

The Perils of Protracted EU Accession: “Eurofundamentalist” and “Euroopportunistic” Discourses on the EU in North Macedonia and Serbia

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Abstract

This paper compares the EU-related discourses of the current governments of two EU candidate member states: North Macedonia and Serbia. Despite the considerable amount of shared history and cultural proximity, these countries exhibit dramatically different discursive portrayals of the European Union, as well as their own prospective membership in it, which they have been pursuing for several decades. This divergence can be attributed to one crucial difference between the two countries: levels of popular support for EU membership. North Macedonia’s overwhelmingly pro-EU sentiment has enabled its government to engage in an unambiguously favorable discursive portrayal of the EU, best summarized as Eurofundamentalism, where EU accession is depicted as a basic prerequisite for the prosperity of the country. By contrast, Serbia’s lower (albeit still dominant) levels of pro-EU sentiment have contributed to a discourse of Euroopportunism, where EU membership is framed as a pragmatic goal whose desirability is subject to constant re-evaluation. In the long run, however, the paper posits that these disparate discourses might paradoxically lead to a similar outcome of undermining pro-EU sentiment, and, ultimately, the quality of governance in these two countries.

Key terms: European Union, North Macedonia, Serbia, EU-related sentiment, Eurofundamentalism, Euroopportunism

Introduction

Over the last several decades, membership in the European Union has constituted a key foreign policy objective in the Balkans. Mindful of their turbulent history, small size, and freshly acquired independence, countries in this region have regarded EU accession as the final affirmation of their statehood and national identity, thus discursively elevating this policy objective into a near-existential identity marker (Borneman & Fowler 1997). For some of them, however, the process of integration into the EU has become increasingly protracted and uncertain. Since the accession of Croatia in 2013, there have been no new EU members. North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo are yet to begin their accession talks, while Serbia and Montenegro have been closing the chapters of the EU's legislative framework (*acquis communautaire*) at a slower pace than any past candidate members. Fears of the viability of the enlargement process have been heightened by hints of a new accession methodology¹, which is intended to make EU accession more meritocratic and less prone to democratization reversals, but might end up prolonging an already protracted process. This process is additionally burdened by concerns of an “enlargement fatigue” among some EU member states (Economides 2020), which appear increasingly reserved about further enlargement regardless of the performance of candidate members.

However, in two EU candidate members, North Macedonia and Serbia, these unfavorable developments have so far produced different effects on public sentiment towards EU membership. As of late 2020, pro-EU attitudes in North Macedonia are placed at around 70% by most public surveys (IRI 2020a: 79; IDSCS 2021: 9). In Serbia, however, they are believed to be nurtured by a mere half of the population (IEA 2020: 10; IRI 2020a: 79). Interestingly, this divergence is heightened by several other indicators of public attitudes in the two countries. Of the six Western Balkan countries yet to join the EU, Serbia exhibits the highest level of public confidence in both the national government and the general direction of the country, with estimates ranging between 41% and 53% (Standard Eurobarometer 2019; IRI 2020a: 5), and lowest level of pro-EU sentiment (IRI 2020a: 79). By contrast, North Macedonia

¹Politico (2019) *France outlines proposal to overhaul EU accession process*. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-outlines-proposal-to-overhaul-eu-accession-process/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

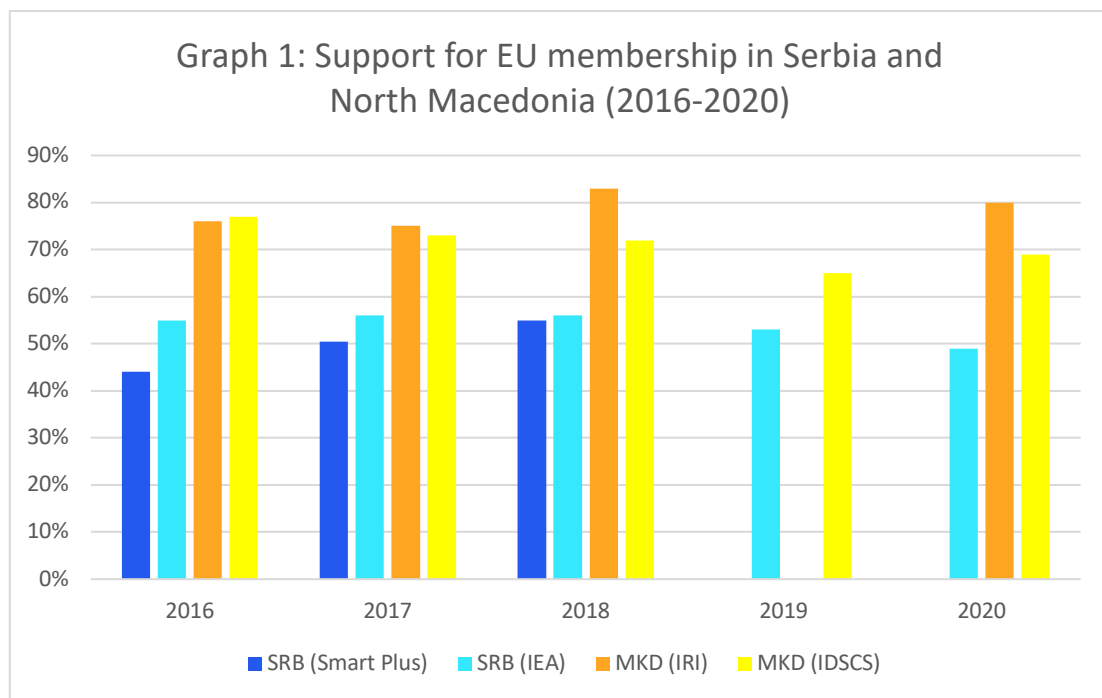
ranks poorly by the first two metrics, with estimates ranging between 26% and 33% of confidence in the national government and the general direction of the country (Eurothink 2019: 4; IRI 2020b: 5), yet strongly by the third metric (IRI 2020a: 79). Thus, Serbia's relatively low pro-EU sentiment challenges the oft-assumed nexus between EU membership and quality of life and suggests that (a majority of) its citizens might no longer view EU accession as a necessary condition for a satisfying future. By contrast, North Macedonia's pro-EU sentiment has remained high over the years (IRI 2020b: 29), while optimism in the general direction of the country has mostly been declining (*idem*: 6), which suggests that EU accession might be seen as the sole remaining instrument for a prosperous future.

