related to Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Serbia has not explicitly condemned the aggression (despite voting with the EU at the UN General Assembly) and has so far refused to align with any restrictive measures against Russia. Belgrade has continuously maintained close relations with Moscow and has even hosted Russian officials on the EU sanction lists.¹¹

Serbia has for a long time maintained close links with Russia, which it considers as its historical Slavic and Orthodox ally and protector.¹² These romanticised links are still important today and are reflected by Russia support to Serbia on Kosovo and its refusal to authorise NATO intervention in 1999. They are instrumentalised for political gain by both Serbia and Russia which makes them hard to break.¹³

Meanwhile, instead of trying to decouple from Russian gas and oil, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has voiced interest in building a new interconnector with Hungary to get more oil from Russia.¹⁴ Three months after the start of Russia's full scale war in Ukraine, President Vučić announced that his country had agreed to a new three-year gas supply deal with Russia's state energy provider Gazprom.¹⁵ More recently, in September 2022, an agreement on consultations for 2023-2024 was signed by Serbia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikola Selaković and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov. Although Selaković insisted that the signing of this document was a technical matter and was not related to security policy,¹⁶ such a show of proximity in the context of Moscow's aggression in Ukraine elicited sharp criticism from EU officials.

The European Parliament's rapporteur on Serbia Vladimír Bilčík tweeted that according to him, "the news of planned consultations between Serbia & Russia [was] a major blow to accession process in the Western Balkans"¹⁷. Another MEP (Member of the European Parliament), Viola von Cramon,

¹⁰ *Op. Cit.* "Serbia Report" https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022_en

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Andrew Higgins, "Bound by a Sense of Victimhood, Serbia Sticks With Russia", *The New York Times*, 30 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/30/world/europe/ukraine-serbia-russia.html>

¹³ Helena Ivanov, "the EU is pushing Serbia into Russia's arms", *Unherd*, 18 March 2022 <https://unherd.com/the-post/the-eu-is-pushing-serbia-into-russias-arms/>

¹⁴ Zoran Radosavljevic, "Serbia eyes interconnector to bring Russian oil from Hungary", *Euractiv*, 16 June 2022 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/serbia-eyes-interconnector-to-bring-russian-oil-from-hungary/>

¹⁵ Luke McGee, "Serbia's gas deal with Putin has created a fresh headache for Europe", *CNN*, 1 June 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/06/01/europe/serbia-russian-gas-eu-analysis-intl-cmd/index.html>

¹⁶ Euractiv.rs, "Serbia doubles down on plan to coordinate foreign policy with Russia", *Euractiv*, 26 September 2022 https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/serbia-doubles-down-on-plan-to-coordinate-foreign-policy-with-russia/

¹⁷ https://twitter.com/VladoBilcik/status/1573956602058706944?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw accessed on 25 November 2022

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called the agreement a “serious scandal” and called for a freeze of the EU’s accession talks with Serbia.¹⁸

This sharp criticism from influential MEPs echoes the conclusions of the Commission’s *Serbia 2022 report* which established that Serbia was “backsliding” on its EU path in part because of its relationship with Russia.¹⁹ Against this backdrop, the European Parliament’s AFET Committee drafted a report explicitly calling the Council and the Commission to “prioritise the alignment of accession countries with the EU’s common foreign and security policy and to continue accession negotiations with Serbia only if the country aligns with EU sanctions against Russia”.²⁰

Clearly, in a context of heightened tensions between the EU and Russia, Belgrade’s proximity with Moscow is increasingly seen as unacceptable in Brussels. This will be the case at least until Serbia decides to finally align with sanctions on Moscow like other Western Balkans countries did.

2- The elephant in the room: China

While the EU’s focus has been mostly on Russia because of the urgent challenges created by the ongoing war in Ukraine, Serbia’s strong links with China may also jeopardise its EU bid. According to a report by the EPRS,²¹ China established itself in the Western Balkans during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis and intensified cooperation amid the pandemic. China is involved in a great number of projects in Serbia through foreign direct investments and loans. Its undertakings there are linked to its Belt and Road Initiative which was established in 2013 and aims at enhancing China’s presence by investing in a network of transport infrastructure.

