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THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE PROMOTION OF WESTERN BALKAN
“STABILITOCRACIES:” CASE STUDY OF SERBIA

by

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B.S., Western Kentucky University, 2020

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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Approved by:

Dr. Stephen Bloom, Chair

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TITLE: WESTERN BALKANS “STABILITOCRACIES:” CASE STUDY OF SERBIA

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Stephen Bloom

In recent years, several regional experts have supported the term “stabilitocracy” to describe the current state of the relationship between the European Union and the Western Balkans, and to depict the autocracies with clear democratic shortcomings who staunchly claim their commitment to democratic reforms. A “stabilitocracy” is believed to represent a significant shortcoming of the EU’s vision to expand the Union and get the former Yugoslav states to maintain peace, align on foreign policy issues and join the European market. Granted, with the exclusion of occasional skirmishes and threatening statements from the regional leaders, after a decade-long war that resulted in ethnic divisions and intolerance, the Western Balkans have enjoyed relative peace. The unintentional consequence of the emphasis on stability, however, has resulted in the significant undermining of democratic reforms, allowing autocratic leaders to entrench their rule undisputed. Through the case study of Serbia, formerly the most prominent candidate for EU accession, I attempt to point toward the ways the EU actions or the lack thereof have inadvertently aided the democratic backsliding. In the end, I touch upon the paradoxical security threats of “stabilitocracy” vis-à-vis the Serbian response to the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

After the second world war, similarly to its central and Eastern European neighbors, Western Balkan countries were under communist rule. In 1948, however, Yugoslavia split with the Soviet Union and remained independent from major geopolitical and military blocs in Europe, becoming one of the founders of the Non-Aligned movement (Dabrowski and Myachenkova 2018). Only three decades ago, the present-day sovereign nations of the Western Balkans were once united under one flag and the communist regime. The Balkan Wars, however, seem like a distant memory to many, and the recent narrative in reporting the Russian aggression as the largest land war on the European continent since 1945 (Cooper, Schmitt and Barnes 2022), for whatever reason, showcases the tendency to omit Balkan wars from the very recent and unpleasant part of the European history.

The dissolution of the former Yugoslavia came quickly under the pressures of the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the communist rule in Eastern Europe. The vacuum created by the dissipation of the Soviet Union was exploited by Slobodan Milosevic, Serbia's president since 1989 who took advantage of the weakening of the central government to encourage the spread of Serbian nationalism and stir up the conflicts in other republics. The weakening of the central government further created space for political parties to stoke nationalism along ethnic lines.

What ensued was a decade-long war in which Milosevic aimed to establish borders of the "Great Serbia" that would be created out of the ruins of former Yugoslavia and ensure an ethnically homogenous Serbian state. In the span of a decade, it is estimated that as many as 300,000 people may have lost their lives to war or as a direct consequence of starvation, disease,

and exposure, while as many as two million are believed to have been forcibly displaced (CFR 2022).

Following the NATO intervention in response to the atrocities committed by Milosevic's army, the Yugoslav wars came to an end and the former republics started transitioning away from the communist past and towards the European future. In 2006, Serbia and Montenegro officially split, and in 2008, Kosovo was granted official independence with strong opposition from Serbia which remains in staunch opposition to its independence. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the US, but particularly the European Union, directed their efforts toward building civil societies and stable central governments that would eventually become stable democracies and join the Union.

Out of the Western Balkan states, only Croatia was able to attain membership in 2013, while other republics obtained EU candidate status (Dabrowski and Myachenkova 2018). While the rest of the Balkan republics have made efforts towards the establishment of stable institutions and improved conditions for democratic progress, domestic politics remains permeated with corruption and political figures who were present during the 1990s turmoil. The Western Balkan countries hold great geopolitical value to the efforts of the European Union to bring together former communist countries of the East and integrate them with the shared market. The dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1999 gave birth to the present-day independent republics of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

The broader focus of this paper, however, will fall upon the Western Balkan nations, meaning that both Croatia and Slovenia will be excluded, as they are both members of the EU and NATO and have exhibited success stories of post-communist democratic transitions. The countries of the Western Balkans, on the other hand, despite the efforts of the EU and a few

domestic movements that at moments signified a potential democratic revolution, remain far from being granted member status. While individual states differentiate on their trajectories to being granted a membership status within the European Union, their present political dynamics share similarities beyond their historical and cultural ties. In recent years, experts in the Western Balkans have coined the term “stabilitocracy” to capture the reality of the relationship that exists between the EU and the Western Balkans nations (Pavlović 2017; Zweers et al. 2022; Bieber 2022; Kmezić 2020; Kmezić and Bieber 2022). And while there are significant similarities across the individual regimes, in both their interaction with the European Union and the resulting promotion of a “stabilitocracy,” this paper will more closely focus on the case study of Serbia.

The reason for focusing on Serbia as a case study to exemplify the “stabilitocracy” approach of the European Union is mainly twofold. Firstly, out of all the Western Balkan nations, Serbia has been recognized as the next most likely member even though it has had a notable concerning track record of democratic backsliding in the past decade. The EU’s approach that enables “stabilitocracies” to exist has allowed the Serbian regime to suppress any democratic efforts, take over the media, capture the institutions and capitalize on the EU’s prioritization of regional stability over democratic promotion. Secondly, Serbia represents an important case as it indicates the potential ramifications of a “stabilitocracy” where the domestic regime uses the nature of this relationship in order to effectively capitalize on the ties with Russia that are not attached with domestically unpopular political conditionalities.

