

# THE MASKS HAVE SLIPPED

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## SERBIA IN A GEOPOLITICAL

# PANDEMIC

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**BCSP**

MAY 2020

# **The Masks Have Slipped**

## **Serbia in a Geopolitical Pandemic**

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A bad film might include such features as unconvincing actors, a predictable plot, forced lines, unnecessarily explicit love scenes and a nonsensical ending. In which case Serbia's foreign policy during the state of emergency, declared in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, looks like a multiple winner of the Golden Raspberry award. Maladjusted to the new circumstances, she remained silent when she should have spoken out, spoke the wrong lines at the wrong moments, stammered and overacted only to come to the expected unhappy end – on bad terms with her most important international partners and in a firm embrace with those who are unpredictable.

## Setting the Scene

The series of (un)expected global events that unfolded during March and April 2020 have set the scene and raised numerous questions. Will international relations change radically or has the pandemic merely accelerated existing processes? Has US global leadership vanished for the long term? What are the real interests of the People's Republic of China? Where did the muscles of the Russian bear disappear to? Is this the last warning for the European Union that it must undergo radical change? What happened to regional cooperation in the Western Balkans? And now that the scene is set, what is Serbia's current foreign policy orientation and how will it evolve in the future?

A plethora of data indicate that China concealed information about the emergence of the coronavirus,<sup>1</sup> that it tried to silence those of its own citizens who warned about it,<sup>2</sup> that it expelled foreign reporters who wrote about it<sup>3</sup> and that it played down the numbers of confirmed cases and fatalities.<sup>4</sup> At the start of the crisis, Chinese officials even accused the United States of deliberately spreading the virus to China.<sup>5</sup> From the position of being the bad guy, China launched its "mask diplomacy" – a gargantuan humanitarian-diplomatic-information endeavour that sought to ensure the country would emerge from the pandemic as the world's saviour, rather than as being, at least in part, responsible for the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, similar responses to the pandemic were crafted by the other two eastern powers with interests in this part of Europe – Russia and Turkey.

On the other side of the Pacific, it seems that the already turbulent final year of Donald Trump's presidency – marked by the impeachment process, tensions in the Middle East

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<sup>1</sup> "China didn't warn public of likely pandemic for 6 key days", The Associated Press, 15.04.2020. <https://apnews.com/68a9e1b91de4ffc166acd6012d82c2f9>

<sup>2</sup> "How the Coronavirus Has Tested China's System of Information Control", The New Yorker, 07.02.2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-the-coronavirus-has-tested-chinas-system-of-information-control>

<sup>3</sup> "China Defends Expulsion of American Journalists, Accusing U.S. of Prejudice", The New York Times, 18.03.2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/world/asia/china-expels-journalists.html>

<sup>4</sup> "Coronavirus: China hid scale of outbreak — US intelligence report", Deutsche Welle, 02.04.2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-china-hid-scale-of-outbreak-us-intelligence-report/a-52988929>

<sup>5</sup> "Chinese Diplomat Accuses US of Spreading Coronavirus", Voice of America, 13.03.2020. <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/chinese-diplomat-accuses-us-spreading-coronavirus>

following the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, the collapse of the president's peace plan for Israel and Palestine and the pernicious game his administration is playing with relations between Kosovo and Serbia – has only been made more dramatic by the COVID-19 pandemic. Trump's response to the pandemic has shifted from taking too long to react with isolation measures, even though he was informed of the risks,<sup>6</sup> to the focusing on anti-Chinese propaganda, which has contributed to hampering a coordinated global response by the G7 and G20,<sup>7</sup> the 'hijack' of medical equipment from other countries,<sup>8</sup> a unilateral travel ban from the EU and the termination of funding for the World Health Organisation (WHO).

For the European Union 2020 has also proved not to be the best time to tackle the coronavirus. Even though the United Kingdom has formally left the EU, bringing to an end a long-running saga that has hindered the EU's usual functioning, the migrant crisis has escalated again and EU institutions were only formed following serious face-offs between member states. Clumsy political and economic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are a logical result of previously accumulated problems. The closure of internal and external borders, delays in providing assistance to the most vulnerable states and candidate countries, stopping traffic between member states<sup>9</sup> and divisions over economic recovery measures have been accompanied by the intensification of authoritarian trends, especially in Hungary and Poland. Questioning some of the EU's core values, such as solidarity and democracy, damages the EU's image and opens the door to external malignant influences.

The Western Balkan countries entered 2020 with a mortgage of relationships based on the unfortunate events of their recent past. In spite of the aggressively marketed *ad hoc* political project of a "Mini Schengen",<sup>10</sup> the region remains dysfunctional during the pandemic. Moreover, tensions over the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church that carried Serbia and Montenegro over into the New Year, have continued during the state of emergency and bled across into other issues.<sup>11</sup> The highly turbulent processes unfolding in Kosovo, regarding the overthrow of the government, were accompanied by deafening silence in Serbia, which reacted in the same way to the Euro-Atlantic integration successes of North Macedonia and Albania. The relationship between the

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<sup>6</sup> "He Could Have Seen What Was Coming: Behind Trump's Failure on the Virus", The New York Times, 11.04.2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html>

<sup>7</sup> Ash Jain, "Trump Just Missed a Perfect Opportunity to Reassert American Leadership", Foreign Policy, 02.04.2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/02/g20-helped-beat-ebola-but-not-coronavirus/>

<sup>8</sup> "US cast as culprit in global scrum over coronavirus supplies", Politico, 04.04.2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-united-states-cast-as-culprit-in-global-scrum-over-supplies/>

<sup>9</sup> "Austria suspends train traffic to and from Italy over coronavirus", Euronews, 24.02.2020. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/02/23/austria-suspends-train-traffic-to-and-from-italy-over-coronavirus>

<sup>10</sup> "Three countries agree mini Schengen in the Balkans", Euractiv, 14.10.2019. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/three-countries-agree-mini-schengen-in-the-balkans/>

<sup>11</sup> "Crna Gora ponovo odbila pet respiratora iz Srbije" ("Montenegro Again Rejects 5 Ventilators from Serbia"), Slobodna Evropa, 28.03.2020. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30514979.html>

president of Serbia and the Serbian member of the presidency of Bosnia and Hercegovina continue to provoke controversy.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of their differences and disagreements, most of the countries of the region have something in common. This common thread is their crude violations of human rights and their continued dismantling of democracy and the rule of law.

