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**SEMI-AUTHORITARIANISM ACCEPTED:  
THE EUROPEAN UNION'S PROBLEMATIC  
INVOLVEMENT IN SERBIA**

**Abstract**

The relationship between Brussels and Belgrade has never been straightforward. Following the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, EU authorities have welcomed different opposition forces and altogether failed to pursue reforms and consolidate institutional infrastructure. Accordingly, this paper examines the EU's position vis-à-vis the increasing semi-authoritarianism in Serbia. It is argued that as long as the problematic Serbian elites pretend, or even manage to meet some of the EU's expectations, the Brussels administration will continue to ignore the pursuit of a wide range of unfavourable domestic policies. Such an approach has regrettably given the Serbian regime the opportunity to cement its power base, thereby obstructing the implementation of any substantial democratic improvements.

**Keywords:** Serbia, European Union, semi-authoritarianism

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and Serbia has never been straightforward. Following the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia as independent states in the early 1990s, the EU's participation in economic sanctions against the newly established Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, severely affected the Serbian citizens but not the regime of Slobodan Milošević. It consolidated further by benefiting from the proceeds of a black market economy and various media outlets constantly accusing the West, as well as the democratic opposition, of being anti-Serbian. Moreover, when different opposition representatives requested Western support for the emerging democratic force necessary to oust Milošević and prevent additional violence, their efforts were ignored (Panić 2015: 78). This, together with the rejection by the EU's representatives in late 1996 of the opposition Zajedno [Together] alliance's municipal victories in favour of Milošević's decision to annul the results and demand new elections, were interpreted as the West's intention to assist Milošević, the perceived key factor in the whole process, to stay in power (Spoerri 2015: 46-47).

Later, with the progress of the Kosovo crisis and the 1999 NATO intervention, the West started to promote narrative suggesting that the time to get rid of Milošević had come. In contrast to previous years, substantial foreign aid was allocated to the democratic opposition, which seemed to have become more united in contrast to a decline in popular support for the regime (Spoerri 2015). Once Milošević was overthrown in October 2000, the West welcomed the new democratic forces. Although initially cooperative, the coalition leadership faced several internal conflicts with various members trying to promote their separate visions for the country's future. The politics of alternatives or other opportunities, as well as an ever-present struggle with the processes of democratisation and Europeanisation, provided enough space for the opposition (many of whose members had once sided with and played important roles under the Milošević regime, although they were never subjected to a lustration afterwards) to organise and challenge the political elite (Radeljić 2014; Radeljić 2017). Consequently, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) was established in 2008 by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, the former Deputy President and General Secretary respectively of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party (its leader, Vojislav Šešelj, was on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at the time). As soon as the former Radicals turned into Progressivists, they started to place an emphasis on their apparently new profile and, even more so, on expected outcomes. The reasoning behind this is that they would appear to differ significantly from their previous affiliation. Apart from discrediting the performance of the then leadership, the SNS invested efforts in

promoting military neutrality, greater social justice, worldwide cooperation and EU membership. In 2012, Nikolić's advocacy secured him the presidency. Two years later, Vučić progressed from being First Deputy Prime Minister to Prime Minister, a position which he held until becoming President of Serbia in May 2017. Their radical past and far-right rhetoric no longer seemed relevant.

In this paper I look at the EU's position vis-à-vis the increasing semi-authoritarianism in Serbia. In her seminal work, Marina Ottaway defines semi-authoritarian regimes as "ambiguous systems that combine rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, the existence of some formal democratic institutions, and respect for a limited sphere of civil and political liberties with essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits. This ambiguous character, furthermore, is deliberate. Semi-authoritarian systems are not imperfect democracies struggling toward improvement and consolidation but regimes determined to maintain the appearance of democracy without exposing themselves to the political risks that free competition entails" (Ottaway 2003: 3). With this in mind, the Progressivists' behaviour in Serbia is undoubtedly semi-authoritarian and the EU has largely refrained from confronting it. While welcoming the Progressivists with Aleksandar Vučić at the forefront, the Brussels authorities have regularly suggested that they expected a lot from him in terms of regional developments – primarily in the case of the Kosovo's status, but also in terms of Serbia's problematic ambition to position itself between the East and the West. This in turn could be interpreted as indicating that, as long as Vučić was prone to responding to their demands, a whole range of domestic policies – some more detrimental than others – would be of secondary concern. Aware of the expected dynamics, the regime has used every opportunity to further reinforce its power.