Because of its geographical position in the Balkans and its role as a transport hub, Serbia has been a central piece of China’s presence in the region. One of the key Chinese projects in Serbia is the Belgrade-Budapest high speed railway²² for a total cost of €2.9 billion.²³ Such projects may negatively impact a country’s EU bid. Indeed, what makes Chinese investments attractive for Balkan countries is their lack of conditionality on sustainability and transparency. This affects EU conditionality negatively as it often reduces social rights and environmental standards²⁴. China’s investments may also affect budget deficits and debt limits required by the Stability and Growth Pact, as has been seen by the huge debt contracted by Montenegro for its highway financed by China.²⁵

Serbia’s enhanced cooperation with China also carries security risks. The EPRS mentions that Belgrade’s collaboration with Huawei to develop a biometric surveillance project is still in progress.²⁶ On another issue, at a time when China is increasingly seen as a threat to the rules-based international

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/ViolavonCramon/status/1573758277078454272> accessed on 25 November 2022

¹⁹ *Op. Cit.* “Serbia Report 2022” https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022_en

²⁰ European Parliament, “Draft Report on a European Parliament recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning the new EU strategy for enlargement (2022/2064(INI)), 22 June 2022 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-PR-732911_EN.pdf

²¹ European Parliament, “China’s strategic interests in the Western Balkans”, June 2022

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf)

²² Andreea Brînză, “China and the Budapest-Belgrade Railway Saga”, *The Diplomat*, 28 April 2020

<https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/china-and-the-budapest-belgrade-railway-saga/>

²³ *Op. Cit.* “China’s strategic interests in the Western Balkans”

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf)

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

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order, Serbia has deliberately chosen to cooperate militarily with Beijing. In 2020, Serbia purchased Chinese military drones and agreed on technology transfers with the state-owned China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation.²⁷ China has also delivered surface-to-air missiles to Belgrade in April 2022.²⁸ At a time when Russia's position has weakened because of its war in Ukraine, it Serbia could be compensating by enhancing its dealings with China who also helped the country during the Covid-19 crisis.²⁹

This close relationship between Belgrade and Beijing has also contributed to misalignment with Brussels' foreign policy. In 2021, Serbia refused to align with the EU's political declarations on the situation of human rights in Hong Kong. Belgrade also refused to align with a EU declaration in which the bloc condemned malicious cyber-activities by two hacker groups based in China. Finally, Serbia also failed to align with EU sanctions on China.³⁰

3- Actions taken by the EU

Serbia's developing links with Russia and China may also be explained in part by the slow road to EU accession. Of course, it is understandable that the EU expects Serbia and other candidate countries to align with its foreign policy, respect the Copenhagen criteria and the *Acquis Communautaire*. However, integrating the Western Balkans including Serbia has not been a priority for the EU in the last decade – which may have led Belgrade and other capitals to believe that reforms were pointless without any EU membership perspective.

In the past years, the EU's focus has mostly been on dealing with crises: first the financial crisis, then the refugee crisis in 2015-2016, followed by the Covid-19 crisis and today's further invasion of Ukraine by Russia.³¹ This led the EU to first focus on its internal consolidation to the detriment of enlargement – leaving a gap for an opportunistic China and Russia to gain ground. At the height of the pandemic, the EU's credibility was severely undermined as Beijing and Moscow used vaccine diplomacy to strengthen their role and reputation in the Balkans while the EU was struggling and looking inwards at the beginning of its own rollout³².