It is in this grand dystopian scene, in foreign policy terms, Serbia has largely made the wrong decisions, which can cost the country its current and future roles in a rapidly changing world.

## **Autocracy vs. the Coronavirus**

The pandemic struck China at the height of an 18-month trade war with the United States that had slowed global growth, disrupted supply chains and reduced the profits of American farmers and which was followed by a détente and the conclusion of the first phase of a trade agreement. In parallel with the trade war, there was also a “technological cold war” between two of the largest companies in the world – China’s Huawei and Cisco Systems from the US. Internally, prior to the crisis, the Chinese regime was at loggerheads with protesters in Hong Kong – the largest since the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests – and faced allegations of mass violations of minority rights. The pandemic further strained relations between these two global powers, bringing tit-for-tat accusations about the origins of the virus, competition in development and the right to use a vaccine, the expulsion of Wall Street Journal, New York Times and Washington Post journalists from China and the corresponding expulsion of 60 Chinese state media journalists from the USA.

The pandemic has disrupted the plans of Russia’s president, who was preparing to change the country’s existing political system by rewriting the constitution that would, in theory, allow him to stay in power until 2036. . A nationwide vote on changing the constitution was scheduled for 22 April, followed by the informal crowning of Putin as a modern-day tsar at a grandiose celebration of Europe Day in Moscow on 9 May. This would be legitimised by world leaders from Asia and Europe, other than Trump, who would attend the event.<sup>13</sup> However, the COVID-19 pandemic delayed these plans and heightened Putin’s agony with an economic crisis and falling global oil prices - triggered by a break-up in dialogue between the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and Russia over proposed oil-production cuts.

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<sup>12</sup> “VUČIĆ PREKO DODIKA PRATI SITUACIJU U BiH Treba li predsednik Srbije da se meša u krize u komšiluku” (“VUČIĆ RELIES ON DODIK FOR BiH NEWS: Should Serbian President Intervene in the Neighbourhood?”), Blic, 11.03.2020. <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/republika-srpska/vucic-preko-dodika-prati-situaciju-u-bih-treba-li-predsednik-srbije-da-se-mesa-u-wy41tf2>

<sup>13</sup> Tatiana Stanovaya. “The Putin Regime Cracks.” Carnegie Moscow, 7.05.2020, <https://carnegie.ru/2020/05/07/putin-regime-cracks-pub-81726>; Andrey Pertsev. “Unstable Putin,” Carnegie Moscow, 1.04.2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81424>

In Turkey the pandemic exacerbated the existing economic crisis brought about by the policies of president Erdogan, which have in the last three years caused the economy to go into recession, sharply increased unemployment, sparked a currency crisis and the flight of global investors. The crisis is a serious test for the president and his ruling AKP party. The regime has already faced a loss of support in the country's major cities since last year's elections, the loss of NATO allies due to Turkey's rapprochement with Russia and intervention in conflicts in the Middle East, as well as the problem of nearly four million refugees living within its borders.

In spite of differences in economic and political power and the different problems these three countries face, there are also many similarities in their response to the pandemic. The Chinese government wants the world to forget the unpleasant fact that concealing information about COVID-19 to protect politicians and the Communist Party was what got the world into this mess. The Chinese government's response to the coronavirus was initially delayed by withholding information from the public, underreporting confirmed cases, minimising the severity of the infection and dismissing the likelihood of human transmission. China is now busy trying to convince the world that its authoritarian model is the future<sup>14</sup>: the system that can act decisively in times of crisis - build hospitals in a week, contain virus and offer assistance to other countries - whereas liberal democracies are setting up borders, banning the export of protective medical equipment and keeping it selfishly for themselves.

Western European and North American media have reported that the global campaign China is waging to repair its own image is based on the spread of disinformation through social media – following the example set by Russia<sup>15</sup> – but also on intensive engagement by Chinese diplomats. In its latest report, the European External Action Service (EEAS) also claims that China and Russia continue to use the global coronavirus crisis to spread fake news and other disinformation via the internet in order to undermine the EU and its values.<sup>16</sup> Russia was one of the few countries that sided with China against its critics.<sup>17</sup>

Concealing data and information from the WHO is not the only thing that China, Russia and Turkey have in common. They also share the practices of arbitrarily arresting doctors,

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Meyer-Resende. "Only democracy can fight epidemics," Euobserver, 25.03.2020, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/147867>

<sup>15</sup> Mark Scott. "Chinese diplomacy ramps up social media offensive in COVID-19 info war." Politico, 29.04.2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-disinformation-covid19-coronavirus/>; Mark Scott. "Russia and China push 'fake news' aimed at weakening Europe: report." Politico, 4.01.2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-china-disinformation-coronavirus-covid19-facebook-google/>

<sup>16</sup> "EEAS SPECIAL REPORT UPDATE: SHORT ASSESSMENT OF NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION AROUND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC" EU vs. DiSiNFO, 1.04.2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

<sup>17</sup> Dimitri Alexander Simes. "Will Russia Be the Real Loser in the New U.S.-China Cold War?" The National Interest, 2.05.2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/will-russia-be-real-loser-new-us-china-cold-war-150071>

journalists and activists; censoring traditional and online media; wiretapping, mass electronic surveillance and violations of the right to privacy; settling scores with opposition leaders and other authoritarian measures.

Nonetheless, a coronavirus exit strategy is somewhat different. Russia and China look to each other's assistance, while Turkey is relying on its own resources and is seeking help from other countries. Turkey has, for example, rejected help from the International Monetary Fund,<sup>18</sup> but has instead appealed for help from its own citizens and looked for loans from Middle Eastern countries, such as Qatar. Although Trump has turned his back on Erdogan due to cooperation with Putin, Turkey has ultimately again turned to its traditional American allies with the proposal to refrain from activating the Russian S-400 anti-missile system in exchange for economic aid.<sup>19</sup> Due to their symbiotic relationship, China's emergence from the crisis will largely depend on how the Trump administration handles the pandemic and whether the president will win another term at the forthcoming election. The success of the Chinese strategy will also depend on the behaviour of other countries in its neighbourhood, such as Japan and India, which are determined to reduce their dependence on Chinese companies and products.

