

Serbia: Pulled in two directions

Until recently, Serbia was considered a frontrunner among the western Balkan candidate countries. However, Serbian frustration at slow progress towards EU membership has opened a space for closer links with the Russian Federation and, more recently, China, shedding doubt on Belgrade's commitment to a European perspective.

Background

Serbia submitted its EU membership application in 2009, and the European Council granted it candidate country status in 2012. The stabilisation and association agreement (SAA) entered into force in 2013. A 2018 [western Balkan strategy](#) underlined the EU's commitment to promote political, economic and social transformation and announced 2025 as a possible accession date. The [Commission's 2019 Serbia report](#) welcomed some progress, but there is still an urgent need for [functional parliamentary democracy](#) and cross-party dialogue, in order to forge a broad pro-European consensus, and avoid enlargement fatigue.

Competition of global powers

Serbia is still working on aligning its legislation with the EU *acquis*. However, despite some [progress](#) on political criteria and the rule of law, such as the ongoing constitutional reform intended to align the constitution with European standards, [strategic competition](#) between global powers is on the rise, and could derail the accession process. Russia is a [traditional geopolitical ally](#) of Serbia, and in the past Moscow has provided diplomatic [support](#) (for example, backing Serbia's position on non-recognition of Kosovo*), investment, and economic and military aid. In return, Serbia [resisted](#) EU pressure to apply sanctions on Russia over its aggression in Ukraine. Brussels also [criticised](#) Serbia's decision to sign an October 2019 free-trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, a Moscow-led trading bloc. The [Commission](#) is clear that Serbia will have to cancel any bilateral trade agreements with other countries if and when it joins the EU; and the issue was also raised at the [informal meeting of EU foreign ministers](#) in Helsinki, in August 2019.

In addition, Serbia is a founding member of the [16+1 initiative](#) between China and the central, eastern and south-eastern European countries launched in 2011, before the [Belt and Road Initiative](#). For China, Serbia represents a crucial transport corridor and energy hub. China's main future trade route to the European market is set to be the Piraeus-Belgrade-Budapest [corridor](#) with a €3.2 billion high-speed rail project announced in 2014. A contract to buy nine Wing Loong Chinese military [drones](#) and the transfer of technology to the [Pegaz \(Pegasus\) military drones programme](#) that Serbia has been developing internally are also cause for concern. [Chinese police officers](#) on the streets of Belgrade and the Huawei contract for Belgrade's 'Safe City' project, which envisions mounting hundreds of surveillance cameras with facial-recognition software, meanwhile signal that Serbia's geopolitical orientation has become increasingly unclear. The [lack of transparency](#) surrounding Chinese investments also raises concerns about Serbia's commitment to applying EU rules on competition, state aid and government procurement.

European Parliament

Parliament's [2018 resolution on Serbia](#) criticised Serbia's military cooperation with Russia, and called on Serbia to align with EU foreign and security policy. Parliament also expressed concerns regarding Serbia's dependence on Russian gas supplies. In September, David McAllister, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) initiated a dialogue between the political parties in Serbia in the 'Jean Monnet' format. The [1st Inter-Party Dialogue in the National Assembly of Serbia](#) took place on 9 and 10 October 2019.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) and the Opinion of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

