

# **Serbian youth and the European perspective:**

How to restore hope

**Travel Report presented to:**



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## Table of contents

<b>1. Preliminary comment.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. The path towards disillusionment.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. Towards internal disillusionment.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5. EU membership – a glimpse of hope.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>6. Restoring hope.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>7. Deconstructing “European magic”.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>8. A clear European perspective.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>9. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>10. Bibliography.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>11. Annex 1: Interviewed persons.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>12. Annex 2: Questionnaire.....</b>	<b>20</b>

## Preliminary Comment

My trip to Serbia took place from August 5<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup>, 2007. I spent most of my time in Belgrade, where the bulk of institutions I wanted to visit were located, and made two excursions to the towns of Novi Sad and Indija, both situated north of Belgrade. I experienced a very warm welcome everywhere in the country and a lively interest in the topic of my study, which sometimes even took the form of a certain gratefulness that I should show interest in Serbia at all. Many of the people I interviewed were eager to help me by indicating other possible sources of information, so that leading discussions with a wide range of experts proved unexpectedly easy. The majority of young people I spoke to mastered English surprisingly well, which facilitated the communication enormously; where this was not the case, I let them write their answers in Serbian and later asked Serbian friends to translate them into English. This possibility allowed conversations with people from a wide range of educational backgrounds, although it must be said that most youths I spoke to were university students.

From August 17<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>, I travelled to Bosnia and Croatia, visiting Sarajevo, Mostar and Dubrovnik. It was enlightening to contrast the Serbian perspective on the 1990's wars I had heard until then with the deep traumatism still predominant especially among the Bosnian population, which obliged me to somewhat reconsider my hope that ethnic reconciliation in the region was soon to come. Nevertheless, it was very exciting to visit these places and to add images to the different works I had read about ex-Yugoslavia. Especially my visit to Mostar, where parts of the town have barely been reconstructed since the confrontations of the civil war, was very moving and allowed me a better understanding of what these people had to live through only a little more than a decade ago.

From a personal perspective, my time in Serbia and the region was extremely enriching, and I feel that within a month, I was able to gather and learn an incredible amount of facts not only about the concrete topic of my research, but about the country and its people in general, whom I have come to appreciate greatly. I made very good friends and am very grateful to them for their support and the animated discussions we had together. More than any interview with an expert, it was these conversations, which allowed me to question many of my opinions and to develop a more complete conception of the European Union's transformative role not only in the Western Balkans, but also as an emerging global player in general. Back in Germany, I have begun to take Serbian classes in order to consolidate and develop the basic knowledge of Serbian I was able to

acquire during my time there, and am looking forward to returning to Serbia hopefully as soon as next summer.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Heinz Schwarzkopf Foundation for making this experience possible and for according me such great independence in my research. It was very reassuring to not have to worry about financial issues, and I am very grateful for the scholarship I was granted.

Natasha Wunsch, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007



## Introduction

Ask a young Serb what his country has to offer the European Union (EU), and the first reaction you will likely hear “probably nothing,” “don’t know” or “not much.”<sup>1</sup> The opposite question, inquiring about the benefits of EU membership for Serbia, will yield a similarly automatic, though more optimistic answer, along the lines of “a better life” or “better standards.” For the large majority of young Serbs, the European Union is associated with positive change, with a June 2007 survey finding 68.8% of 18 to 29-year-olds in favour of Serbian EU membership.<sup>2</sup> However, the concrete implications of the accession procedure remain hazy for most, and efforts both by the Serbian government and by the European Union to bring the country closer to adhesion are widely judged insufficient.

The June 2003 Thessaloniki European Summit underlined the prospect of membership for all the Western Balkan countries.<sup>3</sup> For Serbia, not much has changed since this decision was taken, and resignation is beginning to set in particularly among the young generation, who believed accession to be imminent after the fall of Milošević in October 2000. It is above all the strong pressure for reform exercised by the European Union which many consider as unnecessarily aggressive, and which has led a great number to feel rejected rather than encouraged to move forward. The EU thus faces the tricky challenge of striking a balance between conditionality and cooperation. It is the aim of this paper to suggest concrete steps to be taken in order to give back hope to the young generation, to motivate them to believe in their country’s future and to play an active role in shaping it.

