

# Serbia's European Home

Cooperation has drawn the country closer to the EU and NATO

By *per Concordiam* Staff

On a cool, damp March morning near Hohenfels, Germany, squads of soldiers from two nations moved through the woods together, alert to potential danger. The soldiers were taking part in a NATO training exercise in preparation for deployment to Afghanistan. Most of the exercise participants were predictable; the woods, fields and mock-up Afghan villages of Hohenfels were full of soldiers with shoulder patches from a multitude of NATO nations: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania and the United States. But many would be surprised to discover Serbian soldiers patrolling next to American troops that morning.

Serbia and NATO had not had what can be described as a warm relationship for most of the past 15 years. When Yugoslavia splintered in the early 1990s, NATO forces intervened against Serb-dominated Yugoslav forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo and residual resentment remains. In fact, the destructive policies of former nationalist strongman Slobodan Milošević – who died at The Hague in 2006 while on trial for war crimes – had made Serbia something of a European pariah.

But Serbian relations with NATO and the European Union are thawing. In December 2006, Serbia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, and has become a strategic military partner, under the auspices of which Serbian soldiers participate in NATO training exercises like the one in Germany. Perhaps more importantly, the European Commission granted Serbia official candidate status for EU accession in March 2012. Serbia has begun the political and economic reforms necessary to join the EU. But it still faces challenges to achieve those goals, including deteriorating economic conditions, resilient nationalism and the ongoing Kosovo situation.

## EU reforms

In 2006 and 2008, then Serbian president Boris Tadić introduced a series of judicial and constitutional

reforms designed to streamline the government, reduce corruption and improve rule of law. The pro-Western Tadić set Serbia's sights on European integration and eventual EU membership as a means of modernizing the country and stimulating its stagnant and inefficient economy damaged by war, sanctions, corruption and organized crime.

Serbia has faced more obstacles than most other EU candidate countries. Problems with organized crime and corruption, fostered by years of war, placed it behind some of its neighbors in the region. And like Cyprus, Serbia struggles with a separatist crisis. Its economy is considered relatively uncompetitive, its industrial and technological infrastructure outdated. Unemployment hovers about 20 percent, and economist Miroslav Zdravković estimates that average real incomes are the same as in 1971.

The 2011 EU Enlargement Strategy and Progress Reports complimented Serbia on its reforms, stating that "Serbia has considerably progressed towards fulfilling the political criteria related to the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities" and added that Serbia had "taken important steps towards establishing a functioning market economy and achieved a certain degree of macroeconomic stability." In early 2012, Serbia made a series of substantive concessions on Kosovo relations, concessions that European Council president Herman Van Rompuy said resulted in Serbia's receiving EU candidate status.

Perhaps most importantly to the EU, Serbia found and arrested the remaining fugitive war crimes indictees from the Yugoslav wars and turned them over for trial to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague. The arrests of wartime Bosnian Serb political and military leaders Radovan Karadžić (2008) and Ratko Mladić (2011), and Croatian Serb wartime leader Goran Hadžić (2011) were hailed as a turning point for Serbia and

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Newly elected Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić, left, meets European Council President Herman Van Rompuy in Brussels in June 2012. He promised his country would continue working toward EU accession.

the entire region and a victory for the rule of law. Tadić also visited Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2010 and apologized for Serbia's culpability in war atrocities, paving the way for reconciliation.

Poor economic conditions led to Tadić's re-election defeat in May 2012. The new nationalist-leaning Serbian government, led by President Nikolić and former Radical Party leader Tomislav Nikolić and Prime Minister Ivica Dačić, a former Milošević spokesman, eased European worries by pledging to continue the course set by Tadić. Dačić told Serbian news agency B92 that "the new government's position was to continue the EU integration and that it would insist on strict respect of all agreements with Priština [Kosovo];" and announced in August 2012 readiness to discuss normalization of relations, though details will be decided in discussions with EU officials scheduled for September. But the new leadership also swore that, though it would continue negotiations with Kosovo, it would never surrender Serbian sovereignty, which was enshrined in the new constitution passed in 2006.