Aware of the leniency and the lack of ramifications for its political decisions, the Serbian regime has learned how to exploit the void between the EU’s warnings and condemnations on the one hand and the implementations of such on the other. As a result, somewhat inadvertently, the efforts to maintain stability in the region and not take a stronger stance against the Serbian

regime while it backtracked on all its democratic efforts led to an even greater security threat. Seemingly, the EU prioritization of maintaining regional peace through friendly ties with the Serbian government resulted in the undisputed grip on power from the autocratic regime. As it will be shown in the case of the Serbian regime, the EU conditionality may not have led to the state capture in the Western Balkans in the first place, however, it has involuntarily entrenched informal networks in the Western Balkans and further enabled them to strengthen their grip on power (Richter and Wunsch 2019).

The recent Russian aggression in Ukraine further calls for potential reinspection of the EU approach and the sustainability of “stabilitocracies” in the efforts to promote democratic rule across the Western Balkans. The fear ignited by the Russian aggression is unraveling the negative ramifications that the short-term regional stability might have for the long-term prospects of peace and democratic institutions. While Serbia did symbolically vote in the United Nations General Assembly to condemn the Russian attack on Ukraine (Reuters 2022), the reluctance of the Serbian regime to join the EU in imposing unilateral sanctions on Russia and its transparent avoidance of condemning Russia as the invader may showcase where its real allegiance lies. It is unimaginable for the next likely EU member to not align on the EU foreign policy, especially as important as the open condemnation of the Russian invasion, however, we have yet to see whether the EU will shift away from its current approach in the Western Balkans.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

In order to fully capture the complexities of everything entailed by a “stabilitocracy,” how one reaches such a state and what are the external factors allowing for its endurance, I have opted for an approach of a case study. In general, case studies comprise more detail, richness, completeness, and depth for the unit of study than does cross-unit analysis (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). And in recent years, roughly half of all articles in the top political science journals have used case studies (George and Bennett, 2005). Nonetheless, while sometimes undermined or ignored, much of our knowledge about the empirical world has been derived from case studies and they continue to constitute a large proportion of work generated by the discipline of political science (Gerring 2004).

Therefore, as we continue to observe the volatility of democratization transitions in the post-communist countries, traditional idiosyncratic case studies continue to hold value by providing us with context and gist for more general analyses (Clark 2002). While Serbian “stabilitocracy” may not necessarily be representative of the complexity of “stabilitocracies” developed in the Western Balkans, it is a case that warrants close attention due to Serbia’s status of the next anticipated EU member. The recent increase in pro-Russian sentiment among the Serbian populace in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has contributed to the questioning of the sustainability of a “stabilitocracy” in the region as politically volatile as the Western Balkans. Focusing specifically on Serbia can therefore provide the grounds and support for future research that might concern the intricacies of the “stabilitocracies” of the other Western Balkans states, their sustainability, as well as the implications for their EU integration.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT IS A “STABILITOCRACY”

In 2018, the European Commission set an indicative deadline (2025) for the admission to the EU of two of the Balkan’s most advanced candidates, including Serbia and Montenegro (Dabrowski and Myachenkova 2018). In recent years, however, the EU accession discussion has become saturated with the term “stabilitocracy” which has become prominent in describing the relationships between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans. Regardless of the efforts of the European Union, the domestic efforts implemented among the Balkan states seem to be primarily within the scope of cosmetic changes without progress that could indicate the serious potential for membership in the near future. The EU approach towards democracy promotion in Western Balkans can at times be better described as technical rather than political. This is reflected in the reality of the Western Balkans having only advanced in thin-surface norm adoption without deep political reforms or any tangible political and societal transformations (Zweers et al. 2022).

Therefore, instead of experiencing decisive democratic reforms, the Western Balkans have slowly transitioned into “stabilitocracies,” countries with serious democratic shortcomings who are simultaneously claiming they are working towards democratic reforms and offering stability (Zweers et al. 2022). While being only recently introduced, the term “stabilitocracy” itself holds immense value for its ability to capture the complex relationship dynamics between the EU and the Western Balkans. The origin of the term dates to a London School of Economics blog post written by a Canadian academic in the context of trying to explain Montenegro’s regime in late 2016 in which the West turned a blind eye to rampant undemocratic practices (Bieber 2018). Scholars now regularly describe political regimes in the Western Balkan countries

as ‘stabilitocracies’ (Zweers et al. 2022) which at its very core represents the emphasis on preserving stability within the region over a stauncher approach in the form of pushing for democratic reforms that could result in alienating the political regimes from cooperating with the EU.

These regimes are known to claim they are securing stability, while they pretend to espouse EU integration and rely on informal, clientelist structures, control of the media, and the regular production of crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law (Bieber, 2018). The concept of “stabilitocracy” therefore enables the West to maintain its rhetoric of democracy promotion as well as the emphasis on the promotion of human rights, an independent judiciary, and free, fair, and transparent elections (Pavlović 2017). At its very core, the term “stabilitocracy” depicts the approach of both the EU and the United States which continue to support Western Balkan regimes that promise stability but have significantly undermined democratic practices (Pavlović 2017).