It is important to first understand the mindset of young people in Serbia today, and to retrace the path towards the current disillusionment that characterises so many of them. Once this initial position is established, one can formulate desirable modifications to the present EU policy that would increase the credibility of the European project. Through creating realistic expectations while underlining the clear European perspective for the country – an approach not only valid for Serbia, but throughout the region – the scene can be set for fruitful accession negotiations.

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<sup>1</sup> When not stated otherwise, quotes are taken from the interviews conducted with 28 young Serbs between 20 and 29 years of age between 5 and 28 August 2007 in Belgrade and Novi Sad.

<sup>2</sup> Mihailovic, Srecko, Public opinion survey, 9-17 June 2007, ceSID.[http://www.cesid.org/eng/programi/istra\\_zivanja/index.jsp](http://www.cesid.org/eng/programi/istra_zivanja/index.jsp).

<sup>3</sup> Ahead of the Summit, then Enlargement Commissioner Chris Patten declared: “Thessaloniki will send two important messages to the Western Balkans: The prospect of membership of the EU is real, and we will not regard the map of the Union as complete until you have joined us.” *The Thessaloniki Summit: a milestone in the European Union's relations with the Western Balkans*. Press release, Brussels, 18 June 2003.

## **The path towards disillusionment**

*Šta ćeš, takav ti je život*<sup>4</sup> is a sentence repeated abundantly by Serbs, be it to comment on the probable independence of Kosovo, or merely on the increased price of a drink in a café. While being a common expression used essentially unconsciously, this saying does nevertheless reflect a core belief of the population, namely the conviction that things are as they are and may not be changed by individual or even collective action. Having developed from a series of disappointments within the country, this attitude now also risks to largely determine the stance the population takes towards the EU.

## **Towards internal disillusionment**

The recently coined expression of citizen apathy describes a phenomenon, which is on the rise in most European democracies. However, the deep disenchantment displayed by the Serbian youth exceeds by far the traditional discontent many young people feel towards their governments. Indeed, a series of traumatic experiences has shaped a deep scepticism towards current and future promises, while a distinct distrust of the political leadership further complicates the emergence of a strong civil society.

## ***An isolated youth***

A 25-year-old in Serbia today has more or less consciously experienced the 1991-92 war with Croatia, the 1992-95 war in Bosnia<sup>5</sup> and the 1999 NATO bombings of Serbia<sup>6</sup> and Kosovo, has lived through the hyperinflation of the early 90's and experienced the swift economic decline of the country during the embargo in place throughout the Milošević era. The prosperity of the Yugoslav times, where red passports opened the door to virtually unlimited travel and the country was showered with Western credits to remain unaligned, is known to this generation only through stories they hear from their parents or grandparents. At the same time, young Serbs are painfully aware that their country is widely perceived as the only guilty party in the wars of the 1990's wars and, after almost a decade of economic and political deliberate isolation by the international community, remains the "bad guy"<sup>7</sup> in the eyes of most Western observers.

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<sup>4</sup> "What can you do, such is life (to us)."

<sup>5</sup> Both leading to the independence of the two countries following their recognition by the European Community (EC), on January 15th, 1992, and April 7, 1992, respectively. The war in Bosnia broke out after independence was recognized by the EC, but rejected by the Bosnian Serbs. In: Garde, Paul. *Fin de Siècle dans les Balkans : 1992-2000*. Paris : Editions Odile Jacob, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> As a reaction to Serbian repressive moves in Kosovo throughout the autumn and winter of 1998 and continuing through spring 1999. Several strategic infrastructure installations were bombed over a 78-day period. In: Ramet, Sabrina. *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milošević*. Oxford: Westview Press, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Bojana Popovic, project manager for the Serbian section of the European Movement. Interview from August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

