



Weekly Briefing

**Croatia external relations briefing:
The Anti-Government Demonstrations in Serbia and the Ongoing
Relations with Croatia**
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The Anti-Government Demonstrations in Serbia and the Ongoing Relations with Croatia

Summary

This article will reflect on the ongoing situation in Serbia after the early May tragic event that saw a 13-year-old ending the lives of 9 of his school colleagues. The horror that happened in Belgrade kick-started the massive anti-government demonstrations, while at the same time, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on Serbia's progress toward the European Union (EU) membership. In light of this, the article will touch upon the relations between Croatia and Serbia, with the former country being blamed by Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić for provoking anti-government tensions.

Introduction

In early May the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Serbia's progress toward the European Union (EU) membership. The document underlined three areas that need to be addressed in order for the country to intensify its negotiations to join the EU. These are: (1) improving internal political dialogue and reforms; (2) reaching a comprehensive normalization agreement with Kosovo; (3) ensuring better alignment with EU foreign policy¹. The discussion in the European Parliament that preceded the adoption of the Resolution included the participation of Croatian MEPs'. Tonino Picula, representative of the Socialist and Democrats (S&D) group, brought forward the issue of state capture in Serbia by the ruling elite, led by President Aleksandar Vučić. Picula also pointed out that European People's Party (EPP) is the one responsible for the transfer of European values in the country since Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) is a part of the EPP group. All this happens in a tragic month for Serbia that started with a killing spree of a 13-year-old Kosta who ended the lives of 9 of his school colleagues and a school janitor, an event that provoked demonstrations against Vučić's rule.

¹ European Parliament. 2023. 2022 Report on Serbia
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/747112/EPRS_ATAG\(2023\)747112_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/747112/EPRS_ATAG(2023)747112_EN.pdf).

The Issue of Social Responsibility

To put some context behind the Resolution, as well as behind the ongoing relations between Croatia and Serbia, a brief comment on the unfortunate school massacre will be given. While the reactions in the media and public are still settling down, and people are attempting to process what has been going on in the mind of a 13-year-old schoolboy, the question has been raised about the responsibility of those who are supposed to lead by an example, be that parents at the micro level or decision-makers at the macro level. Unfortunately for children and upcoming generations, it would not be an understatement to argue that responsibility has become almost a foreign term, with more and more parents trying to make their children on their own and coercively independent; thus, shifting the responsibility and being nearly blind to their children's needs. On the other hand, we often see politics act reactively, rather than proactively, followed by the introduction of half-measures and unsustainable solutions, in the form of checking the boxes, but lacking the content and interest to bring genuine changes. That said, one could ask why the parents of a 13-year-old Kosta did not know that he was carrying a gun to school that morning and had a list of school colleagues who did him wrong, as well as why such a large percentage of the civilian population in a country that wants to join the EU (at least in principle) owns firearms (according to Al Jazeera, Serbia is at the top of the list of European countries with 39,1 of weapon per 100 inhabitants²).

Anti-Government Protests in Serbia

In the weeks after the school shootout, Serbia faced massive demonstrations against the rule of President Vučić with people demanding from the President to ease his grip on the state media and allow diversification of opinions in the public discourse. Since the ongoing violence has become a prevalent topic in the whole region, the people demanded “the resignation of top officials [Minister of Interior Bratislav Gašić and the Director of Security Intelligence Agency Aleksandar Vulin] and the revoking of licenses for pro-government media that air violent content and host crime figures and war criminals”³. As a counter-reaction, Vučić called upon his supporters to go out in the streets; however, as it appears from the social media posts, the

² Al Jazeera. 2021. Srbija prva u Evropi po broju ličnog naoružanja po stanovniku <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/6/11/srbija-prva-u-evropi-po-broju-licnog-naoruzanja-po-stanovniku>.

³ France24.com. 2023. Tens of thousands rally in Belgrade to protest against government rule <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230527-tens-of-thousands-rally-in-belgrade-to-protest-against-government-rule>.

President's move was not as successful as planned since his rally included fewer people and many of them, apparently, were forced to participate or were given some kind of stimulation or reward. Eventually, Vučić decided to step down from the position of SNS leader and appointed Minister of Defense Miloš Vučević as his successor, while he announced the introduction of a national movement in June which will comprise of a diverse range of experts and parties with the goal of promoting the unity. Despite that, critics are unsure about the nature of the movement with some claiming that it may lead to a further concentration of powers in the hands of Vučić. But some voices claim the movement will offer a third way for Serbia, between the East and the West⁴.

The Relations Between Croatia and Serbia

As soon as the anti-government protests in Belgrade took place, President Vučić commented that there are external regional forces that want Serbia to become weak again, like during the presidency of Boris Tadić. Vučić especially pointed the finger at Zagreb and Priština, underlining that leaders of the two countries do not want a politically and economically strong Serbia that would be independent of their influence, and that would play a major role in the Western Balkans⁵. If looking at the official claims of Croatian politicians, be that Prime Minister Andrej Plenković or President Zoran Milanović, there is a discourse of Serbia as a country that should strive to become a member of the EU, and shift away from its connections with Russia which would be accomplished by joining the sanction policy of the EU. Apart from foreign policy issues, that is, foreign policy incompatibility of Serbia and other EU member states, there are bilateral issues that still provoke tensions between official Belgrade and Zagreb. These are predominantly seen in the number of people who have gone missing during the Homeland War and have not been found. During the January meeting in Davos between Plenković and Vučić, the former said that the process of relations normalization is underway. Despite such diplomatic choice of words, which the Croatian Prime Minister is quite fond of, the deterioration of relations in such a delicate environment can be triggered rather easily.

⁴ Petrović, Ivica. 2023. Zbijanje redova iza Vučića: Čemu služi „Narodni pokret“? Deutsche Welle <https://www.dw.com/hr/zbijanje-redova-iza-vu%C4%8Di%C4%87a-%C4%8Demu-slu%C5%BEi-njegov-narodni-pokret/a-64955225>.

⁵ Index.hr. 2023. Vučić: Zagreb želi srušiti vlast u Srbiji <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/vucic-zagreb-zeli-srusiti-vlast-u-srbiji/2467245.aspx>.

Conclusion

Only with a short overview of protests that followed the school shootout, and with recent comments of President Vučić about the origins of pressure that is imposed on Serbia, the Resolution of the European Parliament and opinions of Croatian MEPs are somewhat self-explanatory. What should be troubling for the Serbian European path is the fact that there is no real progress seen between the 2020 Report on Serbia and the one from 2022, across all 33 negotiating chapters. According to European Parliament, the negotiations will advance only if the country aligns with sanctions against Russia, followed by other reforms related to the rule of law and fundamental rights⁶. With the social unrest still ongoing, it is yet to be seen how President Vučić will reply to EU demands.

⁶ European Parliament. 2023. Serbia: No advance in accession negotiations
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230424IPR82038/serbia-no-advance-in-accession-negotiations>.