At the root of “stabilitocracy” is the belief that stability in the Western Balkans takes priority over any effort to push for greater democratic reforms that could unintentionally lead to further distancing of a Western Balkan regime from the relationship with the EU. Several recent analyses have claimed that the EU unintentionally contributes to the formation of “stabilitocracies” in the region: countries with an obvious democratic shortcoming that claim they are working towards democratic reform and offer stability (Zweers et al., 2022). In order to not unnecessarily strain these relationships, the EU and the authoritarian regimes of the Western Balkans find themselves in a codependent relationship that sustains on mutual interests and consequently compromises any significant democratic reforms. As a result, the regimes that understand the core conviction of a “stabilitocracy” and are also willing to protect and sustain

western geopolitical, security, military, economic, or energy-related interest in each country are typically spared the wrath of the EU or the United States (Pavlović 2017). Following Kosovo's independence in 2008, for example, the US and the key EU member states prioritized getting Serbia to peacefully accept Kosovo's sovereignty that they chose to cooperate with the Serbian regime in exchange for tolerating and ignoring the shortcomings in the rule of law and the rampant corruption (Bieber 2018).

And while my focus is on the Western Balkans and more specifically the case of Serbia, the promotion of regional stability over democratic efforts is nothing previously unheard of, especially in a broader context of Eastern Europe. Similarly, Börzel, Pamuk, and Stahn (2009) found that following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the independence of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, both the EU and the US have shown a preference for political stability over democratic change, motivated by concerns over the war on terrorism as well as concerns about energy security. Evidently so, the EU-state building in the region has brought to the surface the void that exists between the highly technical EU accession process on the one hand and the security-driven EU state building on the other (Bieber, 2011).

CHAPTER 4

DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION AND PROGRESS

The Former Yugoslavia, once believed to be the most ‘liberal’ communist country, and Serbia as its largest constituent part, were widely expected to move fast on their road to democracy and EU integration after the end of communism, but instead, they created new authoritarianism and war (Vladisavljević 2020). The democratic transitions that occurred in Eastern Europe were not replicated in the states of former Yugoslavia and instead, the introduction of competitive elections in the early 1990s led to the establishment of competitive authoritarian regimes that exploited structural weaknesses, and governance practices that were remnants of the period of state socialism (Kapidžić 2020). Soon after the Yugoslav wars and the revolt of October 5th of 2000, in Serbia, the extent of the issue of the past was evident, specifically as it relates to the Milosevic war crimes that were an unshakable legacy with which the new transitional government was simply underprepared (Subotić 2010).

For a moment, the revolution of October 5th 2000 seemed to be a turning point in the modern history of Serbia and a decisive shift towards a democratic transition and European integration. Only two and a half years later, Zoran Djindjic, a staunchly pro-European, former student protester, the first democratically elected prime minister of Serbia since World War II was assassinated (Greenberg 2014). To many, Djindjic was the symbol of youth and change, a signal towards the beginning of a brighter, democratic Serbian future. His assassination seemed to kill the spirit of revolution among many and what was believed to be a decisive moment in post-communist state-building turned out to be short-lived and Serbian society swiftly returned to the rule of the corrupted elite. To measure the extent of the success of the democratic transition, therefore, I will focus closely on the commonly used scores to measure democratic

progress from Freedom House, but also the contextual aspects that dominate domestic politics and that are not necessarily captured by the numbers.

The lack of democratic progress in Serbia's journey to European integration is evident in Freedom House democracy scores, as well as across different quantitative measures of democratization. However, they are not necessarily sufficient in capturing it in its full complexity (Subotić 2010). Similarly, Kapidžić (2020) acknowledges several recent publications that have addressed democratic backsliding in Southeast Europe (Bieber 2018, Kmezić and Bieber 2017; Perry and Keil 2018; Bieber, Solska and Taleski 2018; Bieber 2020) but emphasizes that these do not specifically investigate the role of the governing political parties or the crucial topics such as media, rule of law, and social movements. Therefore, while scores from the assessment of Freedom House provide a good starting point in measuring the development of the democratic transition, they are not sufficient in fully capturing the lack of democratic progress.

One of the most challenging aspects of assessing democratic progress and the success of the democratic reforms is implementing the appropriate measurements in a way that fully captures the variants of democratic progress. The concept of democracy remains one of the most complex concepts in political science making it challenging to find a unilaterally accepted measurement of democracy that is both credible and applicable to states across the globe. Therefore, even though no consensus exists on defining or measuring it, the causes and consequences of democracy remain among the most studied topics in the social sciences (Knutsen 2010). The two most used measures of democracy today include the Freedom House, with its focus on political rights and civil liberties, and Polity IV with its focus on the aggregate indices of democracy and autocracy (Högström 2013). That one measure of democracy will have

potentially serious problems with the robustness of its results is a widely recognized concern (Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2017).

Likewise, different score indicators of democracy such as Polity IV, V-Dem, or Freedom House may result in a variety of outcomes when addressing the democratic reality of the same state. The intricacies and the exact score variations that pertain to the democratic progress are not the concern of my case study as I primarily aim to portray the broader implications of the unilaterally agreed upon lack of democratic progress in Serbia. Therefore, while I will primarily refer to the Freedom House democracy scores, I make a note of the latest two Polity IV scores and their substantive meaning. In addition, in order to fully capture and portray the context in which Serbia's democratic progress was back stalled and on the brink of further decline (Kraemer 2022), the realities of the state capture, EU accession process, and the omnipresent influence of the Russian state will be explored.