Hope re-emerged briefly in 2001 with the charismatic figure of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić<sup>8</sup>, who offered Europe as a way out of the pariah role Serbia had played for more than a decade and towards the economic prosperity the country so badly craved. His assassination on 12 March 2003 put an abrupt end to the shy optimism which was slowly regaining the Serbian population, and brusquely brought the country to what Radomir Diklić, head of Beta News Agency and ex-Ambassador to France, described as “a near complete standstill, a shock which the country took a long time to get over.”<sup>9</sup> The death of Đinđić, who had come to personify the hope for Serbian EU membership, left particularly the youth at loss for any political figure they might identify with, with Bojana Popović, project manager for the Serbian section of the European Movement, claiming that “we lost this period [of getting closer to the EU] because we lost him.”<sup>10</sup>

### *A distrusted leadership*

Relations between citizens and politicians today are widely determined by a striking degree of distrust, with young Serbs describing their leading class as “opportunist,” “corrupt,” “a group of rich people with old opinions” or even a “gang of robbers.” There is a strong sense of repetitiveness<sup>11</sup> and of the persons in power being removed from the needs of the citizens, an impression not only stated by the youth, but which represented a general *leitmotiv* in the judgment of government action among several of the interviewed experts as well. Radomir Diklić, for instance, complained that progress would be possible “if politicians from all sides reduced their concern for their own future by just 5% and increased their concern for the general well-being of society by 10%.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a recent poll revealed a strikingly negative projection of the citizens’ own capacity to influence political decision-making: as of June 2007, 95% of persons surveyed judge their influence to be minor, with 62% claiming they have no influence at all, only 4% asserting medium influence, and a mere 1% believing their influence to be strong.<sup>13</sup>

The 21 January 2007 parliamentary elections added to the growing weariness of Serbs towards their political leaders: a power struggle between the democratic parties, eager to keep the Radicals out of the government<sup>14</sup>, but unable to settle on the terms of such an

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<sup>8</sup> In office from 25 January 2001 until his assassination 12 March 2003

<sup>9</sup> Interview from August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Interview from August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> One 26-year-old mathematics graduate claimed he was “sick of all faces in the government, they’re all the same.”

<sup>12</sup> Interview from August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Mihailovic, Srecko. Public opinion survey, 9-17 June 2007, [cesid.http://www.cesid.org/eng/programi/istra\\_zivanja/index.jsp](http://www.cesid.org/eng/programi/istra_zivanja/index.jsp) (consulted 23 August 2007).

<sup>14</sup> The major divide between parties in Serbia runs not along lines of right or left, but between the so-called democratic and pro-European parties (Democratic Party, Democratic Party of Serbia, G17Plus, who now

agreement, led to the ruling coalition being endorsed as late as 14 May, just 28 minutes before the deadline foreseen by the Constitution would have elapsed, which would have resulted in new elections having to be called.<sup>15</sup>

In what the political situation inside Serbia is concerned, the youth thus do not have any real model to turn to, and widely seem to have simply given up the hope that change could be brought about by a source internal to the country. Instead, what remains of their faith lies in the European Union and the transformations they expect to come from EU membership – even if this hope rests on a limited knowledge that, as we shall see later, might cause difficulties for the acceptance of the necessary transition period during the adhesion procedure.

### **EU membership – a glimpse of hope**

In part surely due to the urban background of the people surveyed, the interviews conducted with young Serbs revealed a broad consensus on the overall wish for EU membership<sup>16</sup>, with surprisingly optimistic estimates on the timeframe in which this aspiration could become reality.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, most agreed that the stance taken by the European Union was too strict and that conditionality was too severe. Furthermore, the lingering issue of Kosovo is for many an important impediment to functioning EU-Serbia relations.

