

Has a Red Line Been Crossed in Serbia? Enlargement as Yet Another Crucial Test for the German EU Presidency

by Matteo Bonomi

While minimum democratic standards were upheld during the vote,¹ Serbian democracy has taken a hard hit as a result of the partially boycotted parliamentary elections of 21 June 2020. Democratic backsliding and rule of law infringements have increased in Serbia since 2012, when the right-wing populist Serbian Progressive Party gained power. However, the recent parliamentary elections may represent a turning point for Serbian democracy as it appears that a red line has been crossed in terms of pluralism and parliamentary representation.

Indeed, most opposition parties boycotted the vote, complaining about unfair conditions and lack of access to the media. As a result, only 11 out of 250 members of the newly elected Serbian

National Assembly will represent the opposition – with potential support coming from four minority groups –, thus undercutting parliamentary pluralism during the next four years.

The election results, which have confirmed the almost unconstrained power of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić will accelerate the on-going erosion of trust in EU-Serbian relations. The recent vote has altered the equilibrium on both sides of the EU enlargement equation; a policy launched in the Balkans almost two decades ago and which today increasingly resembles an empty shell.

From the perspective of Brussels and other EU capitals, the election results have weakened hopes that the EU's enlargement policy may progressively bring about substantial reforms, helping consolidate democracy in Serbia. On the contrary, the gradual adoption of EU norms and standards has gone hand in hand with a progressive erosion of

¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Serbian Parliamentary Elections Well Run, But Ruling Party Dominance and Lack of Media Diversity Limited Voters' Choice*, *International Observers Say*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.osce.org/node/455173>.

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democratic principles and political culture in the country.

Clearly, this outcome is the opposite of what is prescribed by the EU enlargement mantra, which suggests that market and legal integration of candidate countries within the EU will lead to political and economic convergence towards (Western) European standards.

All this reveals that there are no longer automatism in the EU enlargement policy. Under such circumstances, less and less people in the EU are going to be ready to publicly support enlargement and testify to its effectiveness.

Moreover, the fact that EU enlargement policy is so openly falling short of its transformative power also has concrete political consequences for the other side of the enlargement equation, weakening the process even further.

As seen from Belgrade or other Balkan capitals, the EU's weak reactions to regressions in the rule of law and democratic norms sends a signal that Brussels is not serious about its engagement, aside from paying lip service to EU enlargement principles. Nobody can believe that EU member states, voting by unanimity, would be ready to accept new accession countries that are so openly and resoundingly dysfunctional.

Resulting from these embarrassing developments, the German EU Presidency is urged to help the EU clarify the way forward of enlargement in the Balkans even more vehemently than expected – as the “Balkan file” was

already one of its announced priorities.²

In particular, a simple bureaucratic reaction to events in Serbia is not enough to preserve mutual trust and prevent further deterioration in relations. For instance, the Commission's decision – that does not require unanimity – not to open new negotiating chapters with Serbia appears as an extremely feeble signal, which dramatically resembles what the EU already did with Turkey due to its own shortfalls in the rule of law.

Regardless of the enlargement methodology that will be applied to Serbia (the old or new one proposed by the Commission in February 2020),³ the German presidency is called to demonstrate its leadership. In this respect, Berlin must demonstrate that explicit engagement and consent by EU member states can be reached, and that the full use of the EU's available tools in front of fundamental infringements – something that has rarely happened – is possible.

Moreover, the steps that Berlin will be able to coordinate at the EU level seem to bear consequences for the Union that go far beyond the sole life of Serbian citizens or their Balkan neighbours. Through the EU's concerted response to Belgrade and its work on the

² German Federal Foreign Office, *Trio Presidency of Germany, Slovenia and Portugal in the EU*, 22 May 2019, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/europa/trio-presidency/2220532>.

³ European Commission, *Enhancing the Accession Process - A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans* (COM/2020/57), 5 February 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0057>.

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enlargement file, Berlin will contribute to clarify and implement its vision about the future of Europe in three substantial ways.

First, it will contribute to define its vision about the future of a more or less united Europe. By moving the enlargement file forward, Berlin has the chance to advance and complete the specific vision of European unification that was pursued since the birth of the EU and the articulation of its enlargement policy in the early 1990's (for which Germany has been a major stakeholder).

Completing that vision today clearly does not mean simply reaffirming the liberal hopes that marked the end of the Cold War. Rather, it could show the capacity to bank on that huge ideological investment and adapt it to the new world, where the liberal credo seems to be fully realizable only through limited, regional and territorial implementation.

Second, by sponsoring a serious response to Belgrade, Berlin has the chance to clarify its stance on democratic values in Europe. Through the Serbian President's affiliation to the European People Party (EPP), Serbian electoral vicissitudes intimately interlink with the fight for the defence of the rule of law and democratic values within EU, making this Balkan country one of the forefronts of the "rule of law battle".

Regardless of the verdict on the previous point, on how united (or differentiated) the Europe to come has to be, Germany has the chance today to

reaffirm democracy as the soul and DNA of the European integration project, something that cannot be interpreted with flexibility or negotiated.

Finally, Berlin has the chance to sustain geopolitical ambitions of the currently German-led European Commission. Serbian elections have an evident geopolitical dimension, especially through its link to the issue of Kosovo – the former Serbian province not recognized by Belgrade.

In this regard, there are no shortcuts and the best way to sustain the work of Miroslav Lajčák, the newly appointed EU Special Representative for the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue,⁴ is to preserve the full credibility of the enlargement perspective, even if it could cause immediate frictions with Belgrade. EU membership is, in fact, the only real incentive to push for a long-term sustainable solution and reframing the "European way" in the region, in front of competing geopolitical models.

It is also worth noting how the outcome of Serbian elections gives President Vučić's party an overwhelming two-thirds majority in parliament, something that is necessary to embark on constitutional changes that are needed to normalize relations with Kosovo. This can now be done even without the votes of its ally Ivica Dačić and his Socialist party – for years associated with Moscow's interests in

⁴ Aleksandar Ivković, "Miroslav Lajčák: Top Slovak Diplomat Embarking on Yet Another Mission to the Balkans", in *European Western Balkans*, 3 April 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/?p=36741>.

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Belgrade and who has even benefited from help from the Russian foreign minister during the electoral campaign⁵ (a clear sign of mistrust of Vučić by Moscow).

The emancipation of Belgrade from its dependence on Moscow in dealing with the Kosovo issue, where the Kremlin has always shielded Belgrade with its veto power in the UN Security Council, sets Serbian-Russian relations even more on the path of a long-term decline.⁶ Nevertheless, the EU – while still the dominant power in the Western Balkans – has appeared incapable so far to profit from this shift of influences in favour of extra-European players, such as Trump's US and China.

This time, Berlin ought to keep a close eye on political dynamics in Belgrade. If the credibility of EU enlargement is to be preserved, the upcoming German EU presidency must take active interest in defending democratic principles in Serbia and help the Union find the way forward for EU enlargement. Through this test, Berlin will qualify and give substance to its vision about the future of Europe and show how united, democratic and strategic the future EU can become.

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⁵ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Opening Remarks at a Meeting with First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia Ivica Dacic*, Belgrade, 18 June 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/UdAzvXr89FbD/content/id/4168807.

⁶ Maxim Samorukov, "Russia-Serbia Special Relationship Is on Borrowed Time", in *Carnegie Moscow Center Commentaries*, 24 June 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82156>.

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