As previously emphasized by Subotić (2010), much of this context is generally supported by the quantitative measures of democratization. These, however, may not fully represent the stalled process of Serbian democratization, which was heavily influenced by the complex ways EU candidates react to the attempts of Europeanization. Freedom House uses a scale from 1 to 7 when measuring political rights and civil liberties where 1 indicates the highest degree of freedom and 7 indicates the lowest degree of freedom (Högström 2020). Initially, Serbia gradually advanced on the democratic path as it went from 'partly free' in 2001 to electoral democracy in 2008 and liberal democracy ('free') in 2010 and 2015 (Vladisavljević 2020). From 2004 to 2014, Serbia showed little to no real progress in terms of the quantitative score as the democracy score always remained within small variations between 3.64 and 3.83 (Peco 2013). While there was a small increase in 2015 to 4.32, it is also when another consistent decline in

democracy scores starts as it shows largely a continuous drop to 3.89 in 2021 (Freedom House 2022).

In 2019, for the first time in over a decade, Freedom House ranked Serbia as partly free, however, it also stressed the steady erosion of political rights and civil liberties while putting pressure on independent media (Kulić 2020). The latest V-Dem report indicates the same pattern of democratic backsliding in Serbia. The report places it in the fifth spot of the top autocratizing countries of the 2010-2020 period, right behind Brazil and Turkey (V-Dem Institute 2021). Similarly, the latest report emphasizes that the quality of democracy in Serbia has dropped twice or more in the last year, marking Serbia as an electoral autocracy (V-Dem Institute, 2022). The general pattern of the democracy scores over the last decade indicates that despite having the candidate status and financial support from the EU, little to no real progress has been seen in Serbia's democracy promotion.

CHAPTER 5

STATE CAPTURE AND CLIENTELISM

The term “state capture” has been often used to describe the democratic progress, or the lack thereof, among the Western Balkan countries. The underlying roots and causes as well as the perpetuating factors of Western Balkans state capture and autocratic tendencies is a well-discussed topic and has been brought to attention time and time again (Valery and Keil 2018; Richter and Wunsch 2019; Bartlett 2020; Bieber 2018; Dzankic, Keil and Kmezić 2018). The state capture was able to emerge in a highly volatile context of simultaneous democratization and market liberalization, which coupled with post-conflict state-building provided many opportunities for the rise of illicit economic activity and the creation of informal networks (Grzymala-Busse 2008). Structural deficiencies were centered around a strong executive and weak checks, balances and institutionalized informality were able to be exploited by political parties to tilt the electoral playing field (Kapidžić 2020).

At its core, state capture refers to processes in which state institutions and intermediary actors, such as political parties or parliaments become hijacked or infiltrated by clientelist networks and their informal ways of decision making and corrupt practices (Richter and Wunsch 2019). Therefore, in the absence of well-developed regulatory frameworks, a small elite of economic actors can secure considerable monetary gains, build up strong clientelist networks and systematically increase their influence on politics (Richter and Wunsch 2019). The efforts toward economic reform, media freedom, and the rule of law are then largely subordinated to the state elites who favor rent-seeking and ethnic-nationalist appeals that interfere with the membership prospects (Dzankic, Keil and Kmezić 2018). Time and time again, throughout his rule, critics have credibly accused the incumbent president Aleksandar Vucic and his party of

having ties to organized crime and cronyism in the shape of providing jobs to his allies (Freedom House 2021).

The extent of the state capture in Serbia signals that the EU conditionality as a primary mechanism in attempting the integration of the Western Balkans may not prove to be the most successful approach. Ideally, the logic of the EU conditionality is such that the political elite will work towards transforming the institutions of their country knowing that they will eventually be rewarded with EU membership (Bieber 2011). Evidently so, in the case of Serbia, the political elite has shown little real effort in making consistent and palpable democratic reforms that would indicate a real desire in joining the EU and aligning with Western ideas, values, and beliefs.

When the motivation exists and the regime is striving toward EU membership, the mechanism of conditionality can be found successful as shown in the case of Croatia and its internal reforms in the media sector in 2004 that were motivated by EU incentives (Freyburg and Richter 2010). One could say that this implementation was merely to appease the EU without referring to reforms on a grander scale, however, shortly after, Croatia started membership negotiations in 2005 and completed them in 2011, officially becoming the 28th EU member on 1 July 2013 (Dabrowski and Myachenkova 2018). Surely, Serbia has implemented some reforms that have been largely welcomed and applauded by the EU, however, in the span of over a decade, none of the reforms have led to a breakthrough in democratic reforms and instead, the informal networks and clientelism ensured regime's absolute grip on power.

After 12 years of largely sluggish democratic consolidation from 2001 to 2012 (Stojiljković 2012), in 2013 Serbia embarked en route towards becoming a competitive authoritarian regime, which was further accelerated by the incumbent-led Aleksandar Vucic's cabinet stripping the democratic substance of the institutions (Pavlović 2019). The incumbent

president, Aleksandar Vucic, remains one of the most prominent populist autocratic leaders in Europe who was once known as a young, aspiring right-wing politician in the 1990s. Vucic has gained political prominence as a right-wing nationalist leader who has rebranded himself in his rise to power, proclaiming his orientation to the EU and the Western democracies (Kulić 2020). Throughout his early career, Vucic contributed to the oppressive Milosevic regime and was well remembered for his anti-Muslim commentary including the statement he gave in parliament in 1995 saying that “for every Serb killed, we will kill 100 Muslims” for which he was once run out of the Srebrenica memorial service (Sito-Sucic and Zuvela 2015).