In this context, Russia has become one of the few and most vocal defenders of China on the global stage. While other countries have cut economic ties with Beijing, Moscow has gone a step further and allowed the Russian National Welfare Fund to begin investing in the Chinese yuan and Chinese state bonds.<sup>20</sup> In return, Beijing has purchased large quantities of oil from Moscow, allowing Russian energy companies to stay afloat amidst falling demand in Europe due to coronavirus. In the post-coronavirus reality, Russia and China could accelerate their cooperation through "de-dollarisation" and large-scale projects, such as a new gas pipeline to China and a new railway line that would link Arctic and Indian Ocean ports.

### *Sino-Serbian Embrace*

Serbia has set the stage for geopolitical tugs of war because the country's president, Aleksandar Vučić, exploited internal divisions in the EU and the turmoil on the world stage caused by the pandemic for his own political ends and to court authoritarian partners.

Serbia attracted international attention when president Vučić used his declaration of a state of emergency to state that the country's "steel friendship" with the Chinese regime and "brother Xi" was the only thing that could help Serbia halt the spread of the

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<sup>18</sup> "Erdoğan i dalje odbacuje pomoć MMF-a uprkos krizi korona virusa" ("Erdogan Still Rejecting IMF Assistance In Spite of Coronavirus"), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 14.04.2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30551104.html>

<sup>19</sup> Aycan Erdemir and Luc Sasseville. "Trump Should not fall for Erdogan's S-400 gambit." War on the rocks, 5.12.2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/trump-should-not-fall-for-erdogans-s-400-gambit/>

<sup>20</sup> Dimitri Alexander Simes. "Will Russia Be the Real Loser in the New U.S.-China Cold War?" The National Interest, 2.05.2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/will-russia-be-real-loser-new-us-china-cold-war-150071>



coronavirus. The Serbian president used the arrival of aid from China as an opportunity to strike out at the European Union, while symbolically kissing the Chinese flag.<sup>21</sup>

China's so-called "mask diplomacy"<sup>22</sup> spurred rival forces from West and East to deploy their soft power in a global competition to win the "hearts and minds" of the Serbian public during the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>23</sup> Following China's lead, the EU and other European states allocated funds for medical equipment and/or socio-economic post-crisis reconstruction. Russia sent Serbia aid in the form of medical equipment, technical and protective provisions, Russian doctors and special vehicles and military experts from nuclear biological and chemical warfare units who disinfected roads and hospitals. Turkey also sent planes carrying medical aid to Belgrade and other Balkan cities, including 100,000 facemasks, 2,000 protective suits and 1,500 COVID-19 testing kits.

With Chinese help, the president of Serbia managed to turn the EU's belated aid to his own personal political advantage, presenting himself as the nation's saviour and presenting China as the solution to the coronavirus, rather than its cause. In media close to the ruling elite, Chinese aid was glorified while EU, Russian and Turkish aid was unexpectedly left out or minimised. Key competing narratives moved from traditional media into the virtual world, where large numbers of pro-government "bots" on Twitter busied themselves in praising Chinese aid and the "steel friendship" between the two countries, as well as criticising the absence of European solidarity.<sup>24</sup> The Russian news outlet Sputnik,<sup>25</sup> as well as some ministers from the Serbian government, such as defence minister, Aleksandar Vulin, joined in spreading narratives about the EU's demise and the paucity of European solidarity.<sup>26</sup> Kremlin-controlled media used Russian government assistance to Serbia in fighting the coronavirus as an opportunity to promote Russian power and to spread the message that Russia "did not leave its younger Balkan sister in the lurch."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Majda Ruge and Janka Oertel. "Serbia's coronavirus diplomacy unmasked." ECFR, 26.03.2020, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_serbias\\_coronavirus\\_diplomacy\\_unmasked](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_serbias_coronavirus_diplomacy_unmasked)

<sup>22</sup> Vuk Vuksanović. "China and "Mask Diplomacy" in the Balkans." Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 30.04.2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/china-and-mask-diplomacy-balkans-25898>

<sup>23</sup> Shaun Walker, "China and EU vie to win over Serbia," The Guardian, April 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-diplomacy-how-russia-china-and-eu-vie-to-win-over-serbia>

<sup>24</sup> Digital Forensic Center. "A bot network arrived in Serbia along with coronavirus," DFC, 13.04.2020, <https://dfcme.me/en/dfc-finds-out-a-botnet-arrived-in-serbia-along-with-coronavirus/>

<sup>25</sup> Dušan Proroković. „Evropska unija će se posle ovog pada teško oporaviti, a ovakva ne može trajati“ ("The EU Will Have a Hard Time Recovering From This and Cannot Last in this Form"), Sputnik, 22.03.2020, <https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/202003221122130482-evropska-unija-ce-se-posle-ovog-pada-tesko-oporaviti-a-ovakva-ne-moze-trajati-propadanje-profit-novi-poredak/>

<sup>26</sup> Beta. "Vulin: Koronavirus je dokrajčio ideju evropske solidarnosti" ("Vulin: Coronavirus Killed Off the Idea of European Solidarity"), N1, 17.04.2020, <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a590124/Vulin-Koronavirus-je-dokrajcio-ideju-evropske-solidarnosti.html>

<sup>27</sup> Julija Petrovskaja. "COVID-19 kao zgodna prilika za promociju ruske moći." ("COVID-19 As a Convenient Opportunity for the Promotion of Russian Power"), Radio slobodna Evropa, 07.04.2020,



By praising the anticipated Chinese aid, the Serbian president consciously built up his own image as the guardian of the lives, security and physical health of the people of Serbia, thus increasing support both for himself and the ruling party ahead of forthcoming elections.<sup>28</sup> More importantly still, the aggrandisement of China serves to further strengthen economic and political ties and ease access to Chinese investments and loans without public tenders. On the other hand, billboards expressing gratitude to “brother Xi” and the Serbian president’s outpourings of “tenderness” towards China are also pleasing to China itself, since they show its growing influence in Europe. Furthermore, as he has done many times before, the Serbian president plays the Russia or China card very deliberately and skilfully in order to garner more support from Europe and to place himself at the epicentre of global events. By continuing to reinforce anti-Western sentiment among his supporters, the president seeks to undermine and silence his critics, who usually see the EU as an ally in their struggle against authoritarianism and corruption in Serbia.<sup>29</sup>