## 2. THE EU WELCOMES THE FORMER RADICALS TURNED PROGRESSIVISTS

The literature tackling Western support of corrupt, military and authoritarian regimes is voluminous. For example, during the Cold War, the West (in particular the USA) supported such regimes in its fight against Communism, whilst the Soviets tended to support undemocratic regimes against the West. This suggests that "[t]he international system can play a permissive role, as well as a very active role, in democratization, and it can support or block democratic change" (Bunce, McFaul and Stoner-Weiss 2010: 10). The present EU has regularly collaborated with countries whose regimes are authoritarian (Babayan and Risse 2015) and, furthermore, its recent involvement in the Arab Spring has led to its actions

being questioned in the context of whether they actually assisted authoritarian instead of democratic rule (Börzel and van Hüllen 2014). Even more recently, we have seen how mutual interests in the Russo-Hungarian case can alienate an existing EU member state from the Brussels authorities (Buzogány 2017). This logically encourages a debate about possible alternatives and regime preferences, as authoritarians are likely to oppose and negatively affect support for the EU (Tillman 2013). This is even more striking if we consider projections suggesting that authoritarianism is likely to rise (Bloom 2016; Diamond 2008; Puddington 2008), accompanied by more international collaboration among authoritarian regimes with the aim of maximising domestic survival (von Soest 2015). Looking at the Balkans, “[m]any countries in the region have a record of electing persons who behave in an authoritarian way after the ‘democratic’ election” (Farkas 2007: 65). Still, before fully endorsing authoritarianism, political actors may embrace semi-authoritarian *modus operandi* as a starting point; as some authors have put it, “unfavourable conditions – including weak democratic institutions and political organizations, persistent authoritarian traditions, major socioeconomic problems, and ethnic and religious conflicts – create formidable obstacles to the establishment and, above all, the consolidation of democracy” (Ottaway 2003: 4-5).

In the case of Serbia, the Serbian Progressive Party has, since its inauguration, continuously pursued the idea of doing what it deemed necessary for Serbia to move forward. Indeed, by continuously accusing the then Democratic Party-led government of (1) having failed to address Serbia’s unsatisfactory economic performance, high levels of corruption across all sectors, poverty and unemployment rates, and (2) having allowed some of its own representatives to develop individual and often corrupt activities contradicting the party’s original aims, the SNS, notwithstanding, received impressive support in the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections. Following Tomislav Nikolić’s victory, some EU officials noted that Serbia was “at a crossroads”; his victory “proved that the country’s political landscape had become more complex and that the EU needs to be involved in an intensive dialogue with Serbian authorities and all political leaders from the very first moment” (Lajčák 2012). Indeed, José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, welcomed Nikolić to Brussels, interpreting his choice for his first official visit abroad as “a clear sign of the priority the President and Serbia attach to their European reform agenda” (Barroso 2012). Aleksandar Vučić, the First Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia after the 2012 parliamentary elections and subsequently, the most visible member of the Serbian political elite, had an abrupt *volte-face* regarding reformist, Zoran Djindjić, whom he had initially vehemently opposed. For example, after Djindjić’s assassination in 2003, he even posted a fake street plaque with the name of war crimes fugitive, Ratko Mladić, on a Belgrade

boulevard named after Djindjić in 2007. Vučić has since altered his position to the extent that he started recalling and expressing appreciation for Djindjić's pro-EU stance and vision of Serbia's future. He is even on record as saying that he actually felt flattered when compared to him (*B92* 2013) and in interview with the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (*FAZ* 2014), he tried to defend his drastic transformation by claiming that he misinterpreted the post-Cold War trends for a long time and thus developed wrong ideas.