### ***The challenge of fair conditionality***

As much as the goal of EU membership enjoyed wide support among the people interviewed, a large majority concurred that the adhesion process as such was too much shaped by a strict conditionality from the European side and that there was too little willingness for mutual understanding between the negotiation partners. With the youth having largely given up on their national political class, the frustration about the slow advancement of accession negotiations is primarily directed against the EU. A 24-year-old engineering student complained that “we’re not all war criminals, they should just offer

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form the government coalition, and the Liberal Democratic Party), and the Serbian Radical Party, a right-wing anti-European party that, with 28% of the votes, received the highest result in the January 2007 elections. The Socialist Party of Serbia, ex-party of Milošević, won 14 seats and is thus the fifth strongest force in a Parliament with 22 different parties (minority parties do not have to reach the 5% threshold). In: *Serbia's New Government: Turning from Europe*. Europe Briefing no 46, 31 May 2007.

<sup>15</sup> *Serbia's new government. The eleventh hour*. In: *The Economist*, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006. [http://www.economist.com/research/articlesBySubject/displaystory.cfm?subjectid=348882&story\\_id=9193797](http://www.economist.com/research/articlesBySubject/displaystory.cfm?subjectid=348882&story_id=9193797) (consulted on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> 26 were for, and only two against an adhesion of Serbia.

<sup>17</sup> Out of 28 young Serbs interviewed, 15 expected membership to come within 5-10 years, six within 10-15 years, three within 15-20 years and only one person answered this question with “never.” One person gave no answer.

young people a chance to live normally.” In addition, many believe that the negotiations are not entirely fair, and it is a widespread suspicion that the EU will invent new conditions once Serbia fulfils the current ones.

Cooperation with the ICTY is obviously a major issue in this context. Opinions were divided on the assessment of Mladić’s and Karadžić’s roles in the Bosnian war, with responses ranging from a full approval of their indictment as war criminals to much more noncommittal assertions that “they did what they had to do to defend the Serbian people.” However, regardless of this breadth of positions on the actual degree of Mladić’s and Karadžić’s culpability and in spite of some feeling the accusations were unfounded, the general standpoint was that a transfer of the indictees to The Hague was the only possible way of bringing adhesion negotiations back on track. Nonetheless, the perceived inability of each individual to be a factor of change in this question is contributing to a feeling of helplessness among the population, with a 23-year-old physics student complaining that “we don’t know where they are, but we’re the ones to suffer.” This attitude, if it gains larger parts of the population, may slowly erode the current high levels of support the EU enjoys. Ivan Vejvoda, head of the Balkan Trust for Democracy, claimed that “it is important to help the post-communist country to move as quickly as possible through the early stages of the accession process, so putting the burden of heavy conditionality upfront, at the kindergarten stage, defeats the purpose of what we all want, to make these countries stable democracies.”<sup>18</sup> He feared that such an approach could actually undermine the democratic progress in the country by providing the Radical Party with alleged proof of the EU’s unwillingness to admit Serbia into the European family, a concern echoed by Miguel Rodriguez from the Cervantes Institute.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Kosovo question***

It is not only the general issue of political conditionality that currently stands in the way of truly fruitful negotiations between Serbia and the European Union. Although the two processes are officially decoupled, the Kosovo question hangs as a Damocles sword over any possibility of further rapprochement of the two sides. While the Serbian government sticks to its strict rejection of independence, with Ksenija Milivojevic, European Integration advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister, asserting that “no Serbian government will ever accept Kosovo’s independence (...) it’s simply not a matter of compromise, it is unacceptable for any Serbian government”<sup>20</sup>, the EU is desperately trying

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<sup>18</sup> Interview from August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Interview from August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Interview from August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

to find a common position to present to the conflicting parties. Nevertheless, the persistence of diverging opinions on which position to adopt in the case of a unilateral declaration of independence clearly show the lack of unity among the different member states, an indecisiveness undermines the credibility of the EU and thus diminishes its attractiveness as a political player.

At the same time, it was interesting to hear that the deep concern within the EU about the possible consequences of Kosovo independence is perhaps not entirely founded in Serbian public opinion. While the West is preoccupied with the latent risk of a new outbreak of armed hostilities, the predominant desire among the persons interviewed, was to finally come to terms with an issue that has hampered the progress of the country for much too long. Jovan Teokarevic for instance, a European Studies professor, claimed that “people speak more radically about it than they really think”<sup>21</sup> and that the general mood was shifting in favour of “a fast resolution rather than a just one.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, a survey carried out by the leading Serbian research centre Strategic Marketing in July 2007<sup>23</sup> shows that, while only 8% support independence for Kosovo, 39% expect this to be the final outcome. Along the same lines, a CeSID survey found only 12%<sup>24</sup> of interviewees who claimed they would resort to an armed opposition in order to prevent the independence of the province.