The Serbian president favours China over the EU because China will never publish a report on the state of democracy in Serbia, nor will it point out the country’s underdeveloped institutions, media censorship and threats to human rights and freedoms; it will never cast judgement on undemocratic tendencies and the arrests of journalists or civic activists. The Chinese political model is closer to the heart of the leader of the country and most powerful political party than are the models of most democratic European states, which are founded on transparent democratic processes, respect for human rights, free markets, political pluralism and political freedoms.<sup>30</sup> The improving of ties between the two countries and the sharing of common values is also reflected in their high index of corruption,<sup>31</sup> as well as in intensifying cooperation between the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>32</sup> Sending a delegation of ruling party functionaries to China to learn something of the Chinese Communist Party’s way of doing things in the hope that it can be applied in Serbia and visits to Serbia by Chinese police

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<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/covid-19-kao-zgodna-prilika-za-promociju-ruske-mo%C4%87i/30538144.html>

<sup>28</sup> “Ogromna zahvalnost timu kineskih stručnjaka” (“Enormous Gratitude to the Team of Chinese Experts”), Tanjug, 01.05.2020, <https://vucic.rs/Vesti/Najnovije/a37461-Ogromna-zahvalnost-timu-kineskih-strucnjaka-vucic.rs.html>

<sup>29</sup> DMITAR BECHEV. COVID-19 in the Western Balkans. Atlantic Council, 03.04.2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/covid-19-in-the-western-balkans/>

<sup>30</sup> Harun Cero. „Kome trebaju kineski policajci i Huawei kamere u Srbiji?“ (“Who Wants Chinese Policemen and Huawei Cameras in Serbia?”), Al Jazeera Balkans, 28.09.2019, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/kome-trebaju-kineski-policajci-i-huawei-kamere-u-srbiji>

<sup>31</sup> On the 2018 Corruption Perception Index China and Serbia shared the 87<sup>th</sup> spot with an index of 39 on a scale from 0 (very corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Source: Transparency, <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2019>

<sup>32</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa. “Vladajuće partije Kine i Srbije: Jača saradnja dve zemlje.” (“The Ruling Parties of China and Serbia: Stronger Cooperation Between the Two Countries”), RSE, 14.10.2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30216143.html>; Milica Stojanovic. “Chinese and Serbian Ruling Parties Pledge ‘All-Time’ Friendship,” BalkanInsight, 14.10.2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/14/chinese-and-serbian-ruling-parties-pledge-all-time-friendship/>

patrols, anti-terrorist units and artificial intelligence experts – well before any medical aid – clearly indicates the fundamental change of political system and foreign policy on which Vučić is tirelessly working.

Once the pandemic comes to an end, the economic devastation it leaves behind will become the main concern of governments around the world. In a post-coronavirus reality, Serbia will most value those countries and organisations that offer economic recovery through direct investment or loans and that support the current regime staying in power and serving its clientelist network. At the moment, China promises these things but – desiring regional stability and the resolution of Kosovo's status – so does the EU.

## **The US in an Election Year**

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out at the start of a presidential election year in the US and not only did it make the race to the White House more uncertain, it also exposed many of the antagonisms of the American political and economic system. In other words, the pandemic brought to light problems that already existed in American society.

Even though he was warned by his intelligence agencies about the dangers of a global outbreak of coronavirus, US president Donald Trump denied, ignored and minimised the danger until mid-March. Even Trump's close associates responsible for health failed for weeks to persuade him to take more concrete measures – Trump mostly accused them of alarmism.<sup>33</sup> Not too dissimilar from when Serbian officials accuse anyone who points out failings in their handling of the crisis of spreading panic.

The main reason Trump ignored warnings and advice about the pandemic lies in pure political interest. Trump is simply afraid that an economic slowdown will affect his chances of re-election. With the political and ideological stance of the current US president in mind, his decision to ignore the pandemic for too long is a consequence of the following choice: between the uninterrupted functioning of the capitalist economy and the protection of human life at the cost of reduced profits, Trump chose the former.

Neither do Trump's other actions in the run up to and during the pandemic fundamentally deviate from the pre-pandemic trajectory of the American administration. On 10 February 2020, for example, Trump's budget proposal for 2021 envisaged drastic cuts to all federal social programmes, including healthcare, social housing, student loan repayment programmes, etc.<sup>34</sup> At the time the WHO was already appealing to governments to raise the capacities of their health systems. Trump decided, however, not only to ignore the WHO's advice but in April he made the decision to cancel funding for this organisation,

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<sup>33</sup> "He Could Have Seen What Was Coming: Behind Trump's Failure on the Virus", The New York Times, 11.04.2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html>

<sup>34</sup> "What's in President Trump's Fiscal 2021 Budget?", The New York Times, 10.02.2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/10/business/economy/trump-budget-explained-facts.html>

17 percent of whose budget had been covered by the United States in recent years – more than any other country. This was done partly out of Trump’s desire to shift the blame for his poor handling of the pandemic to the WHO and partly out of consistency with his stance that the wealthiest actors in the market (in this case the US) have nothing to gain from contributing to the common good by financing joint (in this case global) institutions.

The actions Trump did take to combat the pandemic are also in line with the political views he has always held – i.e. “America first”. The main measure introduced by the American administration was to close the borders, first for all passengers from China and Iran and, in mid-March, entry to the United States from European Union member states was prohibited. These external measures – in place of internal measures such as isolation of people and strengthening public health – are not surprising. In the aforementioned budget proposal for 2021, Trump not only cuts spending on healthcare and social programmes, he also proposes increased spending on the construction of a wall along the southern border, as well as on other measures for curtailing migration. Even though the reasons for closing borders during a pandemic are different to “normal” times, the closing of borders as a quasi-solution is a trademark of Trump’s policy.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to even more strained relations between the United States and China. During January and February Trump praised the way the Chinese authorities were handling the crisis, on several occasions. However, when the pandemic gained momentum in the US, the American president changed his tune and began blaming China for the global spread of the virus, even referring to the new coronavirus as the “Chinese virus”. Shifting the blame to others (WHO, China, etc.), instead of taking responsibility for mistakes and choosing international isolation over international coordination unequivocally show that the United States failed to be a global leader in combating the COVID-19 outbreak.

Even so, the US presidential election remains scheduled for November and Trump urgently needs a foreign policy success, which has thus far eluded him. A rushed agreement between Kosovo and Serbia could, in that sense, be an opportunity for the US president. However, what counts as a success for the Trump administration could be dangerous for everyone else, especially for the Balkans.