French President Emmanuel Macron's call for a multi-speed Europe³³ and his vision of an EU of concentric circles also raises issues as the Western Balkans may find themselves in an outer circle where they would risk remaining in the waiting room forever.³⁴

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Makar Menshikov, "Pressured by the West Over Russia, Serbia May Look To China, *BalkanInsight*, 28 April 2022 <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/28/pressured-by-the-west-over-russia-serbia-may-look-to-china/>

²⁹ Vuk Vuksanovic, "With All Eyes on Russia, Serbia Nourishes Ties With China, *The Diplomat*, 21 March 2022 <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/with-all-eyes-on-russia-serbia-nourishes-ties-with-china/>

³⁰ *Op. Cit.* "China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans" [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf)

³¹ Dimitar Bechev, "What Has Stopped EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans", *Carnegie Europe*, 20 June 2022 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/06/20/what-has-stopped-eu-enlargement-in-western-balkans-pub-87348>

³² Ana E. Juncos, "Vaccine Geopolitics and the EU's Ailing Credibility in the Western Balkans", *Carnegie Europe*, 8 July 2021 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/07/08/vaccine-geopolitics-and-eu-s-ailing-credibility-in-western-balkans-pub-84900>

³³ Gresa Kraja, "Une Europe à plusieurs vitesses : que pensent les pays des Balkans de l'idée d'E. Macron" *Euronews*, 13 May 2022 <https://fr.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/13/une-europe-a-plusieurs-vitesses-que-pensent-les-pays-des-balkans-de-l-idee-d-e-macron>

³⁴ *Op. Cit.* "What has Stopped EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans" <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/06/20/what-has-stopped-eu-enlargement-in-western-balkans-pub-87348>

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There has been pressure on the EU side for Serbia to change its positions on Kosovo in exchange for faster accession to the bloc and economic benefits, with little result so far.³⁵ According to Serbian MP Milovan Drecun quoted by *Le Monde*, it is possible that Serbia might finally align with Brussels' sanctions on Russia in order to avoid any deal leading to Kosovo's accession to the UN.³⁶

As far as China's growing presence in Serbia is concerned, the EU has finally – belatedly – realised what was at stake and has started to take action.³⁷ In October 2020, it issued an Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans to aid their recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁸ In December 2021, the EU released its Global Gateway Strategy seen as a response to China's Belt and Road Initiative.³⁹ Within the framework of the aforementioned texts, the EU in February 2022 launched a €3.2 billion investment package to advance sustainable connectivity in the Western Balkans.⁴⁰

Despite these actions by the EU, Belgrade has continued to nurture close links with both Moscow and Beijing in a way that may threaten the EU's strategic interests. In this regard, the future of EU investment in the country raises questions. Should the EU continue on this path if Serbia chooses to align with Brussels' rivals such as Russia and increasingly China?

III- Policy Recommendations

The key for the EU in dealing with Serbia's misalignment with Brussels' foreign policy is to strike the right balance. Just stripping Serbia of its candidate status and depriving Belgrade of its EU pre-accession funds is likely to just further alienate the country and its population, while encouraging an even stronger alliance with Russia and reliance on China. Freezing the accession talks – like some MEPs asked for in the wake of Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in early 2022⁴¹ – would not solve the issue either for similar reasons. However, the status quo which allows Serbia to benefit from the perks of being an EU candidate while backsliding on its alignment with the EU's foreign policy with no consequences is not sustainable and definitely not in line with an EU future which remains a shared objective for Belgrade and Brussels. Therefore, new inventive solutions are needed.