Moreover, between a quarter and half of Macedonians expect the highly unrealistic outcome of EU membership by 2025 (IDSCS 2021: 15; Balkan Barometer 2020: 41), as opposed to a mere 11% of Serbs (*ibid*). This indicates that Serbs might be more informed about the dynamics of EU enlargement, but also more pessimistic about the likelihood of EU membership, since 46% expect that their country will never join the EU, as opposed to a mere 25% of Macedonians (*ibid*).

Evidently, North Macedonia and Serbia are characterized by dramatically different attitudes among their populations in terms of the desirability, importance, and feasibility of EU membership. At the backdrop of the divergence in EU-related sentiment between the two countries, this paper will compare the EU-related discourses of their governments in order to explore whether these discourses are similarly divergent, or whether they are instead characterized by more similarities than differences, as one might expect to observe in two countries locked in similarly protracted EU accession processes.

In doing so, this paper does not mean to suggest that EU-related public attitudes constitute the only meaningful difference between the two countries that could influence their EU-related discourses. In fact, North Macedonia and Serbia are ruled by very different governments, with the former being led by a nominally center-left party, the Social Democratic Union of the Republic of Macedonia (SDSM), and the latter being led by a nominally center-right party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). At least in North Macedonia, partisanship is an important predictor of support for EU membership, which has

been up to 35 percentage points lower among voters of North Macedonia’s conservative opposition than among SDSM’s supporters (Naunov 2020: 7). However, as shown in Graph 1, according to two longitudinal surveys on cumulative EU-related attitudes in the two countries, these attitudes have been: (1) relatively stable over time in each country; and (2) dramatically different between the countries, as pro-EU attitudes in North Macedonia have been higher than those in Serbia by anywhere from ten to 31 percentage points over the last five years (IEA 2020; Smart Plus Research 2018; IRI 2020b; IDSCS 2021)².



Another minor difference between the two countries is the current status of their EU accession processes. While North Macedonia is yet to begin its accession talks, Serbia has already opened 18 of the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire*³. However, Serbia has (provisionally) closed only two of these chapters⁴. Given the EU’s historical preference for

²Graph 1 is based on two longitudinal opinion polls in each of the two countries. Throughout this paper, the findings from these polls are complemented by those from other analyses of public opinion. However, Graph 1 limits itself to these four polls, as these are the only public opinion analyses known to this researcher that measure EU-related public attitudes longitudinally and through a consistent methodological framework in the two countries. Data for 2019 and 2020 is partly missing.

³European Commission. *Serbia | European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁴Ibid.

“coupling” the accession processes of different candidate member states (Miscevic & Mrak 2017), which often results in admitting them at the same time, the fact that the two countries currently find themselves in different stages of the process seems unlikely to prove significant in the long run.

Thus, while mindful of these two minor differences, this paper posits that the contextual environment around the EU-related discourses in North Macedonia and Serbia is largely similar, with levels of support for EU membership constituting the only (major) driver of potential variation between their EU-related discourses.

Literature Review

Academic scholarship on the “Europeanization” of post-socialist countries has long shifted from path-dependent frameworks focused on the democratizing power of EU-mandated conditionality (Anastasakis 2005; Vachudova 2005; Schimmelfenning 2007) to more skeptical accounts of an imperfect correlation between progress in the EU accession process and democratization (Mendelski 2015; Richter & Wunsch 2019) and warnings of post-accession “democratic backsliding” (Greskovits 2015; Bermeo 2016). Democratic stagnation is often accompanied (or even previewed) by discursive shifts among political elites, sometimes including nominally liberal parties and politicians (Dawson & Hanley 2018), which mandates an analysis of the (re)constitution of “contexts of meaning” that occurs in discursive practices (Schmidt 2008). Nominal commitment to EU accession, as well as even the transposition of specific EU legislation, often fails to result in democratic consolidation, with democratizing maneuvers frequently resembling “empty shells” (Dimitrova 2010).

The democratic deficit of the current Macedonian and Serbian governments, which has been examined elsewhere (Bieber 2018; Gjuzelov forthcoming), falls outside of the scope of this paper. Instead, what is of interest here is how these governments portray the EU and the prospective EU membership of their countries in their public discourses. Without delving into the specific ways in which the EU accession process fails to translate into democratic gains, this paper examines how political actors “perform” EU values in their discursive practices, partly to compensate for their democratic shortcomings. By doing so, they seek to

instrumentalize the symbolic appeal of the EU accession process to score political points among the pro-EU layers of their electorates. In the case of Serbia, the paper also explores how political actors can use their (more ambivalent) discourse towards the EU to ingratiate themselves with the Euroskeptic layers of their electorates, as well.

Moreover, the paper seeks to enrich (but also partly transcend) the “stabilitocracy” paradigm, which has dominated the academic study of the Europeanization of the Western Balkans (Dimitrov, Jordanovska & Taleski 2016; Bieber 2018; Kmezić 2018). While important in its own right, the disproportionate focus on the EU’s tolerance of less-than-democratic yet nominally pro-EU governments in its candidate member countries has removed some of the agency of local actors, which are (implicitly) treated as uniform beneficiaries of the EU’s pragmatism. By shifting the analytical focus to two national governments in the region, this paper shows that local actors are neither uniform in their EU-related discourse nor do they necessarily benefit (and/or expect to benefit) from enjoying a favorable reputation in Brussels.