Altogether, it thus becomes clear that the Serbian youth is profoundly disenchanted by the current political situation of their country, and that this disillusionment is leading to an increased apathy among this generation with regard to the political realm. The longer the accession negotiations remain in a deadlock, the more probable it becomes that they end up turning away from the EU as well. Hence, as much as adhesion negotiations are a two-way process, where decisive steps can be expected from the aspiring country, it remains essential that the EU assumes its part of responsibility and does not give up on these young people. On the contrary, it is necessary to send out clear signals that can restore hope and re-establish the belief that real change is possible. Such an attitude would not only be beneficial to the internal attitude in the country, but would also allow the EU to encourage the necessary reforms in the region and to finally conclude the painful chapter that the Balkan Wars present for European history.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview from August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> *Public opinion survey on citizenship*.14-20 July 2007, Strategic Marketing Research.

<sup>24</sup> Mihailovic, Srecko. Public opinion survey, 9-17 June 2007, ceSID.[http://www.cesid.org/eng/programi/istra\\_zivanja/index.jsp](http://www.cesid.org/eng/programi/istra_zivanja/index.jsp) (consulted 23 August 2007).

## II. Restoring hope

With approval for membership ranging from 64 to 72% over the past five years,<sup>25</sup> the EU enjoys a public support in Serbia that is largely superior to the numbers reached across many of the current member states. However, the success of Serbian opinion polls is widely based on excessive expectations as to the benefits EU membership will bring about, and might quickly swing back into fresh disappointment once the population realises the hardships the accession procedure will require. The challenge posed is thus to deflate the somewhat overblown anticipations of the Serbian people while at the same time offering them a clear European perspective that will allow them to accept the necessary obstacles which will need to be surmounted on the path to EU membership. What is needed is more pragmatism and a strong commitment from the EU side to bringing the accession process forwards, an approach that is unfortunately often hampered by the member states' inability to reach a common position.

### **Deconstructing the “European magic”**

When pinpointed as to how exactly EU membership would contribute to immediate “better standards,” one 27-year-old graduate of film studies gaily responded that “it’s the European magic.” Indeed, the transformative power of the EU is perceived as almost absolute, with public opinion on the EU being widely based on what Radomir Diklić describes as “fairy tales.”<sup>26</sup> In order to prevent the currently inevitable disenchantment and even sense of betrayal that would follow in the aftermath of a premature accession, it is essential to create realistic expectations among the population. Simultaneously, the efforts to strengthen civil society in Serbia need to be increased, so that positive impulses can come from within the country.

### ***Creating realistic expectations***

Where the shaping of public opinion is concerned, one important actor that comes to mind is the media. However, according to Aleksandra Mijalkovic, foreign desk journalist at Serbia’s leading newspaper *Politika*, the coverage of the European Union in the press and on television is largely restricted to the EU’s role in the Kosovo question, with other issues rarely being reported on.<sup>27</sup> This observation shows to which extent Serbian-EU relations are overshadowed by the future status of Serbia’s southernmost province. Furthermore, in the realm of the media again appears the paradox that while young Serbs wish to be more informed about European issues and the progress in the accession

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<sup>25</sup> *European Orientation of the Citizens of Serbia*. 18-26 June 2007, Strategic Marketing Research.

<sup>26</sup> Interview from August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

procedure, several interviewees insisted at the same time that coverage must not be too aggressive, so as not to topple the opinion in a negative way when people feel too much pressure for change is being exercised. Swedish diplomat Björn Linderfalk agreed that “the more foreign pressure you put on them, the less you influence them”<sup>28</sup>, thus underlining a further challenge EU action is confronted with.

