



Weekly Briefing

**Serbia external relations briefing:
Retrospective of Serbia's external relations in 2020
Institute of International Politics and Economics**

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Retrospective of Serbia's external relations in 2020

Abstract

During the past year foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia was strongly affected by several global challenges and regional developments. In order to better prepare for what lies ahead in 2021, it is important to reflect upon how the past occurrences affected Serbia's international position.

Unfortunately, year 2020 will be remembered in future history books, as the year in which COVID-19 pandemic wrack chaos around the world. The international society's inability to join efforts to contain the crisis indicate the extent to which global governance initiatives and capacities trail behind hyper-globalization flows. From the moment the novel virus emerged as a global threat, it was apparent that every country's strengths and weak points, its health care and socio-economic systems' response capabilities, and finally, its ability to bounce back, would be put on test.

The World Health Organization on March 11 declared COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. Serbia declared epidemic on March 20. The Government adopted measures to avert the spread of disease. Just like in many other countries, a state of emergency throughout the territory of Republic of Serbia was declared. Initially scheduled for 26 April, elections were postponed owing to declared state of emergency. A new date was set on 21 June. President Vučić's Progressive Party won comfortable legislative majority. Days before and after the elections were marked by intense diplomatic activity, culminating with official meeting of the Serbian President Vučić with Russian President Putin in Moscow. Practically straight from Moscow, President Vučić went to Brussels. In an official one-day visit to EU capital he met with the highest EU officials.

In terms of regional affairs beginning of the year was challenging, since the controversial Law on Religious Freedoms in Montenegro was passed. With several articles of the Law directed against the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, Serbian officials found themselves in a rather difficult position between the strive to provide assistance to the Serbian Orthodox Church, while at the same time trying not to interfere in the internal Montenegrin affairs. In the following months after the adoption of the above mentioned Law, occasional

tensions between Serbia and Montenegro reached critical level. Series of protests were organized by Serbs in Montenegro who want the law revoked. Former Montenegrin authorities even arrested priests of Serbian Orthodox Church.

Tariffs introduced by Pristina for goods coming from Central Serbia in November 2018 have been dropped this year by the new authorities, which allowed for the continuation of talks. As it was stated in one of the previous external relation briefings, Serbia officially utilizes these talks for attaining two important goals: to better protect rights of Serbs and other non-Albanians in the province, and of their cultural heritage, in particular for Serbian orthodox monasteries, and to pursue the continuation of the long and bumpy road towards EU membership. Especially since the prospect of EU membership is condition upon resolving Kosovo* dispute.

In Washington, on 4 September, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo* Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti signed separate agreements with the United States on “economic normalization”. The agreement envisages, among other things, establishment of direct air and railway links between Belgrade and Pristina, construction of the Nis–Pristina highway (“peace highway”) and a number of other projects. Pristina consented to a one-year moratorium on seeking new membership in International Organizations. At the same time, Belgrade consented to cease its campaign to influence other countries to withdraw their recognition of Kosovo’s unilaterally declared independence, and will refrain from formally or informally demanding that any nation or international organization withhold its recognition of Kosovo as an independent state.

The deal was met with mixed feelings in the Western Balkan. Some of the commentators expect the agreement to bring substantial US investment to the region, especially to Serbia since the American International Development Financial Corporation will open its office in Belgrade. Others however, interpret the signing of the agreement in Washington as a political aspiration of Serbian President to forge a new foreign policy course, more independent of Russia. Furthermore, the commitment to “prohibit the use of 5G from untrusted vendors” could potentially cause damage to Serbia’s interests, as it is an apparent intention of United States to reduce China’s presence in the region through its powerful company Huawei. Critics, also state that it served only the interests of the United States, more precisely Donald Trump’s election campaign. In addition, it seems the EU-facilitated negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina as a part of a larger European strategy towards stabilization of the region and its EU membership perspective have lost its appeal and credibility.

By signing the Washington agreement authorities in Pristina agreed to join the “Mini Schengen” initiative - the idea they were strongly opposing until recently. After the fall of the three decades long regime of Milo Đukanović, it is expected by some that Montenegro would also take part. As the end of the year was approaching, Serbia’s foreign policy activity was once again directed towards regional cooperation opportunities. This fall, a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation was signed between the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania on cooperation in the fight against COVID-19, as well as an interstate agreement between the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Albania on the free movement of citizens with ID cards. This interstate agreement between the two countries can be considered as a first concrete step towards unravelling of this ambitious and potentially far-reaching political and economic initiative.

In October, the long awaited Annual Report of the European Commission on the progress of the Republic of Serbia was announced. According to the Commission, the results achieved in the key areas of the overall negotiation process – progress on the rule of law reforms and dialogue with Pristina – have been largely limited or remained at the last year’s level. On the other hand, advancement has been noted on the economic front. The report also notes that Serbia intensified cooperation with China in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, and the political rhetoric was characterized by “pro-China and EU sceptical” stances (the latter not being in line with the country’s membership aspirations). Unlike previous years, during the course of 2020 Serbia has not been granted to open any new negotiation chapters with the EU. So far 18 chapters have been opened, two are temporarily closed, and five are ready to be opened.

Month of November was important regarding new opportunities for Serbian companies’ external economic performance on the single country’s biggest market in the world. Twelve Serbian companies from production and processing of food industry took part in the Third China International Import EXPO (CIIE) that was in Shanghai. Traditional ties of friendship straightened with the strategic partnership between Serbia and China were confirmed once again by inviting Serbian President, Mr. Aleksandar Vučić, to address the participants during the opening ceremony. Addressing via video link, President Vučić said that Serbia has the honour of participating for three years in a row in the world’s top platform for the promotion of trade, established by the country with the best economic performance in the world with the aim to be beneficial for all world countries. In addition, he said he is grateful for the huge support during the Covid-19 pandemic this spring, in March and April particularly, “when there was little or no help at all from any side, our Chinese friends were there and we will never

forget that.” In spite of the negative effects of the pandemic, this year Serbia and China recorded a 30% increase in their trade.

Overview of the Serbia’s recent developments on the foreign policy front, suggests that although Serbia’s foreign policy priorities haven’t officially changed, global, as well as, regional context in which they are pursued has undergone deep changes.

Conclusion

As year 2020 nears to its end, perspectives on the international scale, look a tad brighter than they used to just a few months ago. Although this has been a demanding year for Serbia in terms of fighting the disastrous consequences of the corona virus outbreak, with the beginning of vaccination a few days ago one may find reasons to be cautiously optimistic about 2021. That said, majority of challenges pertaining to the external relations domain from the past will most likely remain in the years to come. Namely, these include: the issue of unilateral declaration of independence of Serbian southern province, EU accession negotiations that are de facto stalled and general ambiguity surrounding Serbia’s EU future, pursuing the position of military neutrality amid mounting pressures from the international actors with vested interests, and last, but not least, diversifying international economic cooperation to better suit national interests in an ever changing geo-economics environment.