Finally, in order to capture the distinctive character of the discursive instrumentalization of EU-related sentiment in these two case studies, this paper proposes a relatively novel terminology, instead of relying on established concepts. Thus, in conceptualizing the EU-related discourse in North Macedonia, the paper uses the term *Eurofundamentalism*, which signifies an unambiguously favorable discursive portrayal of the EU and the country’s potential EU membership, which is framed as a basic prerequisite for national prosperity. On the other hand, with regards to Serbia, the paper adopts the term *Euroopportunism*, which denotes an ambivalent discursive portrayal of the EU and the country’s potential EU membership, which is cast as a pragmatic objective whose desirability for the country is subject to constant re-evaluation. Both terms are relatively marginal in the academic literature, with Eurofundamentalism being recently introduced by this author in a study of EU-related myths in North Macedonia and Croatia (Blanuša et al. 2021). Academic uses of Euroopportunism, on the other hand, have largely referred to EU-related public sentiment (Blanuša et al. 2016), as opposed to the discursive instrumentalization of said sentiment by political elites, which is the focus of this paper.

Methodology and timeframe

In evaluating the EU-related discourses of the current governments in North Macedonia and Serbia, this paper takes the summer of 2017 as its starting point. In April 2017, Aleksandar Vučić achieved a landslide victory in the Serbian presidential elections, while in June 2017, Zoran Zaev became the prime minister of North Macedonia following a tight parliamentary election in December 2016. Even though Vučić and his party, SNS, had enjoyed executive power in one form or another since 2012, the 2017 presidential election constituted an important milestone in their consolidation of power. By elevating the party leader (and hitherto prime minister) to a position with largely ceremonial powers, SNS signaled the increasing irrelevance of formal legal structures in the Serbian political system, whose growing capture by this party has been extensively documented by the leading international democracy indexes (Freedom House 2021; The Economist 2020). For North Macedonia, 2017 constituted an even more explicit watershed moment, with Zaev and SDSM replacing their discredited political opponents in the executive government after eleven years in opposition (Gjoneska, Fidanovski & Krouwel 2020). Thus, this paper seeks to capture the main trends in the EU-related discourses in these countries since 2017, while placing a slightly disproportionate emphasis on more recent developments. This choice is driven by the superior relevance of these developments to the present political context, which makes them more useful in the formulation of predictions on the future direction of these discourses.

This paper draws on a total of 27 exhibits of the EU-related discourses in the two countries, 16 of which relate to Serbia and eleven to North Macedonia, where the paper additionally examines the discursive labeling of EU-related legislation. These exhibits include (excerpts of) media statements, press conferences, speeches, interviews, panel discussions, and social media posts. The diversity of discursive settings included in the analytical sample serves to ensure that the findings in this paper provide a microcosm of the broad range of EU-related discursive practices exercised by Macedonian and Serbian politicians. To the same end, the analysis includes discourse intended for both domestic and international audiences and delivered in either Macedonian/Serbian or English, although domestic examples are more abundant.

That being said, this paper does not claim to offer a fully comprehensive picture of the EU-related discourses in these countries, which exceeds the scope of this (and any) paper due to the sheer predominance of the EU accession process in the Macedonian and Serbian public discourses. Instead, the paper limits itself to an analysis of the political discourse surrounding some of the most important developments in the dynamic and highly politicized EU accession processes of the two countries in the past three and a half years (again, with disproportionate emphasis on more recent developments). Due to lack of space, the scope of the analysis is largely limited to Zaev and Vučić as leaders of the two main ruling parties, but it also occasionally encompasses the rhetoric of other governing actors, including but not limited to Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski (elected in May 2019) and Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić (appointed in June 2017). Similarly, the analysis had to omit the role of the media in shaping EU-related discourses, even though they serve to amplify and even complement the rhetoric of the governments, especially in Serbia's tightly controlled media environment (Freedom House 2020). Finally, due to language limitations, representatives of the ethnic Albanian coalition partner in the Macedonian government had to be excluded.

The analysis of the two case studies is presented separately in the following two sections. Each of these sections consists of three sub-sections addressing three central features of the two discourses: (1) the creation of a symbolic façade of "Europeanness"; (2) the presentation of an unrealistic timeframe for EU accession; (3) the framing of the importance of EU membership. The final section of the paper advances several predictions on the impact of these discourses on the long-term popularity of their exponents, but also on the quality of governance and future direction of pro-EU attitudes in each country.

The EU-related discourse in North Macedonia: Eurofundamentalism

Creating a symbolic façade of "Europeanness"

North Macedonia's creation of a symbolic façade of "Europeanness" fits closely Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes' notion (2020) of an "imitation game", albeit with some unique manifestations. This concept posits that, in most East European countries, governments

aspiring to join the EU have adopted a path-dependent approach to their prospective accession, which is almost dogmatically accepted as indispensable, thus being reduced to the urgent, unquestioning, and largely mechanical adoption of the *acquis communautaire* (ibid). In North Macedonia, the desirability of EU membership has not been contested by any major political party since independence in 1991. Thus, over the years, Macedonian political elites have created a public discourse that seeks to highlight their allegedly unwavering commitment to the fulfilment of this objective.

Long preceding the current SDSM-led government, Macedonian politicians have invested extensive effort in the discursive framing of the (alleged) EU accession progress of the country to the domestic and international public. In a seminal 2010 paper, Andrew Graan posited that much of North Macedonia's political discourse is driven by a firm belief that "beyond concrete policy, [it is] the country's *imidz*⁵ [that] would either advance or obstruct EU integration" (Graan 2010: 836). It is thus unsurprising that, over the years, even politicians from nationalist (albeit nominally pro-EU) parties have consistently tried to maintain a façade of "Europeanness" (idem). Consistent to this trend, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has championed North Macedonia's commitment to the strategic objective of EU accession, while (often implicitly) casting himself and his party as crucial tools in the fulfilment of this objective.