Overall, by analysing the period following the 2012 elections, it can be argued that the Progressivists have decided to switch their focus from an advocacy of life for politics to a life from politics – a tendency largely confirmed by the growing intention to replace political figures with different political affiliations with the most trustworthy members of the Serbian Progressive Party. Securing a whole range of positions in public administration institutions has meant direct influence on those institutions, cross-sectoral collaboration and also involvement in numerous private sector endeavours whose approval and realisation directly depend on state permission. More problematically, by the 2014 snap elections, viable opposition in Serbia had vanished with political plurality being seriously endangered. However, the Brussels authorities welcomed newly-elected Prime Minister Vučić as someone who could be trusted. For example, Commissioner Barroso said that “[he is] confident that under [Vučić’s] determined guidance, Serbia will succeed in addressing the key challenges ahead” (European Commission 2014a). And, when EU foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, told him that the EU is “determined to help and support Serbia in its efforts to ensure a strong economic path for its people”, Vučić reassured her: “We are not poor people seeking charity, we need support for true reforms” (*RFE* 2014). German Chancellor Angela Merkel also congratulated Vučić on his election and invited him to visit Berlin, which he eventually did. On this occasion, she praised his efforts and assured him that Germany would support Serbia on its road to the EU, although she also underscored the significance of reforms, the rule of law and further normalisation of relations with Kosovo (Mitrović 2014).

The EU's welcoming stance and signature of the 2013 Brussels Agreement between the governments of Serbia and Kosovo on the normalisation of relations between them, as well as the opening of negotiations for Serbia's EU accession in 2014, provided Vučić with more credibility and potential for manoeuvring at home and vis-à-vis the EU. His apparent readiness to pursue economic reforms and market liberalisation sounded much more attractive to foreigners' ears than them getting involved in discussions over his intentions to minimise any competition for power and the suppression of the opposition. The studies on semi-authoritarian regimes also make a reference to the pursuit of economic reforms and reduction of government control in the context of international pressure: “[S]emi-authoritarian

regimes can undergo market liberalization with little political liberalization or separation of economic elites from political elites. The linkage between economic liberalization and democratization is complex, and it is dangerous to assume that the former always encourages the latter” (Ottaway 2003: 18). So, Western governments have intentionally avoided adopting a firmer stance against any government policies going against so-called Western values. They expect much from the Vučić government that would not only serve the West’s geopolitical and geoeconomic interests in Serbia, but also in the Western Balkan region as a whole. Different European Commission statements about Serbia’s progress have communicated a highly problematic message that the status quo, with some occasional baby-steps, is actually acceptable. For example, one statement in 2014 indicated that “[t]here is a strong political impetus to fight corruption” and “[t]he new government remains fully committed to EU integration” (European Commission 2014b: 1, 8). A year later the Brussels technocrats agreed that “Serbia’s institutions for preventing corruption broadly meet international standards and have shown good potential” with sporadic suggestions as to what should be improved (European Commission 2015: 52).

In reality, the government failed to enhance the business climate, downsize the public sector or come up with measures that would introduce meritocracy in the public sector. More precisely, the Vučić regime took control of it and poured enormous subsidies into public enterprises, the so-called big budget losers. Altogether, they have employed thousands of new party members, many of them in fictional jobs. The German sociologist, Max Weber – whom Vučić paradoxically tends to quote when saying that the Serbian people should adopt the protestant work ethic and be more like the Germans (Malić 2016) – used to write about the benefit-inspired relationship between leaders and their supporters: “The party following, above all the party official and party entrepreneur, naturally expect personal compensation from the victory of their leader – that is, offices or other advantages ... They expect that the demagogic effect of the leader’s *personality* during the election fight of the party will increase votes and mandates and thereby power, and, thereby, as far as possible, will extend opportunities to their followers to find the compensation for which they hope” (Weber 2009 [1919]: 103). So, many members joined the SNS purely because of available benefits and not because of the party’s programme and ideological doctrine. The more the leadership has succeeded in proving that party membership leads to benefits (such as employment, career change, promotion, additional capital accumulation, etc.), the stronger the interest in being affiliated with the party.