The government as the second obvious source of information presents a similarly desolating situation, with the last official campaign by the EU Integration Office, though it disposes of a generous communication budget, having taken place two years ago. Ksenija Milivojevic, claimed that the suspension of the negotiations on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) in May 2006, followed by the difficult formation of the government and increasing tension on the status of Kosovo “made it difficult to motivate people [in the communication department] to work.”<sup>29</sup> She continued that people simply felt the accession procedure was “not their business”<sup>30</sup> and that “it’s something their government does and they don’t get to participate in it.”<sup>31</sup> It seems that the government itself could contribute more to the shaping of a positive public opinion, possibly encouraged by some strategic advice from EU experts.

Before these facts, one can wonder who, then, can contribute to the creation of realistic expectations in the Serbian population? Despite the fact that it is obviously difficult for external actors to play an active role in informing the local population, existing efforts in this direction must be assessed and successful programmes expanded. It is essential that the civil society in Serbia be strengthened in order to establish a firm basis of public support for EU membership.

### ***Strengthening civil society***

While estimates on the actual importance of external actors varied, all interviewees agreed that it was necessary to establish a link to the inside of the country in order to truly make a difference. Ivan Vejvoda claimed that “external actors have a great impact, but they can only have an impact as long as there is energy from inside.”<sup>32</sup> In order to reach those who until now remain undecided on which position to take on EU membership, activities for the promotion of the EU must be anchored within the country and the visibility of the EU generally increased. Nick Groves from the British Embassy named more EU funding

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<sup>27</sup> Interview from August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Interview from August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Interview from August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

for diverse projects, wide-spread common practice in Bosnia, as an “easy win.”<sup>33</sup> Another possibility would be the expansion of existing travel and exchange programmes especially for young people, such as the internship experiences organised in a cooperation between the Austrian Development Agency and the Đinđić Foundation.<sup>34</sup>

Programmes in view of strengthening a pro-European civil society are particularly important in view of the inevitable drawbacks in the transition process will entail. At the moment, public approval of EU membership appears rather fragile: while almost two thirds answer the head-on question about EU adhesion positively, support drops the more concrete the question becomes. Thus, only 44% disagree with the statement “EU membership will bring more disadvantages than advantages, while 25.3% agree and 20.7% do not have an opinion.”<sup>35</sup>

Passivity is currently the crucial problem in the Serbian adhesion process. With the political class almost exclusively focusing on the Kosovo question, until recently little effort has been put into a restarting of SAA adhesion negotiations. As for civil society, concerns about the economic situation are often so overwhelming that little thought is spent on political questions. Ivan Vejvoda here quotes the German sociologist Klaus Hoffer on the “simultaneity problem,” i.e. the challenge that parallel reform processes in distinct sectors are occurring at the same time.<sup>36</sup> In spite of this additional difficulty, it is essential to encourage the emergence of a strong civil society, that could put pressure on the government for instance in the question of cooperation with the ICTY, thus facilitating the adhesion process. Decisive engagement by non-governmental actors however presupposes a clear European perspective for Serbia, which would serve as an essential motivation for any civil initiatives.

### **A clear European perspective**

Realistically evaluated, the shaping of an informed public opinion – until now not even achieved within the EU itself – and a strong and independent civil society can only be long-term goals incorporated into a comprehensive overall strategy towards the region. Moreover, the success of this approach will greatly depend on the will for cooperation within the country. Restoring hope to the young generation however requires more concrete and above all prompt measures that will show that the EU is serious about Serbian

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<sup>32</sup> Interview from August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Interview from August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews from August 15<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Mihailovic, Srečko. Public opinion survey, 9-17 June 2007, ceSID.[http://www.cesid.org/eng/programi/istra\\_zivanja/index.jsp](http://www.cesid.org/eng/programi/istra_zivanja/index.jsp) (consulted August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007).

membership. Two demonstrations of European goodwill are fundamental here: the swift ratification of the SAA for Serbia and the implementation of visa facilitation procedures that have long been promised to selected groups of the Serbian population.