1- A reform of the accession process to create more incentives: staged accession to the EU

What the EU clearly needs to gain influence in Serbia is to have a system rewarding alignment and progress. Instead of being stuck for years and years in the limbo of the EU's antechamber, candidate

³⁵ Jean-Baptiste Chastand, "L'Union européenne veut pousser la Serbie à rompre avec la Russie", *Le Monde*, 13 October 2022 https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/10/13/l-union-europeenne-veut-pousser-la-serbie-a-rompre-avec-moscou_6145669_3210.html?fbclid=IwAR297It4Wr0XvJEVawNnZVu7EwlNpv-Lx0avcAJK3Ni1XiEeXCxOpAUidzw

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Vladimir Shopov, "Southern discomfort: the West's competition with China in the Balkans", *ECFR*, 16 March 2022 <https://ecfr.eu/article/southern-discomfort-the-wests-competition-with-china-in-the-balkans/>

³⁸ European Commission, "Western Balkans: An Economic and Investment Plan to support the economic recovery and convergence", 6 October 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1811

³⁹ European Commission, "Global Gateway: up to €300 billion for the European Union's strategy to boost sustainable links around the world", 1 December 2021 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6433

⁴⁰ European Commission, "European Commission launches €3.2 billion investment package to advance sustainable connectivity in the Western Balkans", 25 February 2022 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_1362

⁴¹ "MEPs Call on EU Heads: Freeze: Freeze EU Accession Negotiations for Serbia Now, Until It Distances Itself From Russia", *Schengenvisa*, 14 March 2022 <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/news/meps-call-on-eu-heads-freeze-eu-accession-negotiations-for-serbia-now-until-it-distances-itself-from-russia/>

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countries, including Serbia, would be engaged on a path with several milestones where tangible progress would be rewarded in a way that appeals to the population and political leaders.

A solution modelled on the “staged accession” process presented by the CEPS in contribution with Serbian researchers⁴² would create incentives for a country – here Serbia – to reform. This would encourage reforms on domestic policy and the rules of law and could of course also be applied to alignment with the EU’s foreign policy. As exposed in an article published by Belgrade’s Centre for European Policy,⁴³ staged accession would create a structure without introducing shortcuts for countries not ready for accession in a bid to reassure countries already in the EU. It would incentivise reform as these would be rewarded by increased funds and gradual participation in EU institutions.

This approach, if clear and well established, would also create visibility for citizens who would be able to better hold their leaders accountable on their EU path. It would help avoid frustration and create momentum. It could step by step contribute to the resolution of bilateral issues in the Western Balkans regions⁴⁴ and would help the EU restore its reputation in an environment – especially in Serbia – increasingly hostile to Brussels⁴⁵.

All in all, this process would create accountability which would benefit both the EU and Serbia. The former will ensure some sort of progress before allocating more funds, the latter will have more visibility and rewards when intermediary milestones are reached.

2- The EU should sanction backtracking

This is the logic advocated by MEPs in their resolution voted on 23 November 2022⁴⁶. Considering that the EU’s security and prosperity relies on its ability to defend peace, democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the rules based international order and that enlargement is the best tool to achieve this goal, the European Parliament advocates for an acceleration of the membership process for countries who demonstrate “strategic orientation and unwavering commitment to EU-related reforms”⁴⁷ which include foreign policy and sanctions on third countries (such as Russia) in a not so subtle nod at Serbia. An acceleration of the membership process would, of course, be the reward for complying countries. Full EU membership is to remain the ultimate goal for all candidate countries.

This is why setting deadlines for reforms is so important. These of course should be adapted depending on the country. The European Parliament advocates for a sanctions system in case of a backtracking in the field of democracy, media freedom, the fight against corruption, human rights, and the rule of law.⁴⁸ In a new, more unstable, and unpredictable international arena, it could make

⁴² Michael Emerson, Milena Lazarevic, Steven Blockmans, and Strahinja Subotic, “A Template for Staged Accession to the EU”, *CEPS*, 1 October 2021 <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/>

⁴³ Strahinja Subotic and Milena Lazarevic, “the Model of staged accession to the European Union”, *European Policy Centre Belgrade*, August 2022 <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/The-Model-of-staged-accession-to-the-European-Union.pdf>

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Euractiv.rs, “Only 20% of Serbs view EU positively says polling expert”, *Euractiv*, 11 April 2022 https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/only-20-per-cent-of-serbs-view-eu-positively-says-polling-expert/