### *A Bermuda Triangle Over Kosovo*

The COVID-19 pandemic has served as the backdrop for distorted interpretations of the fall of Kosovo’s government. The government of Kosovo, led by Albin Kurti, was overthrown on 25 March, less than two months after it was formed. The coalition partner of Kurti’s Self-Determination party, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), initiated a vote of no confidence in the government after Kurti sacked the Interior Minister, Agim Veliu, a member of LDK. The conflict between the coalition partners began when Veliu contravened the government’s official position and supported the idea of Kosovo’s president, Hashim Thaçi, declaring a state of emergency due to the pandemic. While the

pandemic was used as the pretext, the real reason for the toppling of the Kosovo government lies in the conflict between Kurti and Thaçi.

Kurti's declaration of a war on corruption and organised crime, as well as his insistence on a new approach to the dialogue with Serbia, threatened the position of the Kosovo's president, who was described by Slovenian think tank, IFIMES, as "a symbol of the political-criminal octopus".<sup>35</sup> Given the fact that he does not have significant support from the electorate, Thaçi was forced to seek external allies. He found them in the US administration, that is in the form of Trump's special envoy for negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina, Richard Grenell, but also in the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. In spite of the fact that the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has for some time now been seen as officially discontinued, these three politicians have continued to meet and in secret negotiate what has come to be known as a "final agreement", with the idea being for it to be concluded as soon as possible. Kurti became an obstacle to this plan, which is why Grenell decided help topple the newly formed government of Kosovo.

Even though Grenell officially denied that negotiations on a land swap between Kosovo and Serbia had taken place in his presence, this is an idea that has been advocated by Vučić and Thaçi since 2018.<sup>36</sup> There are several reasons why an exchange of territory would suit this troika and why they are in a hurry. Grenell's is rushing to work out a "historic agreement" between Serbia and Kosovo that could be presented to the American public as a foreign policy win for Trump's administration in the run-up to the presidential election. It is also not impossible that Grenell is motivated by his own ambition and by becoming an international calibre negotiator. Thaçi, on the other hand, is looking to conclude any kind of deal as quickly as possible so long as it guarantees him immunity from prosecution – i.e. as long as it prevents the Special Prosecutor's Office in the Hague from indicting him for war crimes.<sup>37</sup> For the third party in this scheme, Aleksandar Vučić, it is important that any agreement reached is one that he can present to the Serbian public through his tightly controlled media as his own personal victory. An exchange of territory would do less damage to Vučić's rating than the unconditional recognition of Kosovo's independence.

But why would a land swap be a bad thing for others? Above all, this quasi-solution would be a defeat for the notion of the state as a political community for all of its citizens, regardless of their ethnicity. Drawing new state borders along lines of "ethnic demarcation" would reinforce the dominance of ethnic nationalism in the region and

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<sup>35</sup> "Analiza: Tači 'simbol političko-kriminalne hobotnice' na Kosovu" ("Analysis: Thaci a 'Symbol of a Political-Criminal Octopus"), *Danas*, 06.08.2019. <https://www.danas.rs/politika/analiza-taci-simbol-politicko-kriminalne-hobotnice-na-kosovu/>

<sup>36</sup> "Serbia, Kosovo presidents broach border changes for historic deal", *Politico*, 25.08.2018. <https://www.politico.eu/article/aleksandar-vucic-hashim-thaci-serbia-kosovo-balkans-eu-enlargement-alpbach-forum/>

<sup>37</sup> Dean B. Pineles, "American Dilemma: What if Kosovo's Thaçi is Indicted?", *Balkan Insight*, 24.01.2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/01/24/american-dilemma-what-if-kosovo-s-thaci-is-indicted-01-23-2019/>

normalise the dangerous idea that ethnically homogenous communities are in some sense natural. Secondly, the land swap would be difficult to implement in practice without enormous human suffering – especially for those who would find themselves on the “wrong side” of the border, and there would be plenty of those. People would leave their homes en masse and those who remained would continue to live in segregation. Finally, drawing new borders in the Balkans would legitimise existing tensions surrounding the creation of ethnically clean states. The Serbian member of the Bosnia and Hercegovina presidency, Milorad Dodik, has supported the partition of Kosovo and expressed a desire that, in addition to the four municipalities of northern Kosovo, Republika Srpska also be joined to Serbia.<sup>38</sup> These tensions have in the past mostly ended with bloodshed.

Another reason why the toppling of Kosovo’s government should be cause for concern is that this act is in fact the start of a soft coup. A coup supported by the Trump administration, following less than successful attempts to exert pressure on the government of Kosovo. In late February when Kurti announced the gradual abolition of tariffs on Serbian goods and the establishment of reciprocity in relations between Kosovo and Serbia, Grenell threatened to suspend US financial aid to Kosovo and even to withdraw US troops if the tariffs were not revoked immediately and unconditionally. This strikingly disproportionate penalty did not come to pass as it was interrupted by the COVID-19 outbreak, which perfectly suited Thaçi and Grenell.

Disagreements over management of the crisis served as a convenient pretext for the overthrow of the Kurti government. It did not take long for the junior coalition partner, LDK, to take Thaçi’s side. This defection should be understood in light of the fact that the war on corruption announced by the prime minister would not be a problem only for Thaçi, but also for the LDK leadership. With the collapse of the Kosovo government, each of the parties involved in the coup got something they needed: Grenell cleared the way for the so-called comprehensive agreement between Belgrade and Prishtina; Thaçi got a chance to sign the agreement as a peacemaker and, in so doing, avoid being indicted for war crimes; while the LDK leadership got protection from anti-corruption measures and potential prosecutions. It should also be remembered that the collapse of Kosovo’s government is also a boon for Aleksandar Vučić, who would certainly prefer not to have Kurti as his opposite number in the negotiations. This is why the Serbian List, formally a partner in Kurti’s government, supported his overthrow.