Despite his public commentary of commitments to the shared values and beliefs of the EU, the deliberate state capture under his rule can be directly tied to his past service as a Minister of Information where he directly contributed to hampering media freedoms. As a matter of fact, since Freedom House monitors media indicators in the post-communist countries, only in one year did Serbia have worse scores for media freedom than in 2018 and that was in 1999 when Aleksandar Vucic himself was the Minister of Information (Pavlović 2019). During the Milosevic era, Vucic’s main responsibility was to control the media and in October 1998, he proposed the Information Act under the premise of “defending the country,” which essentially allowed “anybody to be sued for anything” (Kulić 2020). Under this premise, the basic maxim of the law – innocent until proven guilty – was completely repressed in exchange for the notion of the accused being guilty until proven innocent (Jovanović 2018).

The EU, however, often seems to willfully neglect Vucic’s political past and his integral role in Milosevic’s cabinet where he acted as a Minister of Information and helped spread anti-Western propaganda. During the 1999 NATO bombing, Vucic worked directly with the editors of the largest print media instructing them on what to print and having them report their next day

issue for his approval and potential amendments first (Pavlovic 2020). To a large extent, Vucic's modus operandi in terms of media has remained rather similar ever since he took over in 2012, with the main difference being that instead of punishing the media in his traditional fashion, he now resorts to the complete control of the media landscape (Jovanović 2018). Vucic's SNS party regularly receives most of the media coverage from public broadcasters, and some privately owned national broadcasters and popular tabloids regularly engage in smear campaigns against the opposition (Freedom House 2021). Most of the country's advertising agencies are owned by a handful of media tycoons with direct ties and loyalty to Vucic who withholds the funds from the TV stations and newspapers that criticize him (Eror 2018). The most recent Freedom House report (2021) emphasizes the media freedom being undermined by the threat of lawsuits or criminal charges against journalists for other offenses, lack of transparency, direct pressure from politicians, and threats against journalists.

CHAPTER 6

THE EU EFFECTS ON “STABILITOCRACY” PROMOTION

In the efforts of promoting stability across the continent and integrating former communist countries into the European market, the EU has primarily relied on political conditionality as a tool of state-building. Conditionality as a mechanism focuses on the EU's enlargement through state-building projects and it relies on the assumption that the political elite of the aspiring EU member would transform the institutions of their country if they knew they were going to be rewarded by the EU with a membership (Bieber, 2011). The extent of success of the EU conditionality as a primary mechanism of democracy promotion in the Western Balkans as well as the likelihood that it will replicate the success of Central European countries has been a well-researched concern in the Eastern European academia (Zakošek 2008; Pamuk and Stahn 2009; Freyburg and Richter 2010; Bieber, 2011; Dzankic, Keil and Kmezić 2018; Richter and Wunsch, 2019). The success stories of the most recent members point out that conditionality as a mechanism that is being used by the EU can only be effective under certain preconditions and circumstances that allow for its success.

Therefore, as an incentive-based instrument, conditionality as a mechanism in catalyzing substantial change in countries permeated by legacies of ethnic conflict can be successful only under certain conditions (Freyburg and Richter 2010). Inadvertently, EU conditionality, through its projects, deadlines, and expectations, often allows for the political elite to refer to undemocratic practices under the justification of fulfilling the EU expectations. Indirectly, by overloading the political agenda with strict deadlines and detailed criteria, EU conditionality enables the dominant parties to justify the absence of internal mechanisms of accountability (Richter and Wunsch 2020). In the case of Serbia specifically, the EU conditionality as a toolkit

for democracy and institution building loses much of its credibility once we take into consideration the domestically unpopular political conditionalities that it entails. Ever since the proclamation of Kosovo's independence in 2008, the recognition of Kosovo as a sovereign state has become the primary political issue the elite rallies around, often using it to create division and gather domestic support. The battle of Kosovo, where it is believed that Serbs were defeated by the Ottomans in 1389, remains the key tenet of Serbian national consciousness and as such, the permanent loss of the Kosovo territory remains portrayed as the dismemberment of the country (Dierauer 2013). The idea and the myth surrounding Kosovo are the memory of Serbia's past greatness, its victimization and suffering at the hands of great powers, and the desire to rectify the injustice and to make wrong right (Subotić 2016).

The issue of Kosovo is one of the, if not the most divisive topic, in the sphere of domestic politics, and it is a topic that is commonly exploited in order to rally support and sympathy for the regime in the face of upcoming elections or unpopular policymaking. The opposition politicians purposefully remain vague on the question of whether Serbia should recognize Kosovo's independence in order to satisfy the EU requirements, knowing well enough that transparent support of Kosovo's independence alienates a large portion of the electorate. Even among the pro-EU electorate, many staunchly oppose the official recognition of Kosovo's independence. The issue of Kosovo, therefore, represents a great challenge to the effectiveness of the EU conditionality as the EU demands Serbia to recognize Kosovo's sovereignty in order to fulfill membership requirements and align itself with the EU foreign policy.

It should not come as a surprise that in the times in which the EU conditionality does not coincide with the dominant beliefs of the national identity, the elite may choose not to follow along with the conditionalities but appease the public instead (Freyburg and Richter 2010).

Taking into consideration the strong public sentiment over the Kosovo issue, the EU conditionality as a serious toolkit in bringing Serbia closer to European integration then reads more like a paradox and adds to the notion of the EU contributing to the Serbian “stabilitocracy” rather than committing to real democratic reforms. Political conditionality as a precondition for membership in both the EU and NATO is an instrument that is rather the most useful in a very advanced phase of a country’s development and when major state-building problems are solved, and the addressee of this policy can positively respond to conditionality (Zakošek 2008).