The most prominent example of Zaev's role in the maintenance of a façade of "Europeanness" is the labeling of a wide range of legislation in the national parliament as "laws with a European flag". The origins of this label precede Zaev's government, but in the three years since his rise to power in 2017, North Macedonia has seen it applied to a plethora of bills in areas as diverse as anti-corruption and cannabis legalization⁶. The application of the label results in the fast-tracking of the bills in question, which are passed in the parliament through an accelerated procedure and with limited parliamentary debate. Of course, the alignment of North Macedonia's legislation with the EU's entire legal framework is a time-consuming process, which does often require the adoption of laws in a fast-tracked fashion. However,

⁵Throughout his paper, Graan uses the Macedonian transcription of the English word "image" (*imidz*) to illustrate how the obsession of political elites with outside perceptions of the country has generated a very peculiar brand of "image politics", which far transcends the usual use of the word elsewhere.

⁶Radio Slobodna Evropa (2019) *Закон за опојни дроги, со европско знаме, Радио Слободна Европа*. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/30221354.html> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

the sheer frequency of this practice under Zaev's government, with up to ten "laws with a European flag" being passed every month⁷, has deprived this label of almost any significance, with the distinctiveness of "European" laws (as opposed to "regular" ones) becoming blurred. Thus, rather than a helpful mechanism for prioritizing time-sensitive legislation in the name of the country's biggest strategic objective, the label has become a political tool for expediting almost *any* legislation.

Importantly, the labeling of legislation modelled on the *acquis communautaire* as "laws with a European flag" is *not* mandated by the EU. This highlights the (frequent) gap between Eurofundamentalism and the actual EU accession process it purports to accelerate. On at least one occasion, representatives of major EU member states have openly opposed the use of this label. For example, prior to North Macedonia's accelerated adoption of a divisive language law in March 2018 under the "European flag" label, French ambassador Christian Timonier (fruitlessly) argued that this law was not part of the EU's conditionality and should not be portrayed as such⁸. Even the EU itself has criticized the increasing fast-tracking of laws and the concomitant lack of public debate (European Commission 2020: 4, 9). The persistence of this practice despite the criticism reveals how the EU accession process can be (ab)used by the government to fulfil distinctly self-serving objectives of cushioning public opposition to unpopular legislation. Importantly, the EU's lack of active participation in – and sometimes even explicit opposition to – this particular Eurofundamentalist practice confirms the importance of applying a *locally* focused lens to North Macedonia's EU-related discourse, which, as stated earlier, is one of the core starting points in this paper.

The efforts by Zaev's government to present a façade of "Europeanness" seem to have reaped considerable political benefits domestically. Polling data suggest that about three times as many citizens view SDSM as more conducive to North Macedonia's EU integration than their

⁷NetPress (2021) *Собранието штанца закони, за два месеца 20 закони само со европско знаменце* | NetPress. Available at: <https://netpress.com.mk/sobranieto-shtanca-zakoni-za-dva-meseца-20-zakoni-samo-so-evropsko-znamence/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁸Sakam da kazam (2018). *Препораката за ЕУ виси поради законот за јазиците*. Available at: <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/preporakata-za-eu-visit-poradi-nachinot-na-koj-e-donesen-zakonot-za-jazitsite-veli-frantsuskiot-ambasador-timonie/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

main challenger, VMRO-DPMNE⁹ (IPIS 2019: 48). This is especially important in light of the low levels of confidence in the national government discussed earlier, which suggests that citizens might be suspending their (low) expectations about the quality of domestic governance, and simply supporting whichever party they perceive as the best conduit of European integration.

It could be argued, however, that there is little basis for ranking Macedonian parties as conducive (or not) to the EU accession process *to begin with*. North Macedonia has been an EU candidate member since 2005 and received its first recommendation for opening accession talks with Brussels in 2009¹⁰. The failure to open said talks since then has almost exclusively been caused by factors outside of the control of the Macedonian government, such as the EU's aforementioned enlargement fatigue, but mainly the now-resolved naming dispute with neighboring Greece (Fidanovski 2018) and ongoing squabble with neighboring Bulgaria¹¹. It is this de-meritocratized character of North Macedonia's EU accession process that further highlights the discursive dominance of (merely) symbolic "Europeanness". Even though the status of North Macedonia's EU integration has long been outside of the control of its government, successive governments, including the current one, have successfully deployed a Eurofundamentalist discourse to derive political gains from a paralyzed political process. Having examined its maintenance of a symbolic façade of "Europeanness", the next sub-section will demonstrate how the Macedonian government has also sought to benefit from presenting an unrealistic *timeframe* for EU accession.

⁹VMRO-DPMNE stands for "Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity" (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство).

¹⁰Deutsche Welle MK, D. (2009) *EK препорачa почеток на преговори со Македонија | DW | 14.10.2009*, DW.COM. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/mk/e%0%BA-%0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B0-%0%BF%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%BA-%0%BD%D0%B0-%0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%BE-%0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0/a-4789468> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

¹¹Euronews (2020) *Bulgaria's block on North Macedonia's bid to join EU 'massively endangers Europe's security' | Euronews*. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/12/08/bulgaria-s-block-on-north-macedonia-s-bid-to-join-eu-massively-endangers-europe-s-security> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

Presenting an unrealistic timeframe for EU accession

As mentioned earlier, even though successive European Commission progress reports have been recommending the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia since 2009, Brussels has consistently failed to set a starting date for said talks. This stagnation has prompted extensive discussions in the Macedonian public discourse about the “date” of the launch of accession talks, whose obtainment has been highlighted by all governments as a key foreign policy priority¹². Expectations of finally receiving the long-awaited “date” were emboldened by the resolution of the country’s naming dispute with Greece in June 2018, as this had previously been regarded as the main obstacle. The resolution of the dispute led Zaev to raise what ultimately proved to be false hopes about obtaining the “date” ahead of two EU summits in June¹³ and October of 2019¹⁴. In fact, it was not until March 2020 that the EU finally greenlit the launch of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania¹⁵.

At the backdrop of more than a decade-long fixation with the “date” in the public discourse, it is unsurprising that expectations about the total duration of North Macedonia’s accession process became unrealistically high after the positive decision in March 2020. As of November 2020, a staggering 20% of Macedonians expected the country to join the EU within 3 years (IDSCS 2021: 15). Coupled by another 28% expecting EU membership within 5 years (ibid), it appears that almost half of the population harbours completely unrealistic expectations in this regard, given that accession talks with the EU’s last new member, Croatia, took six years.