In late April, the president of Kosovo officially invited LDK to form a new government, after Self-Determination party had not appointed a candidate for new prime minister and instead called for elections to be held once the pandemic is over. However, Kosovo’s Constitutional Court has suspended the process of forming a new government until 29

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<sup>38</sup> “Dodik: North of Kosovo to remain in Serbia with Republika Srpska joining Serbia as well”, Kossev, 21.09.2019. <https://kossev.info/dodik-north-of-kosovo-to-remain-in-serbia-with-republika-srpska-joining-serbia-as-well/>

May, when it will reach its final decision on whether Thaçi's move is constitutional or not. In the meantime, support for Self-Determination among the electorate continues to grow. Since the parliamentary elections in October 2019, at which Kurti's party was the largest party with just over 26 percent of the vote, polls indicate that the party's rating has improved by over 50 percent.<sup>39</sup> It is important to note here that the chairperson of the Kosovo assembly who headed the LDK party in this election, Vjosa Osmani, opposed the vote of no confidence during the pandemic and also opposed the formation of a new government in which the LDK would be partnered with the so-called "war wing coalition" (PDK, AAK and NISMA). In spite of all of this, Thaçi and Grenell have sought to present the coup as a victory for democracy, highlighting the legitimacy of a future government without Self-Determination.<sup>40</sup> This attempt to redefine democratic legitimacy and to separate the concept of democracy from the will of the people is dangerous not only for Kosovo but also further abroad.

A third aspect of this that should be of concern is the reaction of the European Union to events in Kosovo – or rather, the failure of the EU to react. Although some European officials have voiced support for Kurti's plan to gradually relax tariffs against Serbia or opposed the vote of no confidence during the pandemic, the European Union has proved to be unready – or unwilling – to prevent the collapse of Kosovo's government. It remains to be seen whether it will be able to prevent the agreement on a land swap between Kosovo and Serbia. In fairness, the idea to redraw borders has also appeared within the Brussels dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina, which indicates that the European Union may not be wholly opposed to such a notion. Thus far, the EU-led dialogue has not yielded the expected results and has come to represent a source of frustration among citizens, both in Serbia and in Kosovo.

Why then should the EU's waning interest in the Balkans be a cause for concern? Above all because a withdrawal by the EU would leave room for other, potentially very dangerous external influences – as evidenced by recent events in Kosovo and as discussed in this text. Second, in spite of the undeniable structural problems it has faced for years, the European Union still has the potential to become, through fundamental and radical reform, a genuine community of peoples. In this process it is important not to leave the Balkans by the wayside. Part of these reforms should be the EU's reengagement with the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, founded on new principles and focused on the wellbeing of ordinary citizens rather than political elites.

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<sup>39</sup> "Kurti pod baražnom paljbom zbog saradnje sa Srbima tokom pandemije" ("Kurti Under Fire For Cooperation With Serbia During the Pandemic"), Deutsche Welle, 11.04.2020. <https://www.dw.com/sr/kurti-pod-bara%C5%BEnom-paljbom-zbog-saradnje-sa-srbima-tokom-pandemije/a-53093516>

<sup>40</sup> Richard Grenell, Twitter, 19.04.2020. <https://twitter.com/RichardGrenell/status/1251880416253886468>

## European Drama

The European Union entered 2020 with pronounced internal divisions. The election of the new European Commission was accompanied by a very dynamic power struggle that revealed that it is not "geopolitical"<sup>41</sup> only on the external level, but increasingly on the internal as well. It seems that many EU countries, France principle among them, wanted to use Angela Merkel stepping down as German chancellor in order to increase their influence in Brussels. This brought to the fore increasingly clear differences between these two countries on many issues, such as the future of the EU, its enlargement and relations with the Russian Federation.<sup>42</sup>

The danger of renewed divisions within the EU has also been fuelled by a potential renewal of the refugee crisis sparked by Turkey's decision to open its borders with Europe to 3.6 million migrants. This decision was characterised by EU officials as attempted blackmail by the Turkish president, who demanded that the EU intervene in the war in Syria. Large-scale unrest on Turkey's border with Greece began almost immediately, threatening a repeat of 2015 when some EU member states threw up fences along their borders and refused to cooperate on resolving the refugee crisis. The coronavirus outbreak seems to have put these problems on hold.

The pandemic has, however, exposed one important question – to what extent are the values of solidarity and democracy still pillars of the European Union?

In early March, at a time when it was hardest hit by the coronavirus, Italy requested help in the form of medical equipment from other EU states and the response was very harsh – many countries, among them Germany, France and the Czech Republic, decided to ban the export of these supplies. Even two weeks later, when the numbers of confirmed cases and fatalities in Italy were many times higher than in other member states, help was slow to arrive. But aid did begin to flow in from China, which had previously offered to sell Italy 1,000 ventilators, 2 million masks, 20,000 protective suits and 50,000 COVID-19 testing kits.<sup>43</sup> The Italian public was furious with the EU and polls showed that 52 percent of people saw China as a friendly country, while 45 percent viewed Germany as hostile, even though it had started sending medical equipment in mid-March and later transported Italian patients to German hospitals.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, the European Commission

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<sup>41</sup> "The von der Leyen Commission: for a Union that strives for more", European Commission, 10.09.2019. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_5542](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_5542)

<sup>42</sup> "France is back, but where is Germany?", Politico, 27.11.2019. <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-germany-foreign-relations-emmanuel-macron-angela-merkel-power-imbalance-eu/>

<sup>43</sup> "Italy criticises EU for being slow to help over coronavirus epidemic", The Guardian, 11.03.2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/italy-criticises-eu-being-slow-help-coronavirus-epidemic>

<sup>44</sup> Elisabeth Braw, "The EU Is Abandoning Italy in Its Hour of Need", Foreign Policy, 14.03.2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/14/coronavirus-eu-abandoning-italy-china-aid/>



had to apologise even though it could do little more than appeal to member states to show solidarity, since no other mechanisms were in place.