While the EU conditionality with a prerequisite of the proclamation of Kosovo’s independence alienates a great portion of the Serbian public, it is rather the consistent praise of Serbian autocratic president Vucic and his cosmetic-like democratic reforms that might signal the lack of genuine commitment behind the EU’s efforts. Taking into consideration that public endorsements resonate much more widely with citizens than the detailed reports issued by the EU, these instances have only allowed the ruling incumbent party, SNS, to deflect domestic criticism of its actions and further consolidate its rule (Richter and Wunsch 2020).

Given the lack of freedom within the domestic media, the statements issued by EU officials are reiterated in government adjacent news sources in the efforts to legitimize the regime and portray it as a regime that is working towards democratic reforms. The discrepancy between the findings of Commission reports and the public statements of the EU member state representatives creates a knowledge gap that Vucic skillfully exploits in order to frame and deliver a narrative that fits his interests (Zweers et al. 2022). As a result, while politics in Serbia remains largely perceived as “dirty business” where no one is credible, even more prevalent is the overall political culture that is permeated with extensive mistrust toward international institutions, especially the EU and NATO (Fiket, Pavlović and Pudar Drasko 2017). Such

statements consolidate the support among president Vucic's genuine supporters, but they also instigate a sense of disappointment among the pro-EU citizens who would like to see Serbia join the EU and establish real freedoms and democratic reforms.

Often, such discourse legitimizes the existing animosity towards the West and even helps new resentment emerge and thrive when none existed in the first place (Pavlović, 2017). The consistent praise of the Serbian regime for the smallest efforts or the lack of criticism in response to continuous backsliding on democratic principles is often read as indirect support for the Vucic's autocratic regime. Just recently, in her symbolic last visit to Serbia, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel chose not to address any of the issues halting Serbia's accession process which resulted in widespread disappointment among the opposition and the proponents of Serbia's EU integration (Roick and Roser 2021).

One of the most prominent statements, however, came from the former European Council President Donald Tusk who called Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic a "soulmate" and a "strong patriot" (Leyts 2018). Former Chancellor of Austria, Sebastian Kurz once gushingly described him as "an anchor of stability" and Angela Merkel went on to praise Vucic for his "very good reform record" and "who does not make false promises but tries to implement them," (Zweers et al. 2022) despite Serbia's clear record of democratic backsliding. Other EU officials are also known for their reiteration of praise for Vucic's commitment to the "European values," including Johannes Hahn, the European commissioner for European neighborhood policy and enlargement (Eror 2022). To a large extent then, the responsibility for the various outcomes of this political discourse should be equally shared between the autocrat, in this case Vucic, and his enablers in the West as they feed off each other in a mutually beneficial and profitable relationship (Pavlović 2017). Among the pro-EU domestic public, the tolerance, ignorance, and

occasional praise of president Vucic for the bare minimum signals prioritization for regional stability over public shaming for the hampering of democratic reforms.

Evidently so, the EU member state officials prefer to play along and disregard Serbia's problematic rule of law record for the sake of progress in dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo (Richter and Wunsch 2019). In large part, this contributes to the declining support for the EU accession as the EU hasn't been outspoken enough in its stance against corruption, nepotism, and its opposition to the authoritarian aspirations of the Serbian government (Sidlo and Hartwell 2018). Often, judging by either the silence of the West or its mild criticism of the countries in question, one would think that their governments are largely democratic with independent and impartial judiciaries as well as free, fair, and transparent elections (Pavlović 2017).

The NATO intervention in 1999 further adds to the complexity of the dynamic between the domestic political elite, the public opinion, and its perception of the EU and the West in general. The 1999 intervention left a bitter taste among the Serbian population and the resentment against the West which has poured over into the mistrust and skepticism over the EU integration. While many recognize and strongly condemn the atrocities committed by Milosevic and his regime, the recency of the NATO intervention coupled with support for Kosovo's independence has significantly shaped national identity and the feeling of victimization and subordination by the great powers. This narrative has developed upon the notion of self-identity of victimized people who are engaged in an honorable but often futile self-defense against the great power enemies (Subotić 2016).

Such narrative draws from historical and mythological events such as the Kosovo battle where the Serbs were defeated by the Ottomans in 1389, followed by the 500 years of Turkish rule, commonly perceived as the defining moment of the Serbian national consciousness. The

narrative of victimization, heroic people, and being wronged by the great powers has been perpetuated by the Austro-Hungarian rule, then Germany in World War II, Croatia during the Yugoslav wars, and more recently NATO in 1999 and the EU with the efforts to promote Kosovo's independence. If the salience of national identity is measured by its diffusion and internalization among both the elite and the mass population (Langenbacher 2003), it is evident that the victimization of the Serbian people at the hands of great powers has taken deep roots in all spheres of Serbian society. Such narrative has been strategically promoted and exploited by the ruling political elite as it serves not only to dramatize foreign policy concerns to their benefit but also to showcase themselves to the Western elite as the source of stability and a regime they can rely on in the face of a crisis.

As a result, Serbian "stabilitocracy" can survive as it is based on a volatile equilibrium between the external demands for stability and therefore the need to create domestic tensions in order to create legitimacy for their existence (Bieber 2022). The current dynamic between the domestic political elite and the EU reveals that Vucic is being perceived as a "strongman" who can be relied upon in the quest of maintaining regional stability. During his time as the Ministry of Information, he resorted to heavy censorship under the justification of the national crisis and the parallels to his present rule are omnipresent as he continues to resort to the tactic of victimhood and protecting the nation's interests to make up for the evident lack of democratic and economic progress. This narrative is heavily pushed among the pro-government tabloids where exaggeration is used to emphasize and strengthen the victimhood discourse and instill fear among the readership (Jovanović 2018).