⁴⁶ European Parliament, “European Parliament recommendation of 23 November 2022 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning the new EU strategy for enlargement (2022/2064(INI))”, 23 November 2022 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0406_EN.html

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

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sense to also include alignment with foreign policy as one of the issues where backsliding would be sanctioned. The European Parliament's resolution claims that the EU should pause all accession talks with Serbia until Belgrade aligns with sanctions on Russia because of the war in Ukraine⁴⁹. Such a position is understandable but may lead to Serbia abandoning completely its EU path. Suspension of some funds may be more justifiable since the EU has some space to work with as Serbia's largest donor⁵⁰ despite its rapprochement with China and Russia. Serbia also shares a border with four EU countries – it is in all parties' interest to maintain goodwill and cooperation is as many areas as possible.

In the event Serbia chooses to follow through with its partnership with Russia to the detriment of the EU in a way which makes cooperation with Belgrade unjustifiable in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, then indeed accession talks should be suspended.⁵¹ This, however, should be a means of last resort and would definitely be a failure for the EU.

3- Taking into account the reality of China's presence in the region

When it comes to responding to China's growing presence in the Western Balkans, there is also room for action on the part of the EU. China's presence in Serbia is now well established: Beijing has invested in infrastructure, bought industries, and increased its cooperation with Belgrade in defence. This is a reality the EU now must deal with and which is not reversible in the short term.

Therefore, the EU should take China's presence and activities into account in its enlargement policy – by fostering transparency on China's project, insist on minimum work and environmental standards through public scrutiny for example.⁵² Such a strategy would also contribute to even the playing field and improve fair competition in the region. It also matters to build resilience and avoid hidden conditionalities or debt traps similar to the one Montenegro found itself in because of the exorbitant cost of its motorway financed by China.⁵³ This improved monitoring of China's activity in Serbia would also help the country to better align with the EU *acquis Communautaire* in preparation for full membership, while acknowledging China's contribution to the economic development of Serbia.

4- Better communicate on the Global Gateway Strategy

It is undeniable that the West (including the EU) has been a bit late to rise to the challenge of China expanding its influence in the Western Balkans.⁵⁴ China's game in the region is now clear, however, and the one of the best responses from the EU is to improve its communication at all levels to warn about the risks of China's involvement, and the reality of the EU being the biggest contributor to Serbia.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Serbian Ministry of European Integration, "EU Funds" <https://www.mei.gov.rs/eng/funds/eu-funds/#:~:text=The%20European%20Union%20is%20the,order%20to%20support%20the%20reforms>. Accessed on 25 November 2022

⁵¹ "Germany tells Serbia: you have to choose between EU and Russia", *Reuters* <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-tells-serbia-you-have-choose-between-eu-russia-2022-11-01/>

⁵² Valbona Zeneli and Fatjona Mejdini, "China in the Balkans", *Concordiam*, 17 November 2022 <https://perconcordiam.com/china-in-the-balkans/>

⁵³ Nikola Dordevic, "Montenegro narrowly avoids Chinese debt trap, for now", *Emergin Europe*, 9 August 2021 <https://emerging-europe.com/news/montenegro-narrowly-avoids-chinese-debt-trap-for-now/>

⁵⁴ *Op. Cit.*, "Southern discomfort: The West's competition with China in the Balkans", <https://ecfr.eu/article/southern-discomfort-the-wests-competition-with-china-in-the-balkans/>

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Serbia's choice to rely on Huawei and to collaborate with Beijing in the military sphere with drones and air defence creates vulnerabilities as well as backtracking risks for Belgrade's EU bid since Chinese activities are usually not so willing to abide by ecological and worker's rights norms.⁵⁵ China's help is extremely visible for Serbian citizens because of a successful communication strategy supported by the authorities. The risk of debt is rarely mentioned, as well as potential risks linked with China's growing influence in the field of surveillance for example.