The former president of the European Commission, Jaques Delors, stated that the lack of solidarity is a deadly threat to the European Union.<sup>45</sup> The rift between northern and southern Europe over the economic response to the pandemic threatened to make these predictions come true. A fierce debate erupted over whether it was possible to share the cost of the crisis among member states through the issuing of so-called corona bonds – an idea that was firmly opposed by a group of states led by the Netherlands and Germany – or whether an economic response should be sought through a common fund similar to the one set up in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. Following difficult negotiations within the EU, a 500 billion-euro aid package was agreed for the hardest hit countries. Southern European states remained dissatisfied, however, but perhaps it was necessary to insist from the beginning not on solidarity but on the ability of member states to identify their own interests in debt mutualisation.<sup>46</sup>

While it may be possible to find a substitute for solidarity, a better political order than democracy has not yet been discovered. Even so, the EU is still unable to stem the surge in authoritarianism that is gaining momentum in some of its member states – particularly Hungary and Poland. On 30 March the Hungarian parliament passed a ‘coronavirus law’ that enabled the country’s prime minister, Viktor Orban, to rule by decree for an unlimited length of time, to suspend elections and all those who “distort the truth” about the coronavirus face up to five years in prison. The tepid reaction of EU institutions and other member states is shocking but perhaps not surprising, given the different interests and the limited number of mechanisms available to the EU to sanction such manoeuvres.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, for the fourth time the EU initiated proceedings against Poland before the European Court of Justice in response to its violations of the rule of law and undermining the independence of the judiciary.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “Coronavirus could be final straw for EU, European experts warn”, The Guardian, 01.04.2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/coronavirus-could-be-final-straw-for-eu-european-experts-warn>

<sup>46</sup> Yanis Varoufakis, “Solidarity Is Not What Europe Needs”, Project Syndicate, 20.04.2020. [https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/eurobonds-must-be-based-on-self-interest-not-solidarity-by-yanis-varoufakis-2020-04?a\\_la=english&a\\_d=5e9d914cdaa78f900c8e64ba&a\\_m=&a\\_a=click&a\\_s=&a\\_p=homepage&a\\_li=euro-bonds-must-be-based-on-self-interest-not-solidarity-by-yanis-varoufakis-2020-04&a\\_pa=curated&a\\_ps=main-article-a2&a\\_ms=&a\\_r=](https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/eurobonds-must-be-based-on-self-interest-not-solidarity-by-yanis-varoufakis-2020-04?a_la=english&a_d=5e9d914cdaa78f900c8e64ba&a_m=&a_a=click&a_s=&a_p=homepage&a_li=euro-bonds-must-be-based-on-self-interest-not-solidarity-by-yanis-varoufakis-2020-04&a_pa=curated&a_ps=main-article-a2&a_ms=&a_r=)

<sup>47</sup> Yasmeeen Serhan, “The EU Watches as Hungary Kills Democracy”, The Atlantic, 02.04.2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/europe-hungary-viktor-orban-coronavirus-covid19-democracy/609313/>

<sup>48</sup> “Commission launches 4th infringement procedure over Poland’s rule of law”, Politico, 29.04.2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/brussels-launches-4th-infringement-procedure-over-polands-rule-of-law/>

## *The Policy of Musical Chairs*

In these circumstances, the Serbian government's disappointment in the EU's reaction was either a failure to understand the context or a deliberate intention to achieve some other political goal. When someone is paralysed by fear, the normal reaction is to offer them support, not to kick them while they are down. Serbia, nonetheless, opted for the latter.

On 14 March, in order to protect the EU's ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission passed a decision according to which the export of medical equipment to third countries required the permission of the member states. The president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, misrepresented this decision, stating that Serbia was no longer allowed to import medical equipment from the EU, that there was no European solidarity, that it was always just a fairy tale and that he had appealed to the Chinese president, to whom he referred as his brother, for aid. In so doing the president signalled the start of a vociferous anti-European and pro-Chinese campaign in pro-government media, which culminated with the now famous billboards across Serbia expressing gratitude to the president of China.

The president's statement and the ensuing media campaign have finally exposed years of Serbia's dishonest, inconsistent and poorly articulated foreign policy and have potentially done long-term damage to the countries interests. A policy of "musical chairs" is one in which Serbia counts on being able to sit wherever it chooses when the music stops. In this game, Serbia thinks it can juggle the conflicting interests of the US, EU, China, Russia and other countries. Even among EU member states it finds its closest ally in Orban's authoritarian Hungary but at the same time seeks close partnership with Germany and France.

Such a policy is much more likely to bring Serbia down to earth with a bump, which can already be inferred from the reactions of European officials – such as that of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, who expressed concern over such narratives – and from the reaction of Western media, such as Spiegel<sup>49</sup>, Standard<sup>50</sup> of Foreign Policy<sup>51</sup>, which have increasingly been writing about the undemocratic nature of the Serbian government and its growing closeness with China.

In addition to its expressed objections, Brussels quickly launched a humanitarian counter-attack. As early as 20 March the EU approved a 7.5 million euro financial aid package to help Serbia fight the COVID-19 epidemic. A week later it decided to redirect 93 million

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<sup>49</sup> "Der Spiegel: Democracy in Serbia most limited during pandemic", N1, 28.04.2020. <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a593980/Serbia-goes-farthest-in-limiting-democracy-during-pandemic-Der-Spiegel-says.html>

<sup>50</sup> "Serbien wirft sich China an die Brust", Der Standard, 16.04.2020. <https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000116895760/serbien-wirft-sich-china-an-die-brust>

<sup>51</sup> Vuk Vuksanović, "China Has Its Eyes on Serbia", Foreign Policy, 08.04.2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/08/china-serbia-aleksander-vucic-xi-jinping-coronavirus/>

euros from IPA funds to fighting the coronavirus. These funds were used to pay for the transport of medical equipment from other countries, including China, for the purchase of medical supplies, support for job creation and as assistance for small and medium enterprises. Interestingly, data on the total value of aid from China, Russia and other non-European countries is not publically available. Neither is information on what percentage of incoming medical supplies was given as donations and what percentage had to be purchased.

However, in the eyes of the Serbian media – most of which are pro-government – and the eyes of the Serbian authorities themselves, it seems as though aid from the EU was not as valuable as aid Serbia received from China, Russia, Turkey or the United Arab Emirates. For these other countries, the Serbian government reserved terms such as “brothers” and “friends”, as well as ceremonial receptions complete with flag kissing, while EU aid was less prominently reported on and was received merely in accordance with protocol. This is why the EU Delegation to Serbia took it upon itself to try to communicate the fact that since 2000, it has provided more than 450 million euros in donations and loans for hospitals, institutes, laboratories and the purchase of all kinds of medical equipment.<sup>52</sup> Since it was undermined by the highest ranking Serbian officials, this ploy by the EU ended up looking more like a desperate attempt to reach out to the people of Serbia, who continue to believe that Chinese and Russian donations are merely a percentage point or two below those from the EU – which could not be farther from the truth.<sup>53</sup> In that sense, Vučić’s lukewarm, casual and belated expression of gratitude for EU aid<sup>54</sup> fits perfectly with Serbia’s insincere attitude to it.