### 3. 'L'ÉTAT, C'EST MOI'

The outcome of the April 2016 parliamentary elections, which reconfirmed Vučić's dominance, came as no surprise. As a prime minister, he had been craftily solidifying power during the previous few years, taking control over state institutions as well as non-state actors, such as media. The scholarship discussing power diffusion has carefully explained that "in today's information age, so many decisions are made outside the control of even the most powerful states. Power diffusion also widens the scope of coalition-building. Leaders must win the support of not only other states but also a whole range of non-state actors including media, NGOs, and businesses" (Cooper 2015: 42). In Serbia, ninety-seven local and national-level opposition leaders were arrested in the previous four years. In almost all of these cases the charges were dropped and no indictments were handed down. Of the remainder, only four trials actually commenced, but no verdicts were delivered (Vasić 2015). In local elections, tens of opposition activists were attacked or kidnapped and the police did not resolve a single case (*Novi Magazin* 2014). Finally, the elections confirmed that the relevant administration had not been reformed and, even worse, that the elections suffered serious irregularities which cast a shadow on the democratic process (*Balkanist* 2016).

Since 2012, the dominant media in Serbia have generally tended to support Vučić's actions and reactions at home and abroad. By avoiding criticism and, even more worryingly, applying auto-censorship as a result of warnings and pressures about what can or cannot be reported, the media have indirectly facilitated the continuation of well-embedded practices. One analysis uses a pyramidal structure to illustrate the trend; in this case, "[m]anipulations under the mask of free media help the pyramid to expand in ways [in which] it sustains itself. This is most obviously reflected in the leader's unusually frequent appearances in the media. Moreover, there are more and more journalists and celebrities joining the pyramid. These are exactly the conditions for self-censorship and inferiority to the leader ... Many people choose to obey the rules of practice in order to preserve their positions and benefits" (Kelić 2016). It is also worth remembering that Vučić was in charge of the Ministry of Information in the late 1990s when Slobodan Milošević was in power: "[He] was the hatchet man for the media who defended the vast ethnic cleansing by paramilitary police of more than 60% of the 90%-majority Albanians living in the Serbian province of Kosovo" (Pond 2013: 7). Back then, newspapers were regularly fined or, even worse, closed, so that the public would primarily gather information from the state-controlled media or other media working in favour of the ruling elite. In fact, as Timothy Garton Ash (2009: 6-7, 16) has put it, "[t]he single most important pillar of [the Milošević] regime was the state television, which



he used to sustain a nationalist siege mentality, especially among people in the country and small towns who had few other sources of information ... Milošević's dictatorship was a television dictatorship. And television was equally central to the revolution. From teledictatorship, via telerevolution, to teledemocracy". Thus, aware of this and the ever-increasing relevance of the media in an information age, the Vučić regime has been determined to secure support from as many channels of communication as possible.

If we consider some of the European Commission's assessments regarding the media situation in Serbia, we can see that the former has been conscious of the problems. For example, in 2012, the annual progress report stressed that "violence and threats against journalists remain of concern, although their frequency has decreased slightly. The Serbian authorities have continued to provide police protection for journalists and media outlets which have received threats. Investigations into murders of journalists dating back to the late 1990s/early 2000s and into recurring threats against journalists have so far failed to identify the perpetrators ... Access to advertising in the media remains under the control of a few economic and political actors, entailing a significant risk of influence on the media and of self-censorship" (European Commission 2012: 14). Two years later, the Brussels administration seemed even more concerned; this time around, it supported its findings by citing the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, according to which, "media reporting was insufficiently analytical and was influenced by the political parties in power, including through public funding, which led to widespread media self-censorship" (European Commission 2014b: 7). In the Commission's view, "efforts are expected to identify and prosecute suspects of violations of internet freedoms. Pending the full implementation of the newly adopted legislative package, the Serbian media continued to operate in a blurred legal environment which delayed the state's withdrawal from media ownership, one of the cornerstones of the 2011 media strategy" (European Commission 2014b: 46). Most recently, the Commission noted that "[c]ivil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders, who play a key role in raising awareness of civil, political and socioeconomic rights, continued to operate in a public and media environment often hostile to criticism" (European Commission 2016: 8), while "[h]ate speech is often tolerated in the media and is rarely tackled by regulatory authorities or prosecutors. Statements by state officials in relation to the investigative work of journalists have not been conducive to creating an environment in which freedom of expression can be exercised without hindrance" (European Commission 2016: 61).

