Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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The EU's Serbian shame

Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić reminds me in many ways of Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Not only for the way he runs a clientelist state around an increasing personality cult. Or how he tries to ignore widespread challenges to his rule.

But also in the way the West, particularly the European Union, has bought into the myth that it's either him or chaos.

Serbia now appears in the balance. There's talk of early elections, possibly by the end of the year, and of the protesters offering a viable political alternative.

On the other hand, Vučić is doubling down on his suppression of the demonstrators and is strengthening ties with China, ominously purchasing surveillance equipment and even engaging in joint exercises with the Chinese armed forces.

No comparison is perfect, and Serbia is a very different country in a very different region than Syria.

Yet, there is a particular lesson to be learned here for the European Union, which also for a long time believed that Bashar al-Assad would take Syria in for a "soft landing" (a direct quote from a senior EU representative in the early 2000s). We all know how that panned out.

A master manipulator

The European Union has, to put it mildly, been extremely muted in its criticism of Vučić and the Serbian authorities in their handling of the mass protests that broke out in the wake of the disastrous collapse of part of the Novi Sad railway station on 1 November 2024.

Fanned by students but joined by many other sectors of society, these anti-corruption, pro-democracy and pro-rule-of-law demonstrations show no sign of fizzling out.

Vučić has shown himself to be a master manipulator. Not only by entrenching his ultra-nationalist, populist rule in a system of clientelism throughout society, the so-called party-state cartel, and gaining almost absolute control of the country's media.

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He is also stringing along the EU with Serbia's continuing candidacy status, his influence over the volatile situations in Kosovo and Bosnia, his ties with Russia, and his deepening relations with China.

As if that was not enough, in April this year a new agreement with the EU's border agency Frontex came into force to help with the EU's current top priority: stemming the flow of migrants.

And soon after, the EU struck a deal with Serbia on its crucial but environmentally controversial lithium deposits.

'Colour revolutions'

Yet, there are indications that this carefully crafted edifice that he started building after he won elections first in 2012, is starting to show some significant cracks.

The widespread protests have, some say, lifted the veil on what had been hidden by his dominance of the political, governance, economic, cultural and media sectors: opponents have started realising that they are not alone, and possibly not even in the minority.

Many now seem to have become immune to the authorities labelling the protesters traitors or terrorists and comparing them to pro-European 'colour revolutions' elsewhere.

While not exactly panicking the regime, this defiance has translated into some heavy-handed crackdowns, initially through the trusted Vučić tactic of sending in the thugs but more recently also in the form of violent police

action and mass arrests.

> "Serbia needs to deliver on EU reforms, in particular to take decisive steps towards media freedom, the fight against corruption and the electoral reform" - Ursula von der Leyen

This earned Vučić a rebuke in July from the Council of Europe, which is distinct from the European Union. Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, stated he was "concerned about the current human rights situation in Serbia."

The European Parliament, too, has been more critical in its approach to Serbia than the European Commission. After the December 2023 elections it already pointed out that these were not held under "just conditions".

This April, in a reaction to the student protests, the parliament's rapporteur on Serbia, the Croat Tonino Picula, remarked, "For too long Serbia has been trying to take the best of EU funds while sidelining our core values and our geopolitical orientation."

Yet the reaction was also in line with Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, who had rather blandly stated that Serbia "needs to deliver on EU reforms, in particular to take decisive steps towards media freedom, the fight against corruption and the electoral reform."

All talk and no action

Some of the EU's dilemmas in dealing with Serbia are laid out in the Commission's own 2025 Rule of Law report that was compiled this July.

It sets out the reforms that Serbia is embarking on in fields such as the judiciary, media freedom, electoral safeguards, anti-corruption rules, parliamentary oversight, etc.

In each instance, the document concludes that while reforms were introduced, sometimes even on a constitutional level, implementation in practice was lacking. In other words, Serbia is all talk and no action in terms of meeting the EU's accession demands.

It also shows how the country's checks and balances are totally hollowed out and/or captured by Vučić and his followers.

A similar pattern can be seen in Vučić's approach to foreign policy. Serbia's historic ties with both Russia and China have caused concern in the past within the EU.

They have been used by Vučić both domestically and to try keep the EU in check, even though his country relies overwhelmingly on Europe rather than on these two communist era allies.

> The EU is clearly playing what it regards as a realpolitik - hold your nose and keep dealing with them - game in Serbia

The EU, in its tolerance of the stabilitocracy model, has mostly downplayed Vučić's domestic failings but has been somewhat more outspoken on his flirtations with Russia and China.

EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Kaja Kallas has in the past urged Belgrade to align with EU foreign policy.

But even this sounds quite impotent in light of Serbia's purchases of Chinese arms, its unprecedented joint exercises with the Chinese military and its recently revealed expansion of the surveillance systems it has been purchasing from China's Huawei.

The EU is clearly playing what it regards as a realpolitik - hold your nose and keep dealing with them - game in Serbia. Yet this might be a huge misjudgement, as it was, for example, in Syria, albeit under different circumstances.

The ultimate invalidation of what the EU stands for

The anti-government protesters, while maintaining a diffuse and horizontal organisational structure, are starting to organise for possible early elections, at which Vučić has hinted.

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Opinion polls suggest that combined, the protesters and the opposition might be able to unseat Vučić, especially as they propose a transitional government to level the playing field for the next elections.

The absence of robust EU criticism of Vučić and his practices, not only the way he has handled the protests, is turning more Serbians away from the bloc. But that, and the obvious moral imperative, should not be the only reasons for Brussels to change tack.

Rather than Serbia being too close and too central to the EU's interests for Brussels to take a tougher approach and risk alienating Belgrade, it should be the other way around.

Within Europe, the EU cannot afford to let slide the kind of rule of law, democratic and foreign policy and security provocations that Vučić is getting away with. It is the ultimate invalidation of what the EU stands for.