These unrealistic expectations can be linked both indirectly and directly to the discourse of the government. At an indirect level, they can be explained by the constant emphasis on the

¹²Deutsche Welle MK, D. (2012) *Груевски: Македонија го очекува заслужениот датум за почеток на преговори со ЕУ* | DW | 16.11.2012, DW.COM. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/mk/%D0%B3%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%BC%D0%B0%00> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

¹³Kanal 5 (2019) *Заев: Ќе добиеме датум за преговори во јуни или јуни, Меркел не е против* - Канал 5. Available at: <https://kanal5.com.mk/zaev-kje-dobieme-datum-za-pregovori-vo-juni-ili-juni-merkel-ne-e-protiv/a378658> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

¹⁴Kanal 5 (2019) *Заев: Убеден сум дека на 17 и 18 октомври ќе добиеме датум за почеток на преговори со ЕУ*, kanal5.com.mk. Available at: <https://kanal5.com.mk/zaev-ubeden-sum-deka-na-17-i-18-oktomvri-kje-dobieme-datum-za-pochetok-na-pregovori-so-eu/a392959> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

¹⁵Atlantic Council (2020) *EU greenlights North Macedonia and Albania membership talks: Breakthrough or symbolic gesture?* - Atlantic Council. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/eu-greenlights-north-macedonia-and-albania-membership-talks-breakthrough-or-symbolic-gesture/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

“date”, which is almost never contextualized as a relatively minor component of the overall accession process. With the newly proposed “reversible” accession methodology, where chapters of the *acquis communautaire* that have been closed earlier in the accession talks could later be reopened¹⁶, the mere *launch* of accession talks would become even less significant. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that even the much-celebrated positive decision of March 2020, which now appears increasingly inconsequential in light of Bulgaria’s ongoing obstruction, stopped short of stating a specific launch date for the accession talks it greenlit.

In this light, Zaev’s increasingly optimistic rhetoric on the timeframe of the accession process can be seen as *directly* misleading. In an interview for the magazine Luxemburger Wort in March 2021¹⁷, Zaev stated that the country would “probably become an EU member within five, six, or ten years”. Coupled by similar statements made domestically¹⁸, Zaev’s misinformation carries the risk of undermining long-term support for the EU accession process in the country, which might suffer tremendously if and when the inflated expectations about the duration of this complex process prove false.

Exaggerating the importance of EU membership

When asked to choose between ten suggested issues in a 2020 opinion poll, Macedonian citizens overwhelmingly cited “European integration” as the one issue that is “discussed too much” in the national public discourse (IRI 2020b: 16). While this response might seem paradoxical in a predominantly pro-EU country, it might be explained by the sheer predominance of EU accession in the discourse of the government, which has been portraying EU membership as an all-encompassing panacea for a wide range of societal ills, and, ultimately, as a symbol of a better future. Over the years, this growing mythology around the

¹⁶Politico (2019) *France outlines proposal to overhaul EU accession process*, POLITICO. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-outlines-proposal-to-overhaul-eu-accession-process/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

¹⁷Luxemburger Wort (2021) *Nordmazedonien-Premier Zaev: „Wir sind durchaus verbittert“*, Luxemburger Wort - Deutsche Ausgabe. Available at: <https://www.wort.lu/de/international/nordmazedonien-premier-zaev-wir-sind-durchaus-verbittert-604f8db3de135b923656c7d2> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

¹⁸Nova Makedonija (2021) *Зеев: Очекувам за шест години да ги завршине преговорите со Европската Унија - Нова Македонија*. Available at: <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/politika/%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B5%D0%B2-%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BC-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%88%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%80/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

EU accession process has stretched the notion of “Europeanization” to the point of devaluing it of almost any meaning.

In their most fundamental iteration, exaggerations of the importance of EU membership are reflected in the heavily decontextualized usage of the word “European”, whose meaning has been heavily extended to serve as an open-ended designation of “progress”. For instance, ahead of a 2018 referendum on the aforementioned name change, the government adopted the campaign slogan “For a European Macedonia”¹⁹, which misleadingly omitted the divisive new name “North Macedonia” at the expense of the much more popular (albeit remote) objective of EU membership. While this usage of the “European” label was at least rooted in a specific context, as solving the name dispute was indeed a vital prerequisite for EU membership, the adjective is often deployed in a much vaguer fashion. For instance, in his 2021 New Year’s address, Zaev expressed his hopes for “European standards” in North Macedonia in the upcoming year²⁰. Despite some wide discrepancies in the standards of living between EU member states themselves²¹, this overgeneralization is commonly made in the national public discourse. Similarly, President Stevo Pendarovski based much of his election campaign in April 2019 on the vague promise of a “European future”²², thus embracing Zaev’s self-contained usage of the “European” label as a generic symbol of prosperity. Moreover, the unmitigated glorification of EU membership is often extended to explicitly inaccurate claims, such as Zaev’s assertion in December 2020 that EU accession will result in less brain drain²³, despite the post-accession spike in emigration in most of the East European member states of the EU (Kahanec et al. 2010).

