

Serbia: EU accession progress stalled

The EU opened accession negotiations with Serbia, a country with a population of 6.7 million, in 2013. Serbia got off to a strong start, but progress has stalled in recent years. Unresolved regional issues, in particular the stalemate of the political dialogue with Pristina, as well as lukewarm progress in rule-of-law reforms, are blocking accession negotiations. Parliamentary elections held in June 2020 have not yet provided the expected momentum, and the risk is that the country will progressively turn to Russia and China, confirming its ambiguous geopolitical orientation, which was also criticised by the European Parliament.

Background

Serbia, alongside five other Western Balkan countries, was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership during the EU [Thessaloniki](#) summit in 2003. A [European partnership for Serbia](#) was adopted in 2008, paving the way for the country's candidate status, which it was granted in 2012. In September 2013, an EU-Serbia [stabilisation and association agreement](#) entered into force. In line with the June 2013 [European Council](#) decision to open accession negotiations, the Council adopted a [negotiating framework](#) and agreed to hold a first intergovernmental conference with Serbia in January 2014. Serbia has opened 18 negotiation chapters, of which two have been provisionally [closed](#). The new [enlargement policy methodology](#), presented in 2020, groups negotiation chapters into six thematic clusters. With the new methodology, negotiations have become more difficult, as the main cluster on 'fundamentals', including the rule of law (an area where Serbia performs poorly), will remain open throughout the negotiation process.

New challenges

In addition to the [Copenhagen criteria](#), two specific conditions were added for the Western Balkan countries after Croatia's accession in 2013 – 'regional cooperation' and 'good neighbourly relations' – as a basis for resolving many bilateral problems, including the [Kosovo-Serbia](#) dispute. The Belgrade-Pristina dialogue was relaunched in 2020, following the appointment of Miroslav Lajčák as the EU special representative (EUSR) for the dialogue. The Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, and EUSR Lajčák [met](#) in Brussels on 26 April 2021 ahead of talks in mid-June with Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti. Of some concern is Serbia's increasing dependence on Russia and China, in particular in the energy, defence and health sectors. With regard to the pandemic, Serbia is performing relatively well. On 14 May, the health authorities announced the end of the epidemiological emergency declared in July 2020. So far, more than 2.25 million adult citizens have received at least one dose of the vaccine. This makes Serbia among the top 15 countries globally with a fully vaccinated population rate of 31.26 % ([Johns Hopkins University](#) data as at 4 June 2021). The [excess-mortality rate](#) due to Covid-19 (12 %) was lower than the EU-27 average (15 %).

European Parliament position

In its 25 March 2021 [resolution](#) on the Commission reports on Serbia for 2019 and 2020, the Parliament welcomed the fact that enlargement remains a political priority of the new government. It urged Serbia to deliver convincing results, including effective investigations in areas of concern such as the judiciary, freedom of expression and the fight on corruption. The Parliament endorsed the 'Team Europe' package and the commitment of €3.3 billion to the Western Balkans, and welcomed the reallocation of €374 million from the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance to help mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic. Parliament also noted 'the disproportionate visibility given by Serbia to third countries' and encouraged the Serbian authorities 'to communicate more actively their commitment to European values'.

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PE 690.658 – June 2021

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