### ***Ratification of SAA***

In a long expected move forward, the technical details for a Serbian SAA were agreed upon on September 10<sup>th</sup> of this year after negotiations between the European Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn and Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Božidar Đelić.<sup>37</sup> However, the signing of the agreement, anticipated by the Serbian side for as soon as October, will be subject to a positive evaluation by ICTY Prosecutor Carla del Ponte, who is due to visit the region in the coming weeks. While, again, full cooperation with ICTY is an absolutely essential condition prior to membership, one may ask whether the strong insistence on this issue is really necessary at this stage of the accession negotiations.

Instead of maintaining its hard stance on this question – which, in the case of Croatia, only became determining for the opening of actual accession negotiations<sup>38</sup> – the European Union should privilege the cooperation with the democratic forces within Serbia. A decisive step forwards in the negotiations, namely the ratification of an SAA for Serbia, would show that the accession perspective is real and thus likely contribute to a larger public support for the more difficult tasks ahead. It is necessary to change the negotiations between the EU and Serbia from a logic of confrontation to a logic of cooperation, in which both sides begin to understand each other as partners and reflect on the efforts they themselves could make rather than calling for more engagement from the other side. Visa facilitation could be a first expression of this change of attitude.

### ***Visa facilitation***

Whenever young interviewees did name a more concrete advantage arising from EU membership, travel was their main concern. One 24-year-old mechanics student claimed that “just to be in Schengen would be enough for me,” thus expressing a desire of many of his generation to return to a normal status within Europe and to no longer be considered a pariah nation. Alas, queues in front of the EU embassies are long, visas expensive by local income standards, and the extensive procedure requiring a large number of documents leads not only Srdjan Bogosajevic, General Director of the public opinion research institute

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<sup>36</sup> Interview from August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> SAA talks conclude, signing after Del Ponte report. B92, 10 September 2007. On: [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2007&mm=09&dd=10&nav\\_category=90&nav\\_id=43637](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2007&mm=09&dd=10&nav_category=90&nav_id=43637) (consulted September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007).

Strategic Marketing, to accuse the EU of “humiliating Serbs far more than anyone else with the visa regime.”<sup>39</sup>

While visa facilitation has long been an issue in the negotiations between Serbia and the EU, different EU member states have adopted largely diverging views on this question. The Czech Republic, for instance, has embraced a very liberal stance on visas in particular for students, for whom 90-day multi-entry permits are issued free of charge.<sup>40</sup> Old member states have more reservations; Great Britain for instance opposes visa facilitation on the grounds of lacking security features on Yugoslav passports.<sup>41</sup> New passports will apparently be issued starting from March 2008, though both Nick Groves and Jovan Teokarevic uttered doubts about the accuracy of this date, which was judged overly optimistic.

Despite these concerns however, negotiations between Serbian Interior Minister Dragan Jočić and Internal Affairs Commissioner Franco Frattini on September 18<sup>th</sup> resulted in the conclusion of an agreement on visa facilitation and readmission, which is supposed to come into force on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008. The implementation of this agreement would be a major step forward in the relations between the EU and the Serbian population, and a very symbolic gesture that, according to Teokarevic, “will certainly gain much more popularity for the EU as a project.”<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the possibility of studying and working in the EU would further an exchange between the population and thus actively contribute to the strengthening of a European identity among the Serbian population, while allowing them to develop a more concrete image of what the European Union implies and what they may expect from Serbian membership.

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<sup>38</sup> Other stages of rapprochement had been undertaken with General Ante Gotovina still at large, and Croatian cooperation with the ICTY judged insufficient.

<sup>39</sup> Interview from August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Ms. Alena Obrusnikova, employee in the Political Affairs Section of the Czech Embassy, on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Interview from August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Since the change of name from Yugoslavia to “Serbia and Montenegro” (after Montenegrin independence in May 2006), no new passports have been issued; the photos are simply stapled to the paper document instead of being heat-sealed as they are in EU passports.

