



Weekly Briefing

**Serbia External Relations briefing:
Crucial foreign policy developments for Serbia in 2017
IIPE**

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Crucial foreign policy developments for Serbia in 2017

Serbia in 2017 is faced with challenges for three of its main foreign policy goals:

- a) For the EU integration process;
- b) For the maintenance of strong partnership with Russia and strengthening of cooperation with China;
- c) For the process of maintaining and providing international support for the diplomatic and legal battle over its southern province Kosovo and Metohija;

Continued transformation toward multipolar world order, internal evolution of EU toward federation and persistence of Western support for the secessionist Kosovo Albanian governments in Pristina (in the province of Kosovo and Metohija), with continued sanctions of EU and USA against Russia are exposing Serbia to pressure from the West.

Montenegrin integration into NATO adds pressure on Serbia and primarily on Bosnia and Herzegovina of which Serbia is international guarantor, to join this military alliance against its own national interests.

What are crucial foreign policy developments for Serbia?

Without making order by importance, these are:

I) Announcement by the EU Commission and its President Juncker on 13 September 2017 that Serbia (and Montenegro) are “frontrunner candidates in the Western Balkans” within the 2025 perspective of Joining EU.¹ Within this development is opening of six chapters out of 35 within EU negotiations with Serbia during the 2017 (27 February chapters 20 and 26, 20 June 2017 chapters 7 and 29, 11 December chapters 6 and 30). Of these six chapters, five are related

¹ State of the Union 2017, by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission 13 September 2017, AUTHORISED VERSION OF THE STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS 2017, #SOTEU ec.europa.eu/soteu.

to economy and finance except for the chapter 26 (Education and culture). In 2015 Serbia opened two and in the year 2016 four chapters in EU negotiations.

II) Montenegro joined the NATO on 5 June 2017, and, partially in response to that, in October 2017 commenced the realization of the Russo-Serbian agreement on the delivery of warplanes with 6 Mig-29 coming from Russia to Serbia. At the beginning of December 2017, it was announced that another ten Mig-29 warplanes, this time from Belarus, would be delivered to Serbia. Further cooperation was negotiated during the latest visit of Serbian president to Moscow and his meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin on 19 December.

After more than two years of delay due to EU Commission probe on Serbian -Hungarian railroad, Serbia officially launched the construction of the first 30km-long (18.6 miles) stretch of the railway, financed from the loan by Exim Chinese bank (Serbia borrowed \$297.6 million for start of the railway). Chinese EXIM bank is source of financing loans also for other projects of Sino-Serbian cooperation.

III) Two countries revoked the recognition of Kosovo and Metohija: Guinea Bissau, and Suriname, while one recognized it, Bangladesh and self-proclaimed institutions in Pristina claim that Madagascar did the same, although there are no legal proofs.

Detailed analysis:

I) Public opinion polls in past two years largely differ one from another. Governmental polls are saying that support for the EU was in the middle of 2017 still at the level of 49%, but other opinion polls show major fallout in the support among general population and particularly among the students (according to this polls from 2017 support for EU is 38-40%).²

² “Studenti u Beogradu protiv ulaska Srbije u NATO i EU”, *Politika* 19.06.2017, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/383239/Studenti-u-Beogradu-protiv-ulaska-Srbije-u-NATO-i-EU>; http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/analiza_medijskog_izvestavanja/grafikoni_november17_english.pdf ; <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/2962439/istrazivanje-o-clanstvu-srbije-u-eu-mala-razlika-izmedju-da-i-ne.html>.

Serbia is under constant pressure by EU to *de facto* recognize its southern province. Since September 2012 Angela Merkel's German ruling party CDU, was asking for the "legally binding agreement on normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina" as a *conditio sine qua non* for the EU integration of Serbia. This phrase entered into EU negotiating framework for Serbia adopted on 9 January 2014.³ This obviously makes it harder for Serbs to accept the EU conditionality, because it presumes from Serbia to give up on more than a territory and a population, particularly when there is no similar case with any other EU country.

Uncertainties, pressure to continue with concessions toward Pristina, political and economic crisis of EU (but also cultural transformation); migrant crisis; lack of any sign of improving the economy or any other of day to day life on the EU path for the ordinary people, are strengthening opinion of the people that EU path is inconclusive and less and less promising.

Still, Serbian leadership stresses invariably since 2008 that EU integration is main strategic goal of foreign policy.

However, Serbian good relations with Russia, China and Turkey made EU to engage and offer more promises, and that is why Mr. Juncker invoked year 2025. Yet this aim seems equally distant and far less promising as time passes. Germany is the main negotiator when it comes to the relations with EU, but internal instability of governance in that country after the 24th September parliamentary elections, and significantly weakened position of Angela Merkel leave Serbia little bit out of the radar.

II) Continued visits of high level between Serbia and Russia, having in mind also the last year visit of Chinese president Xi Jinping to Serbia, are resulting in better international position of Belgrade. This gives some space to the official Belgrade to ease the western pressure on the government. This is

³ "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...", in: EU OPENING STATEMENT FOR ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS, Brussels, 9 January 2014, CONF-RS 1, pp. 5, 10.

specifically important in recent years of mounting rivalry between West and East and past year growing discrepancies in the western front.

Exactly because of the mounting tensions on the global scale, NATO countries stepped up pressure on Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, on Serbia and on Republika Srpska (within Bosnia and Herzegovina) to join this military alliance. Montenegro joined in June 2017, despite polarized political scene and negative opinion of the people of NATO to join this alliance, by parliamentary decision. Macedonian government has changed after several months of demonstrations (2016/17) and after involvement of USA ambassador in Skopje Jess Bailey, to form the government that is willing to compromise its name in a dispute with Greece. Change of name of FYR of Macedonia is a prerequisite for Greece to put aside veto and vote in order to admit former Yugoslav republic into western alliance. This would leave Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as only two countries in the Balkan Peninsula outside NATO.

Delivery of six Russian warplanes on October 2017 and announcement of ten other from Belarus is thus crucially important for two things:

a) Continued cooperation of Serbia with Russian military, with Russian diplomacy, and

b) As a tool for maintaining crucial foreign policy positioning regarding the military alliances – military neutrality of Serbia.

III) Status of Serbian southern province headed by the secessionist local Albanian leadership is of major internal but also of foreign policy importance. Russian and Chinese support for Serbia is of utmost importance when it comes to UN. As Western bloc is losing its common stance and other players at the international level are gaining more prominence, the tide when it comes to international recognition of the secessionist local-government as a state may be reversing.