¹⁹MKD.mk (2018) *Коалиција „Заедно за европска Македонија“ за позитивен исход на референдумот, МКД.мк*. Available at: <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/koalicija-zaedno-za-evropska-makedonija-za-pozitiven-ishod-na-referendumot> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

²⁰Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (2020) *Заев: Во 2021 носиме европски стандарди дома, сите во акција! | Влада на Република Северна Македонија*. Available at: <https://vlada.mk/node/23784> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

²¹World Bank (2019) *GDP (current US\$) - European Union | Data*. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=EU> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

²²Stevo Pendarovski (2019) ‘Ќе победиме бидејќи носиме европска иднина и подобар живот! Нудиме едно општество за сите, каде нема делби и секој има еднакви права. #ЗаедноНапред <https://t.co/Jh4P3HEliz>, @spendarovski, 12 April. Available at: <https://twitter.com/spendarovski/status/1116753023999598597> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

²³Utrinski Vesnik (2020) *Заев: Влезот во ЕУ ќе го намали иселувањето на граѓаните, Утрински Весник*. Available at: <https://utrinskivesnik.mk/%d0%b7%d0%b0%d0%b5%d0%b2-%d0%b2%d0%bb%d0%b5%d0%b7%d0%be%d1%82-%d0%b2%d0%be-%d0%b5%d1%83-%d1%9c%d0%b5->

It would be simplistic, however, to dismiss the inflated image of EU membership within North Macedonia's Eurofundamentalist discourse as a mere political strategy by the current Macedonian government. While politically opportune, this particular layer of Eurofundamentalism might have deeper cultural roots. In fact, Western "othering" of the Balkan region as an "incomplete self" locked into a constant struggle to complete its "Europeanness" has been extensively documented (Todorova 2009). This "othering" often leads to "internalized Balkanism", expressed through a self-perception of inferiority among Balkan populations (2009: 52). In the regional folklore, for instance, evidence of this internalization dates as far back as the late 19th century, with satirical vignettes from the era expressing the sentiment that "we are European, but not quite there yet" (Friedman 1994: 103).

Since his rise to power in 2017, Zaev has exemplified the notion of "internalized Balkanism" on numerous occasions, not least in a pivotal November 2020 interview for the Bulgarian media²⁴, amidst the ongoing dispute between the two countries over several aspects of their shared history. By asserting that "we [Macedonians and Bulgarians] will never be as European [sic] as, say, Germany, but [we should] try to be at least somewhat European", Zaev not only reiterated his loaded understanding of the word "European" as a symbol of progress, but he also embraced a dangerous cultural stereotype. Another illustration of this stereotype can be observed in a statement²⁵ made by Zaev ahead of the name-change referendum in September 2018, when he opined that "[Macedonians] need a whip; someone from the EU and NATO who would come here and show us all – not least myself – how to get things done". Even Pendarovski has echoed Zaev's lack of faith in his own government by asserting in early 2021 that "[North Macedonia] can perhaps make progress even without the EU, but at the speed

[%d0%b3%d0%be-%d0%bd%d0%b0%d0%bc%d0%b0%d0%bb%d0%b8-%d0%b8%d1%81%d0%b5%d0%bb%d1%83%d0%b2%d0%b0%d1%9a/](#) (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

²⁴360 Stepeni (2020) (ВИДЕО) Интервју на Заев за БГНЕС: Испративме документ дека немаме територијални претензии, нема да се мешаме во внатрешните работи и немаме побарувања за малцинствата. Available at: <https://360stepeni.mk/video-intervju-na-zaev-za-bgnes-isprativme-dokument-deka-nemame-teritorijalni-pretenzii-nema-da-se-meshame-vo-vnatreshnite-raboti-i-deka-nemame-pobaruvana-za-maltsinstva/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

²⁵Макфакс (2018) Заев Ни треба камшикар, ни треба некој од НАТО и ЕУ да дојде и да не потсреди - YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7bWZnG_KGs&ab_channel=MAKFAX (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

of a snail”²⁶. Moreover, criticism received from the EU is never contested, with Zaev once stating that his government “dutifully accepts all suggestions [in the March 2020 progress report], which will help us become better and more successful”²⁷. Finally, even the exceedingly rare criticism *towards* the EU is cautiously phrased and cushioned by simultaneous praise. For instance, when expressing his “disappointment” in March 2021 with the EU’s failure to provide COVID-19 vaccines to North Macedonia, Zaev was quick to add that “the EU has helped us a lot this past year through cheap loans”²⁸.

Overall, by placing all hopes for the future of the country in EU membership, North Macedonia’s leading two political actors often relegate themselves to the role of facilitators of the EU accession process, rather than executive leaders of a sovereign country. Thus, the Eurofundamentalist portrayal of EU membership might constitute an extreme manifestation of a potentially broader East European phenomenon, where “the more confidence that imitators [politicians in EU candidate member states] have in those they imitate [the EU], the less confidence they have in themselves” (Krastev & Holmes 2020: 11).

The EU-related discourse in Serbia: Euroopportunism

Creating a symbolic façade of “Europeanness”

In a Euroopportunistic discourse, the symbolic façade of “Europeanness” operates somewhat differently from its Eurofundamentalist iteration, while at the same time assuming an equally central role. For instance, the “imitation game” notion discussed with regards to North Macedonia does *not* apply to Serbia, as superior public trust in the national government over

²⁶Macedonian Information Agency (2021) ‘Пендаровски за МИА: ЕУ е единствената насока, не можеме да мислиме само на профит, нам ни требаат и политичкото искуство и демократските вредности’, МИА. Available at: <https://mia.mk/pendarovski-za-mia-eu-e-edinstvenata-nasoka-ne-mozheme-da-mislime-samo-na-profit-nam-ni-trebaat-i-politichkoto-iskustvo-i-demokratските-vrednosti/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

²⁷Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (2019) *Премиерот Заев за извештајот на Европската Комисија: Го добивме најпозитивниот извештај со чиста, безусловна, препорака на Европската комисија за почеток на преговорите за членство, Влада на Република Северна Македонија*. Available at: <https://vlada.mk/node/18008> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

²⁸Luxemburger Wort (2021) *Nordmazedonien-Premier Zaev: „Wir sind durchaus verbittert“*, Luxemburger Wort - Deutsche Ausgabe. Available at: <https://www.wort.lu/de/international/nordmazedonien-premier-zaev-wir-sind-durchaus-verbittert-604f8db3de135b923656c7d2> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

trust in the EU prevents the replication of North Macedonia's belief in the indispensability of EU membership. This is not to suggest that EU membership is not a priority for Serbia. As discussed earlier, this country has been engaged in accession talks with the EU since 2014, with both President Aleksandar Vučić²⁹ and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić³⁰ constantly reiterating that there is no geopolitical alternative to Serbia's EU accession. However, the discursive portrayal of Serbia's commitment to EU membership assumes a dramatically different form.