### *European Integration – Business as Usual*

The EU’s attitude towards prospective member states in the Western Balkans has in recent years been dominated by the following elements: tolerance towards authoritarian tendencies; the blocking of the start of negotiations with countries that were de facto ready for them; an inability to influence changes in Bosnia and Herzegovina; an unfair approach to the visa regime with Kosovo; a lack of political appetite for enlargement; and

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<sup>52</sup> “EU assistance to Health sector in Serbia – a fundamental effort that modernised the whole Serbian health system”, Europa.rs, 23.03.2020. <http://europa.rs/eu-assistance-to-health-sector-in-serbia-a-fundamental-effort-that-modernised-the-whole-serbian-health-system/?lang=en>

<sup>53</sup> “Evropska orijentacija građana Srbije. Ispitivanje javnog mnjenja (decembar 2019. godine)” (“European Orientation of Serbian Citizens. Public Opinion Poll (December 2019)”), Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, [https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna\\_dokumenta/istrazivanja\\_javnog\\_mnjenja/ijm\\_dec\\_19.pdf](https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/ijm_dec_19.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> “Vučić sa ambasadorima zemalja članica EU: Odobreno nam je 93 miliona evra pomoći, ali je i Srbija ponudila pomoć Evropi” (“Vučić With EU Ambassadors: We Will Receive 93 Million Euros of Aid But Serbia Has Also Offered Aid to Europe”), Blic, 24.04.2020. <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-sa-ambasadorima-zemalja-clanica-eu-odobreno-nam-je-93-miliona-evra-pomoci-ali/kj3vzlv>

undercutting of the process by the most powerful member states with talk of a new methodology and similar.

Consequently, the decision to open negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in the midst of the greatest challenge the EU has faced since the Second World War had enormous symbolic significance. Serbia did not react at all to this decision by the EU, showing once again how it feels about European integration in the region.

The end of the state of emergency in Serbia coincided with the long-awaited EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb. Just before the summit, civil society organisations signed a declaration entitled “With or Without E(U)”<sup>55</sup> that calls upon EU and Western Balkan countries to accelerate and intensify reforms in the areas of fundamental rights and freedoms, the judiciary, the rule of law and of democratic institutions. In the end, the summit was completely overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. EU leaders were visibly disappointed by the anti-European messages coming from the region in recent months, but also by the significant backsliding in democracy and the rule of law.

## **The Masks Have Slipped**

The masks have slipped and Serbia’s foreign policy interests during the COVID-19 pandemic have been exposed. These interests are not based on the principles of a common good but on mechanisms for preserving the country’s existing internal order. In the morning, the Serbian government faces towards the East, in the afternoon it turns towards the West, all the while hoping to get financial aid and political support from anywhere in the world. And in return it is ready to do just about anything, except to limit its own power. That is why, on the international scene, it perceives as enemies those governments and individuals that look to build bridges with Serbia as an orderly and democratic, not a captured state.

The hope that the pandemic has dealt a deadly blow to the idea of liberal democracy in the world and that it will no longer have to pretend to believe in it has naturally united the Serbian government and those governments that have the same or more pronounced authoritarian tendencies. This is why, after 30 years (if we put aside the short period at the beginning of the century) Serbia has finally found common ground with the Trump’s America. This is why, in addition to its traditional allies such as Putin’s Russia, it is now finding common interests with China. This is why, of all EU member states, it has the closest relationship with Orban’s Hungary.

Unless something radically changes, however, Serbia’s grotesque attempts to persist with its policy of “neo-Non-Alignment” are likely to end in tragedy. Its only partners will be those countries that see it as a bargaining chip, as a testing ground for displays of influence or

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<sup>55</sup> “CSO Declaration on Zagreb EU – Western Balkans Summit ‘With or Without (E)U’” <https://crosol.hr/eupresidency/en/zg-cso-declaration-on-eu-western-balkans/>

as a political and economic vassal state. No one, not even those countries Serbian officials call friends, will have any respect for a country that is dishonest and unprincipled in its foreign relations. A country like that is viewed by other states with suspicion, as a prize to be fought over or as a playground in which they can realise their own national interests, with no concern for the damage they may do to the playground. A country like that will no longer be able to conduct its own foreign policy, others will do it instead.

For a country that claims to be committed to the path towards EU membership, one would expect Serbia to show much more understanding and support for the situation in which the EU finds itself. Turning its back on the EU, the ideas of hoodwinking the most powerful EU member states<sup>56</sup> and harsh criticism expressed when it was neither the place nor the time, were a demonstration of how Serbian officials see the EU and European integration: as a source of power and a means of manipulation, rather than as a tool for developing institutions, the rule of law and the modernisation of the country. This was further reaffirmed by reports from Freedom House<sup>57</sup> and Reporters Without Borders<sup>58</sup> but is also evident from the fact that Serbia's foreign policy lags most among Western Balkan states in its harmonisation with EU foreign policy.<sup>59</sup>

This crisis has been a turning point in international relations globally and the biggest utopia is to believe that everything can continue as before. If Serbia cannot grasp that on its own, reality will force it to do so. If it wants to be a reliable partner and a credible player on the world stage, Serbia must not allow itself to become an object of international affairs, rather than a subject. The struggle for influence over Serbia is geopolitics that it is not up to at the moment. A geopolitics in which he who thinks he can deceive everyone will end up alone, with no allies, with no sovereignty and with no influence.

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<sup>56</sup> "Vučić o respiratorima: Evo koliko ih ima, a hteo sam od Nemaca da uzmem još" ("Vučić on Ventilators: This is How Many We Have But I Wanted More from the Germans"), Mondo, 13.03.2020. <https://mondo.rs/Video/Info-video/a1295079/Vucic-o-respiratorima-koliko-ima-respiratora-u-Srbiji.html>

<sup>57</sup> Zselyke Csaky, "Dropping the Democratic Façade", Freedom House <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>

<sup>58</sup> "Reporters Without Borders: Serbia drops to 93rd, Kosovo moves up to 70th place", Kossev, 21.04.2020. <https://kossev.info/reporters-without-borders-serbia-drops-to-93rd-kosovo-moves-up-to-70th-place/>

<sup>59</sup> Igor Novaković, Natan Albahari, Jovana Bogosavljević, "An analysis of Serbia's alignment with the European Union's foreign policy declarations and measures in 2019" <https://www.isac-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ISAC-CFSP-Analysis-2019-1.pdf>