This results in regimes like Vucic's having to consistently undermine the ordinary issues of domestic politics in the name of creating a crisis in order to legitimize the external support for

seeking to create stability and for not being able to deliver on reforms domestically (Bieber 2018). In 2017 for example, during Vucic's reign as a prime minister, Serbia sent a train painted in "Kosovo is Serbia" in different languages with the interior covered in posters of Serbian Orthodox saints. This resulted in Kosovo calling it a deliberate provocation to which Serbia said how it was ready to send its army and defend every inch of its territory (BBC 2017).

Tensions were building up, Kosovo officials warned of a response, ultimately resulting in the EU urging for the diffusion of the tensions to which Vucic responded with a statement that he has personally decided to stop the train before entering Kosovo to save freedom, lives, and showcase everyone that Serbia wants peace (Die Morina 2017). While the Serbian regime maintained that the train was representative of the efforts to promote Serbian heritage in Kosovo, the provocative tone of such action is undeniable, and it makes little sense to undermine Vucic's real intentions. The tension that was seemingly easy to avoid only served his interests as he was able to position himself as the "savior," strongman, and a voice of reason who can maintain Western Balkans stability.

CHAPTER 7

THE INFLUENCE OF RUSSIA

Russian influence, for cultural and political reasons, permeates Serbian society, and Putin's regime is often seen as the greatest ally and protector of Serbian interests on the world stage. Beyond the cultural ties rooted in the Orthodox Church, Russia's consistent condemnation of the 1999 NATO intervention and the opposition to Kosovo's independence have all contributed to the strong pro-Russia sentiment. For the Serbian populace, the loss of Kosovo, widely perceived as a central tenet of Serbian nationality, and the NATO bombardments remain two of the most prominent impediments to its journey of EU accession. The cultural bond and the political support in Serbia's most important foreign policy issues have therefore contributed to the distorted reality of many Serbs who believe Russia to be their largest economical partner. This is reflected in the ways Serbs perceive foreign aid, with 24% believing Russia was the largest donor between 2005 and 2015 while, in actuality, the EU remains the single largest investor (Sidlo and Hartwell 2018).

To put it in perspective, having a quarter of the population completely unaware of the scale of the investments of the EU goes on to show the misconstrued reality and the continuous regime efforts to undermine the EU accession process. Considering the already strained relationship between the Serbian public perception and the EU, the false belief that Russia is the largest economic partner can further weaken the domestic support for EU accession. In 2015, an IRI survey asked respondents who 'Serbia's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with?' and an overwhelming 94% of respondents said Russia while only 71% indicated the EU (Sidlo and Hartwell, 2018). For a country like Serbia, the appeal of Russia is also reflected in its lack of political conditionality associated with its aid as Moscow does not care

about territorial disputes, modernization of the economy, or let alone democratic reforms (Ponomareva 2020).

As such, Russia actively relies on domestic public opinion and economic support, but more importantly, its international support of the Serbian stance on both the ICTY and NATO (Nelaeva and Semenov 2016). Even though Russia cannot offer the same extent of economic support as the EU, it has masterfully integrated itself into different spheres of Serbian economic resources. In 2008, Russia's Gazprom bought a 51% stake in the Serbian state-owned oil company as a part of its strategy to ensure Gazprom's energy market presence in the Western Balkans (Nelaeva and Semenov 2016) and Gazprom remains the main sponsor of the most prominent Serbian soccer club. Russia has deepened its stakes in energy resources, corporate presence, loans, as well as military and intelligence resources, but most importantly, Russia has offered unconditional support for the Serbian stance on Kosovo (Sidlo and Hartwell 2018).

Before 2014, Serbia seemed to adhere to its "policy of neutrality" which was seeming, at least officially, understood and accepted by both the EU and Russia (Nelaeva and Semenov 2016). Upon the annexation of Crimea and the covert invasion of the Donbas, however, Serbia was reluctant to criticize Russia and even refused to follow along with the EU members and join them in imposing sanctions (Sidlo and Hartwell 2018). Similar to the recent response to the Russian invasion, Serbia tried hard to maintain its neutrality in 2014 by proclaiming support for Ukrainian territorial integrity while simultaneously not voting for the General Assembly Resolution of 2014 on the territorial integrity of Ukraine (Nelaeva and Semenov 2016).

At the time, whether it was due to the Western's weak response to Russia or simply the belief that there is no alternative to Serbia's future besides the EU, there was not much pressure exerted in getting Serbia to strongly condemn Russia's actions. In the ongoing Russian invasion,

the consequences of the lenient approach to the Serbian neutrality amid the takeover of Crimea seem omnipresent.

For many years, Putin has remained the most popular foreign leader in Serbia as a survey in 2019 indicated that 57% of people trusted him (Ponomareva, 2020). Putin continues to enjoy respect and is widely perceived as a leader who is not afraid to stand up to the Western powers, call out their hypocrisy and protect the Orthodox Christian world. His continuous naming of the Kosovo precedence in the name of justifying his Ukrainian intervention (Pineles 2022) is often received among the Serbs as a genuine act of caring for the interests of the Serbian nation. This belief is further perpetuated by the pro-regime tabloids that portray him as a strongman willing to protect the interests of the brotherhood nation and stand up to Western aggression.