The EU has introduced its Global Gateway to counter China's new silk roads. Within this framework, it was already decided to establish a €3.2 billion investment package for connectivity in the Western Balkans including Serbia.⁵⁶ Enlargement and integrating Serbia and the other Western Balkans countries seems to be given more importance now, which can also be seen through the Commission's decision to advise granting candidate status to Bosnia-Herzegovina.⁵⁷

What the EU must do now is to finally give Serbia and the Western Balkans the attention they require to counter China's influence, and to communicate clearly on why it is in Serbian's interest to choose a closer relationship to the EU as opposed to China. By presenting the EU as an attractive and efficient actor, Brussels may be able to appeal to the Serbian public and make aligning with the EU its foreign policy on both China and Russia more palatable.

IV- Conclusion

This paper is particularly timely because of the urgency triggered by Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and the rise in China. At a time when the rules-based international order is challenged by autocrats such as President Vladimir Putin of Russia or President Xi Jinping of China, it is important for EU members – and EU candidates – to present a united front in order to weigh in and defend their interests.

In a world where great powers seem on the rise, the EU must speak with one voice to make its point. This is why alignment in foreign policy is so important for future members. Moreover, since the EU is also about promoting values, aligning oneself with the likes of Russia in spite of the horrors President Putin is unleashing in Ukraine is questionable, and the status quo is not sustainable if the EU wants to remain credible.

On another note, misalignment in foreign policy on matters related to China and Russia is not the only issue of concern with Serbia. Kosovo remains on top of the agenda for the EU. Its independence has not yet been recognised by Serbia (and five EU members) which creates a lot of contention on different sovereignty issues. The recent controversy surrounding car plates in the past months shows

⁵⁵ Jean-Baptiste Chastand, "La Serbie, sas d'entrée vers l'Europe pour Pékin", *Le Monde*, 22 March 2021 https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/03/19/la-serbie-sas-d-entree-vers-l-europe-pour-pekin_6073757_3210.html

⁵⁶ *Op. Cit.* "European Commission launches €3.2 billion investment package to advance sustainable connectivity in the Western Balkans" https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_1362

⁵⁷ Jorge Liboreiro & Aleksandar Brezar, "Brussels recommends granting Bosnia the status of EU candidate, but with conditions", *Euronews*, 13 October 2022 <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/10/12/brussels-recommends-granting-bosnia-the-status-of-eu-candidate-but-with-conditions>

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how hot this crisis still is.⁵⁸ A French-German proposal is currently on the table to establish Kosovo's final status – stabilisation is indispensable for Serbia to join the EU.⁵⁹

On another matter, President Vučić's leadership also coincided with a deterioration of the rule of law in Serbia⁶⁰. This too should be resolved perhaps through the principle of staged accession for Serbia to finally be granted EU member status. It can also explain why Serbia's current government is so keen to align itself with China and Russia – two increasingly authoritarian countries.

What is clear, however, is that the war in Ukraine and the subsequent candidate status granted to both Ukraine and Moldova mean that there is an urgent need for enlargement reform to avoid fatigue and disillusion in candidate countries. Let's hope the EU continues to take the initiative in this area.

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⁵⁸ Wilhelmine Preussen, "Kosovo, Serbia reach deal over car plate dispute, EU says", *Politico*, 24 November 2022 <https://www.politico.eu/article/kosovo-and-serbia-reach-last-minute-deal-over-car-plates-dispute-josep-borrell-aleksandar-vucic-albin-kurti/>

⁵⁹ Alexandra Brzozowski, Alice Taylor and Georgi Gotev, "Leak: Franco-German plan to resolve the Kosovo-Serbia dispute", *Euractiv*, 9 November 2022 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/leak-franco-german-plan-to-resolve-the-kosovo-serbia-dispute/>

⁶⁰ European Parliament, "Serbia at risk of authoritarianism?", May 2019 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637944/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)637944_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637944/EPRS_BRI(2019)637944_EN.pdf)