<sup>42</sup> Interview from August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

## **Conclusion**

Serbian youth today seems at a turning point: after having given up on their national political representatives, they have tentatively placed their hope for change in the European Union. It is decisive for the EU not to disappoint these young people. The promise of a European perspective made to the Balkans in Thessaloniki is irrevocable. What is needed now are concrete steps in a productive adhesion process, in which the EU should play as much of a role as Serbia itself, using its dominant position to show leadership and not shying away from making the first significant gesture. A rapid ratification of the SAA and a swift implementation of the visa facilitation agreement are important signals that would reach out to the Serbian population and garner more public support for the challenging years to come.

Until today, the European project has been about the preservation of peace in a pacified region. The admission of Serbia and the other Western Balkan countries, bringing peace and stability to a region that has been in turmoil for much too long, would be a true demonstration of transformative power of the EU. At the same, it is in the EU's own best interest to actively contribute to the democratic transition of Serbia and its neighbours, thus coming one step closer to the historical unification of the European continent.

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## **Annex 1: Interviewed persons**

### **American Embassy**

Mr. Ian Campbell (Political Counsellor)

### **Austrian Embassy/Technical Cooperation**

Mr. Hans-Jörg Hummer (Head of Office)

### **Balkan Trust for Democracy (German Marshall Fund)**

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda (Head of Office)

### **Beta News Agency/Ex-Ambassador to France**

Radomir Diklic (Owner)

### **British Embassy**

Mr. Nick Groves (Second Secretary, EU and Economics)

### **CeSID (Centre for Free Election and Democracy)**

Milos Mojsilovic (Researcher)

### **Clinical Centre (European Agency for Reconstruction)**

Dr. Brian Potter (Project Leader)

### **Czech Embassy**

Ms. Alena Obrusnikova (Political Affairs Section)

### **Deputy Prime Minister's Office**

Ksenija Milivojevic (Advisor for European Integration)

### **European Agency for Reconstruction**

Mr. John White (Spokesperson)

### **European Centre for Peace and Development**

Bojan Starec (General Coordinator)

### **European Commission**

Vera Morandini (Economic and European Integration Expert)

### **European Movement**

Ms. Bojana Popovic (Project Manager)

### **Ex-Health Minister**

Prof. Dr. Nenad Djordevic (Private University Dean)

### **Faculty for Political Science**

Jovan Teokarevic (European Studies Professor)

### **G17 Plus Party**

Dragan Sljicic (International Secretary)

### **Instituto Cervantes**

Mr. Miguel Rodriguez (Language Teacher)

**OSCE**

Mr. Vladimir Bilandzic (Political Coordinator)

**Politika newspaper**

Aleksandra Mijalkovic (Foreign Desk Journalist)

**Strategic Marketing (Statistical Research)**

Srdjan Bogosajevic (General Director)

**Swedish Embassy**

Björn Mossberg (Technical Counsellor)

Björn Linderfalk (Political Counsellor)

**Zoran Đinđić Foundation**

Andrijana Vojnovic (Programme Coordinator)

In addition, 28 young Serbs between 20 and 29 years were interviewed in the streets of Belgrade and Novi Sad, using the questionnaire to be found in annex 2.

## Annex 2 : Questionnaire

1. Sex:            male                female
2. Age:            < 20                20-23                24-27                28-30
3. Profession: Student        Employee        Independent        Unemployed
4. Nationality:
5. Have you already travelled to another (EU) country? If yes, which one(s)?
6. Would you like Serbia to join the EU?    Yes        No
7. Why (not)?
8. What can Serbia offer the European Union?
9. What can the European Union offer Serbia?
10. When do you think Serbia will be part of the EU?  
5-10 yrs     10-15 yrs     15-20 yrs     Never
11. Do you feel sufficiently informed about the conditions for Serbian EU membership?  
Strongly agree     Agree     Disagree     Strongly disagree
12. Do you think that the Serbian government does enough to achieve Serbian EU membership?  
Strongly agree     Agree     Disagree     Strongly disagree
13. Do you think that the EU does enough to achieve Serbian EU membership?  
Strongly agree     Agree     Disagree     Strongly disagree
14. What could/should be improved about the cooperation between the EU and Serbia?