Carried away by the staunch opposition to NATO and its allies or genuinely believing Putin's foreign policy is motivated by the cultural ties to Serbia, many continue to unconditionally support his actions. In one of his visits to Serbia, a resident was noted saying how Putin's visit brought him back to the pastimes, saying that nowadays the West is blackmailing Serbia and how grateful the people are to be able to rely on Russia and Putin (Nelaeva and Semenov, 2016). The narrative of Europe having a grand plan of purposefully breaking up Yugoslavia remains prevalent, further creating a preference for a closer relationship with Russia rather than the EU (Subotić 2010). Given the strong cultural and political ties and amid the lack of pressure exerted against Serbia to decisively shape its foreign policy towards the EU and away from Russia, the overwhelming pro-Russia sentiment among the Serbian populace in response to the Russian invasion should not come as a surprise.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

In the report of the European Parliament in 2018, Hartwell and Sidlo concluded that Serbia's regional ambitions and interests have always been the primary and most important driver of its foreign policy. The attempts at maintaining a position of neutrality in which the Serbian regimes make minor, cosmetic-like reforms to appease the EU have proven extremely fruitful for the perseverance and longevity of the Serbian autocratic regime. As shown, the EU was reluctant to call out and shame the regime for its continuous dismantling of what was once a promising post-communist democratic transition. In the void left by the lenient political pressure, the Serbian regime had no restraints in developing close economic and political ties with the Kremlin under the veil of Slavic and Orthodox kinship. The recent political upheaval in the Western Balkans in response to the Ukrainian invasion further unravels the challenges and the weaknesses of forming a relationship based on the rule of a "stabilitocracy." Evidently so, "stabilitocracy" as a rule results in everything but actual stability and security, and often, it fuels the resentment and legitimizes the existing animosity towards the West (Pavlović 2017).

Russian invasion in 2014 is incomparable to the full-fledged aggression we are seeing unravel in 2022 and we are seeing countries across the globe imposing sanctions like never seen before. Vucic's regime, however, found itself in a challenging position where its neutrality was brought into question but with much greater exerted pressure than it faced in 2014. This time again, Vucic played his card of dramatization and victimhood as his initial answer was that Serbia is once again, to no fault of its own, pressed into a corner and having to make extremely hard foreign policy decisions. When asked if Serbia was going to impose sanctions, Vucic told the reporters that he will deliver them his decision in the next 48 hours (N1 Belgrade 2022) while

also telling Russian news agency TASS (2022) that Serbia can't join sanctions against a country who is a major guarantor of Serbia's sovereignty. Ultimately, Serbia did not impose any sanctions, but when most of the European countries closed their airspace to Russian planes (Kauranen and Polland 2022), Serbia not only continued operating the flights but also increased their numbers in surging demand (Stojanovic 2020). In the light of criticism that AirSerbia was profiting off war, however, the airline vowed to reduce the frequency of its flights (Fabinger 2022). Additionally, in response to the decision to not impose any sanctions on Russia, many EU adjacent academics and experts called for the disqualification of Serbia from the EU accession process as there should be no room left for the countries not aligning with EU's values and beliefs.

Ahead of the voting at the United Nations General Assembly, there was palpable tension regarding the way Serbia will vote, with many going as far as urging the EU to cut the EU accession process with Serbia if it were to abstain or vote against condemning Russia. In a historic vote, however, Serbia aligned with the overwhelming majority and cast a vote against the Russian aggression to the content of many in the West (Pamuk and Landay 2022). Consequently, this move earned praise from Western officials who welcomed this decision (N1 Belgrade 2022), and the European Commission spokesman extended the EU's support of this decision and its expectations for Serbia to continue aligning with EU's decisions and positions in foreign and security policy matters (N1 Belgrade 2022).

The response to the Russian invasion perfectly demonstrates the reality of the Serbian "stabilitocracy" and its stalled and backsliding democratic progress. The pro-Russian regime has once again shown its ability to balance off between the EU and Russia through a crisis that might be indicative of its future foreign policy. Once again, the weak response of the EU and their

praise for the bare minimum in the face of the greatest threat to the democratic order goes on to imply the subordination of the EU accession process and democratic reforms to appeasing the autocratic leader for the sake of regional stability. With the Western allies occupied with the ongoing aggression, it appears too early to make a judgment on whether the EU policy towards Serbia will change in any way. The initial responses, however, are implying the continuation of tolerating autocratic regimes at the cost of further democratic backsliding and minimizing the window of opportunity for real, transforming democratic reforms. Somewhat paradoxically, the political tension created in response to the invasion showcases that a “stabilitocracy” in a politically volatile region, saturated with Russian influence can be a real threat.

While there are other factors affecting Serbia’s foreign policy and its relationship with the EU and Russia, the lack of consistency in the democratization efforts may have contributed to the Serbian regime comfortably aligning with Russia and straying away from the EU accession. Inevitably so, it’s important to acknowledge that the EU conditionality process by itself is largely limited in achieving serious reforms, especially in the face of domestic opposition and an autocratic regime. However, the endurance of Western Balkan’s “stabilitocracies” with seemingly little objection from the EU has allowed regimes like Aleksandar Vucic’s to exponentially autocratize and create greater prospects for regional instability. In the light of Russia’s aggression, Putin has shown the extent of his presence and influence in the Western Balkans through the likes of Vucic in Serbia and Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska vis-à-vis he can perpetuate tensions and remind the West of his influence in Europe’s backyard. All things considered, the “state” of “stabilitocracy” in the Western Balkans, and especially in the case of Serbia, might have allowed for the Russian political presence to substantially increase and present an even greater regional stability threat.

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