In a country where EU-related sentiment is divided, the adjective "European" does not carry anywhere near the same symbolic appeal it does for North Macedonia. Hence, it is unsurprising that the notion of "laws with a European flag", for instance, does not exist in Serbia. This does not imply that laws, including ones modelled on the *acquis communautaire*, are never fast-tracked; in fact, European institutions have long criticized the country on this topic (GRECO 2018). Instead, rather than by constantly deploying the "European" label as a one-size-fits-all quality marker, the discursive demonstration of Serbia's "Europeanness" has been more subtle and overall less present in the national public discourse than in North Macedonia. Additionally, in even starker contrast to North Macedonia, this demonstration has sometimes sought to paint a picture of bolstering – rather than merely copying – "European" values and behaviors. This sub-section seeks to highlight this contrast by focusing on three illustrative (sets of) events for the demonstration of Serbia's "Europeanness" since 2017: the appointment of an openly gay prime minister in 2017, the staging of annual pride parades in Belgrade, and the inauguration of a gender-balanced government in 2020.

Following his victory in the 2017 presidential election, Vučić appointed the (formally) non-partisan, UK-educated and openly gay Ana Brnabić as his successor at the prime minister post³¹. Already in announcing his decision, Vučić adopted a distinctly opportunistic framing. As the news of a largely conservative government appointing a gay prime minister in a

²⁹Insajder (no date) Vučić i Hoti saglasni da kompromis nema alternativu, ali se ne slažu oko njegove sadržine, Insajder. Available at: [//insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/20919/](https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/20919/) (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

³⁰Danas (2021) *Brnabić: EU jedini put za Srbiju*. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/politika/brnabic-eu-jedini-put-za-srbiju/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

³¹B92 (2017) *President gives Ana Brnabic mandate to form new government*. Available at: https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?dd=15&mm=06&nav_id=101561&yyyy=2017 (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

relatively conservative country was making headlines around the world³², Vučić made an obvious effort to downplay the importance of Brnabić's sexual orientation. When asked about this aspect, he dodged the topic by stating that he was "only interested in what she can do [as prime minister]"³³, thus (deliberately) missing an opportunity to portray himself and his party as champions of the equal status of sexual minorities. Hence, Vučić's Euroopportunism accomplished two seemingly dissonant objectives of presenting a façade of progressiveness internationally (including with the EU) and preventing the potential alienation of his domestic support base by avoiding the explicit championing of an unpopular cause.

This two-pronged character of Serbia's Euroopportunistic discourse is also evident in Vučić and Brnabić's positions on the annual pride parade in Belgrade. Over the years, the Serbian government has invested extensive efforts in preventing violence during this event, possibly due to memories of the negative effect of several clashes during earlier iterations of the parade on the country's reputation³⁴. However, Vučić has been careful to distance himself from this event, such as by remarking in 2017 that he would not attend the parade because "there are more useful things I can do for Serbia"³⁵. While Brnabić has attended the parade regularly³⁶, she has also sought to portray Serbia as "no more homophobic than other countries", while maintaining the dubious premise of "not want[ing] to change people's thinking by law" in response to criticism of her refusal to push for the legalization of same-sex partnerships³⁷.

³²The Guardian (2017) *Serbia gets its first female – and gay – prime minister*. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/serbia-gains-its-first-female-and-gay-prime-minister-ana-brnabic> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

³³Danas (2016) *Vučić: Ne zanima me da li je nova ministarka gej, hoću rezultate*. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/politika/vucic-ne-zanima-me-da-li-je-nova-ministarka-gej-hocu-rezultate/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

³⁴Associated Press (2010) *Serbia police clash with far-right rioters at gay pride march*, *the Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/10/serbia-police-rioters-gay-pride> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

³⁵N1 (2017) *Parada u septembru, poziv Vučiću da stane na čelo kolone*. Available at: <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a283199-Parada-u-septembru-poziv-Vucicu-da-stane-na-celo-kolone/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

³⁶Glas Amerike (2017) *Brnabić na Paradi ponosa: Srbija poštuje različitosti*. Available at: <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/brnabic-na-paradi-ponosa/4032490.html> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

³⁷Balkan Insight (2017) 'Brnabić Denies Serbia Has Homophobia Problem', 28 July. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/07/28/brnabic-denies-serbia-has-homophobia-problem-07-28-2017/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

Using the LGBTQ+-related attitudes and policies of the government as his case study, the scholar Koon Sloomaeckers has described Serbia's approach to EU accession as "tactical Europeanization", or "an act of compliance to communicate to the EU a readiness to Europeanise by aligning oneself with certain 'European norms'" (Sloomaeckers 2017). On the one hand, designating LGBTQ+ rights as "European" is itself problematic, given the wide range of divergence on this issue among EU member states³⁸. However, the reluctance of the Serbian government to legalize same-sex partnerships and champion LGBTQ+ rights in its rhetoric suggests that the appointment of a gay prime minister might have been driven by a pragmatic expectation to score political points in Brussels. This assumption is bolstered further by Serbia's explicit effort to boost its international reputation by winning the race to host the continental Europride in 2022, beating Barcelona, Lisbon and Dublin in the process³⁹.

The latter determination to not only embrace values and practices perceived as "European", but also portray an image of embodying these values and practices *better* than countries that are already "European" (by virtue of their EU membership) is also exemplified by Serbia's gender-balanced government. In October 2020, Prime Minister Brnabić was (re)inaugurated as the head of a government where eleven out of 23 ministers are female⁴⁰. While still Euroopportunist, this third example of a European façade in the Serbian discourse differs dramatically from the previous two. With gender equality being presumably deemed a much less contentious topic than LGBTQ+ rights, Vučić was quick to credit himself with "[having] personally asked the prime minister to ensure gender balance in the new government⁴¹.