Looking more closely at media performance during the 2016 election campaign, there was no record of a debate between government and opposition; prominent journalists were fired for reporting about government failures (Hadrović 2017;



Petrović 2016). For example, the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network's journalist, Stevan Dojčinović, who was investigating the property of public officials including Vučić (Dojčinović and Petrović 2016), was attacked by a pro-government tabloid with Vučić's aides labelling him a "foreign spy" and "conspirator" working for "the Western forces" (*Informer* 2016a; *Informer* 2016b). In fact, in its earlier extensive study, Human Rights Watch (2015) had exposed and criticised "[t]he inadequate state response to attacks and threats against journalists and media outlets, political interference including through the courts and curbs on funding, and smear campaigns targeting critical media and journalists". It also urged EU institutions, the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom and different Council of Europe departments to pressure the relevant authorities in Serbia to address the problems. In return, Prime Minister Vučić called the independent *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network* "liars" financed by Michael Davenport, the Head of the EU delegation in Serbia, to attack the Serbian government (*Balkan Insight* 2015; Dragojlo 2016). This was a similar reaction to the one he had when addressing the OSCE: "They are lying, and when you're lying, it is elementary decency to apologize. I will not let anyone attack Serbia ... The OSCE has uttered falsehood and lies, and I'm telling the truth" (cited in Barlovac 2014).

None of the above has significantly eroded the government's popularity. Based on his previous involvement in politics, the Vučić regime has clearly understood what works with both domestic and international audiences. As it has always insisted, multiparty elections are held, the rights of citizens are theoretically recognised (although not always in practice), civil society and non-governmental organisations exist and manage to conduct research and communicate their findings (usually thanks to foreign financial assistance), the media reporting goes on, with the Internet being loaded with critical thinking, etc. Alongside this and in the context of semi-authoritarianism, "incumbent governments and parties are in no danger of losing their hold on power, not because they are popular but because they know how to play the democracy game and still retain control" (Ottaway 2003: 6). In the case of Serbia, playing the democracy game is further facilitated when the profile of the average voter is considered. Back in 2013, some surveys demonstrated that the typical voter tended to be largely uninformed or undereducated, with an interest in tabloids, reality TV shows and sports events. Even though he used to vote for the Democratic Party in the past, he now voted for the Serbian Progressive Party – a switch outlining the disloyal nature of half of the electorate and a tendency to vote for the majority party (Latković 2013). Right before the 2016 elections, different surveys repeated the previous description of the electorate, confirming that the support for the Progressivists was still strong and likely to remain so, at least for the foreseeable future (Vukadinović 2016).