### NATO cooperation

Serbia has become an active, cooperative participant in the NATO PfP. In April 2011, Serbia began an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO, which is a framework of cooperation that provides for specific ways NATO will support Serbia in achieving defense sector reform goals. According to

Serbian forces in the NATO training like that at Hohenfels, which demonstrates the increased level of cooperation. For example, Serbian soldiers learned counterinsurgency tactics from Americans and Romanians. The squad's leader, Capt. Goran Roganović commented in fluent English: "Their experience in Iraq and Afghanistan was very useful for us. We received very useful skills and knowledge from U.S. Special Forces." Though Serbia has no plans to deploy forces to Afghanistan in support of NATO operations, Serbia has provided medical staff on United Nations and EU peacekeeping missions in Africa.

The Alliance has also funded and executed several NATO/PfP Trust Fund projects in Serbia, including programs to dispose of obsolete ammunition and help veterans start small businesses or train for alternative livelihoods, and awarded Serbia grants under the Science for Peace and Security Programme. Serbia currently has no plans to join NATO, though some pro-Western politicians have expressed support. Active participation in Pfp and the Strategic Military Partnership leave it well placed to pursue membership should a future government decide to reverse course.

### Kosovo issues

Resolution of the status of Kosovo stands between Serbia and membership in the EU, or even NATO. Kosovo is a touchy subject in Serbian politics; any hint at relinquishing Serbia's claims to Kosovo are considered to

be political suicide, though many Serbs have conceded Kosovo's new status. A minority in Serbia wish to move on toward Europe and put the wars of the Milošević years in the past, even if it means accepting the de facto loss of Kosovo. "Serbia needs to understand once and for all that Kosovo is lost," former Deputy Prime Minister

Jožef Kasa told Serbian newspaper Dnevnik in July 2011, comparing the situation to that faced by post-World War I Hungary. "Constant dealing with the Kosovo issue, instead of economy, means a downfall for Serbia." As Milan

Left: Serbian nationalists in Belgrade protest in May 2011 the arrest and extradition of Bosnian Serbs Ratko Mladić, right in photo, and Radovan Karadžić.

Right: A Serbian infantryman, right, links up with a Bulgarian rifleman during NATO live-fire exercises with U.S. Marines at the Novo Selo training area in Bulgaria.



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NATO, the IPAP "will allow NATO and Serbia to deepen both their political consultation and practical cooperation."

NATO has a Military Liaison Office in Belgrade that facilitates the participation of



Marinković, a Serbian journalist, wrote on OpenDemocracy.org: “Whether examined from a political or ethical viewpoint, Serbia lost Kosovo deservedly. Serbian state policy during the 1990s could not have been better devised to alienate the nation from the entire civilized world.”

And there are many European-oriented, liberally minded Serbs who abhorred Milošević, his policies, excesses and wars but resent that Serbia’s long-standing historical territorial claims are often dismissed in the West. Nationalist politics feed on this resentment. DMITAR BECHEV, a policy analyst with the European Council on Foreign Relations, sees hope. He told Radio Free Europe that the “solid nationalist credentials of Nikolić and his coalition government could give him the flexibility to make compromises on Kosovo that other leaders could not make.”

Serbia appeared ready to make such a compromise In January 2013, offering to remove all remaining Serbian institutions from northern Kosovo if Pristina would agree to full autonomy for the region’s four ethnic Serb municipalities.

### Conclusion

Serbia is now on the path to EU membership. “The natural place of Serbia is in Europe, in history, in culture, in geographical terms, in economic terms,” EU Ambassador to Serbia, Vincent Degert, told Euractive. “When you do 80 percent of your trade with the European Union and the surrounding countries, it’s obvious where you are.”

Serbia has been made an official EU candidate but has not yet been given a date to start membership negotiations, which will have to wait until the country shows more progress on reforms and movement toward compromise on the status of Kosovo, according to EU officials. The *Guardian* newspaper cited a Serbian poll showing 85 percent support for the reforms necessary to gain accession, primarily rooting out corruption.

Jerzy Buzek, former president of the European Parliament, emphasized the importance of Serbia not backsliding on reforms in *The Wall Street Journal*: “Serbia must keep up its pro-democratic momentum – not only to meet its European goal, but first and foremost for the benefit of its citizens.” □

Then Serbian President Boris Tadić, left, pays tribute in 2010 to 200 Croat civilians and prisoners of war killed by Serb forces when they captured the town of Vukovar in November 1991. He apologized for the abuses committed by Yugoslav forces.