In 2017, Aleksandar Vučić became the President of Serbia after crushing his opponents in the first round by winning 55% of the vote. While Vučić himself stated that “[w]hen you have results like this, there is no instability – Serbia is strong and it will be even stronger” (cited in Macdowall 2017), some academics nevertheless pointed out that “[t]his election was over before it began, for the same reason that last year’s parliamentary elections were. The tight control that the governing party exercises over media, information, employment, and the distribution of benefits means that there is no level playing field and voters are not in a position to freely make an informed choice” (Gordy 2017). Given his dominance in the party and the Progressivists’ majority in the parliament, this particular victory turned Vučić into the strongest and most influential political figure in Serbia which, in the long run, could mean more authoritarianism. EU representatives congratulated him in a similar manner as before; for example, in a joint letter, Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker, on behalf of the European Council and the European Commission, stated that Vučić’s straight victory is a clear confirmation of the people’s support for his EU-orientated programme. They also expressed confidence in his ability to promote regional stability and cooperation as well as moving forward the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština (*EURACTIV* 2017). A direct consequence of the glorification of Vučić’s regional engagement is that the West’s reliance on him will continue to keep him in power, whilst EU accession becomes of secondary relevance to him and the Brussels administration, alike. As could be expected, the street protests, which took place immediately after the election outcome – mostly attended by young people and students, shouting that the elections were not fair and that Serbia was becoming a dictatorship (Krajňák 2017; Rudić and Djurić 2017) – did not generate any critical reflection among the Brussels authorities. Cognisant of the external favourable position, Vučić himself reflected upon the chants *Vučić, You Stole the Election! and End the Dictatorship!*: “There are always people not satisfied with election results ... It’s a democratic process. Nobody intervened, we allowed them to protest” (cited in Rudić and Djurić 2017). Even here, by remaining calm in front of social discontent (mainly because of the participants’ lack of organisation and therefore the unlikelihood of challenging the regime) (Pešić 2017), Vučić secured additional points internationally as being someone truly committed to functioning democracy.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The failure of post-Milošević and, even more worryingly, post-Djindjić leaderships to consolidate democracy and develop a clear future orientation of the Serbian state, has provided space for the formation of the Serbian Progressive

Party and the subsequent semi-authoritarian regime. The Vučić government has taken control of the media and numerous in-desperate-need-of-reform public sector institutions, leaving an impression that he has engineered his own system and is capable of remaining dominant over time. The Progressivists' insistence on the politics of opportunity has undoubtedly helped them generate public support at home as well as strengthening the Serbian regime's relevance internationally.

European Union representatives have welcomed Radicals turned Progressivists whilst turning a blind eye to numerous questionable moves and decisions. As pointed out, as long as the Progressivists continue to cooperate with the West or, at least, leave an impression of such an intention, the quality of political pluralism, state institutions, electoral procedures and media reporting, among others, is left to the regime to regulate. Nevertheless, the support for the EU in Serbia is at its lowest since 2000, which means that the EU is actually a big underachiever in the Serbian case (Cvijić 2017). More and more voices have argued that the rise of Vučić has, in fact, weakened the support for the EU because it revealed the EU's hypocrisy towards its core principles and values, such as the rule of law and human rights. Many from the intellectual elite, who firmly advocated EU accession in the past, are now disenchanted with the EU's lack of reaction to Vučić's alleged undermining of democratic principles. The result is that the forces underpinning the pro-EU agenda in public appearances have rapidly diminished, so it has become quite difficult to find those who would publicly confront the anti-EU forces. Vučić and his closest associates are known for being prone to sending mixed messages. On the one hand, they have declaratively supported EU values, pledged for EU accession and so on whilst, on the other hand, the slightest external criticism has resulted in a narrative that the West wants to overthrow Vučić, that big powers are working against Serbia and that Russia makes for a more honest friend. As rightly noted elsewhere, "Russia is positioned as the first friendly Other in the anti-European debates ... [It] is recognized as having historical ties with Serbia based on economic and energy collaboration, as well as certain cultural and religious commonalities and a similar language" (Russell-Omaljev 2016: 55, 103-5). With this in mind, it is not possible to exclude the scenario in which Vučić will turn to Russia upon realising that his pro-EU agenda is capable of generating more harm than benefit in terms of votes.

In case of the above turn, the Brussels administration would most likely start putting pressure on the regime, labelling its domestic policies as detrimental and not in accordance with the EU's accession agenda. At this point, Vučić's semi-authoritarian behaviour would suddenly become highly problematic and the West could claim the need to come up with a new approach so as to allow Serbia to genuinely pursue processes of democratisation and Europeanisation. As in other

cases, the foreigners could opt for sanctions, which are generally ineffective, often causing more problems than they resolve. Accordingly, the West might decide to take the opposition seriously and provide it with necessary assistance so as to overthrow the regime – repeating what it already did with Milošević. In such a case, the infamous notion of lessons learnt would be defeated and become quite irrelevant for any future EU involvement in Serbia.

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