Thus, Euroopportunism enabled the government to attract the desired response both domestically and internationally in all three cases, even though it assumed domestic attitudes to be favorable in the latter and unfavorable in the first two. The flexibility of this discourse allows the government to gravitate between explicit and subtle embraces of different

³⁸Pew Research Center (2019) 'Where Europe stands on gay marriage and civil unions'. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/28/where-europe-stands-on-gay-marriage-and-civil-unions/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

³⁹N1 (2019) *Beograd izabran za domaćina EuroPrajda 2022, N1*. Available at: <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a527830-Beograd-izabran-za-domacina-EuroPrajda-2022/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁴⁰BBC Serbia (2020) *Poznat sastav Vlade Srbije: Žene na čelu deset ministarstava, Vulinu policija, Stefanoviću odbrana*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-54682823> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁴¹Ibid

progressive causes based on their expected (lack of) resonance with the domestic population. In all three cases, however, the government was able to (at least symbolically) bolster its “European” credentials. The importance that these discursive efforts hold for the government was perhaps best embodied by Brnabić’s statement upon her (re)inauguration, when she boasted of Serbia being “at the top of the world in terms of the number of women in politics”⁴². This highlights once again one of the key objectives of Euroopportunism, which seeks to portray its exponent(s) as being *more* European than most, rather than being “European, too”. In doing so, Serbia’s Euroopportunism constitutes a (perhaps) softer form of what is a common EU-related posture among other East European politicians with questionable democratic credentials, not least Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and his oft-repeated declaration that “we are the future of Europe” (Krastev & Holmes 2020: 30).

Presenting an unrealistic timeframe for EU accession

In terms of the kind of timeframe for EU accession that it anticipates in front of the public, Serbia’s Euroopportunism is considerably similar to North Macedonia’s Eurofundamentalism, although these similarities have partly faded in the face of changing circumstances in the EU accession process. Most importantly, however, unlike in North Macedonia, the relatively similar tendency of downplaying the length of the EU accession process has not resulted in inflated expectations among the population about the timeframe for obtaining EU membership.

In June 2020, Vučić expressed the belief that Serbia would finish accession talks with the EU by 2024 and become a member by 2026⁴³. This timeframe is unlikely, partly for the reasons discussed earlier with regards to North Macedonia, but also based on the current pace of Serbia’s accession talks, as the country has closed merely two of the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* after seven years of accession talks⁴⁴. Moreover, the pace of the talks has

⁴²N1 (2021) *Brnabić: Srbija u svetskom vrhu po broju žena u Skupštini i Vladi*. Available at: <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/brnabic-srbija-u-svetskom-vrhu-po-broju-zena-u-skupstini-i-vladi/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁴³Danas (2020) *Vučić: Srbija članica EU do 2026. godine*. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/politika/vucic-srbija-clanica-eu-do-2026-godine/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁴⁴European Commission (2016) *Serbia, European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations - European Commission*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

been slowing over the years, with no new chapters being opened in 2020⁴⁵, keeping Serbia's total tally of opened chapters at 18. Yet, this unpromising reality has not prevented Vučić from presenting a highly optimistic accession timeframe, which has featured consistently in his statements on this topic, including a 2015 promise of achieving EU membership by 2020⁴⁶.

However, while its portrayal of an accession timeframe is very similar to the one in North Macedonia's Eurofundamentalism, Serbia's Euroopportunism does not allow for the kind of oversimplification of the EU accession process commonly observed in its southern neighbor. In a 2019 statement, Vučić conceded that even the recognition of Kosovo, whose unresolved status constitutes a major obstacle to Serbia's EU accession, would not translate into immediate membership. This recognition of the complexity of the EU accession process, while basic, is nonetheless sufficient to distinguish Euroopportunism in this regard. Its distinctiveness is further reflected in the much more tempered expectations about the EU accession timeframe among the Serbian population. As mentioned earlier, in stark contrast to North Macedonia, only 11% of Serbs nurture unrealistic expectations of EU membership by 2025 (Balkan Barometer 2020: 41). Thus, even though Serbia's discursive portrayal of the EU accession timeframe is often inflated, it paradoxically ends up producing inflated expectations of EU accession only among a small minority of the population.

Overall, the examination of the type of EU accession timeframe presented in Serbia's Euroopportunistic discourse highlights once again the importance of analyzing the different layers of the EU-related discourses in their mutual interplay, as the effects that each of these individual layers exercises on the public would seem counterintuitive if treated independently. The paradoxical lack of inflated EU membership expectations observed in this sub-section might be attributable to Serbia's Euroopportunistic framing of the *importance* of EU membership. This in turn constitutes the starkest (and most important) difference from North Macedonia's Eurofundamentalism, as EU membership is portrayed extremely lukewarmly within Serbia's Euroopportunism.

⁴⁵BBC Serbia (2020) *Zašto stoje pregovori Srbije i Evropske unije*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-55171343> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁴⁶Novosti RS (2015) *Vučić: Srbija u EU do 2020. godine!*, *NOVOSTI*. Available at: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:541621-Vucic-Srbija-u-EU-do-2020-godine> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

Downplaying the importance of EU membership

In contrast not only to the exaggerated emphasis on EU membership in North Macedonia's Eurofundamentalist discourse, but also to the well-documented, value-driven aspiration for a symbolic "return to Europe" (Lindstrom 2003) observed in many East European countries since the fall of socialism, Serbia attaches moderate importance to EU membership. When asked in October 2019 about the importance of EU accession for Serbia, Vučić responded in a distinctly opportunistic fashion, citing the close trade ties between Serbia and the EU and noting that "it is always better to be inside the club than outside"⁴⁷. On the same occasion, Vučić argued that Serbia's sentimental conception of "Europe" is not only weak, but insofar as it is present, it might even be working against the cause of EU membership, as "the Serbian people like better those who did not recognize Kosovo and did not bomb us [during NATO's military intervention against Belgrade in 1999]".

A similar attitude was expressed by Vučić even more succinctly during an English-language interview in January 2020, when he stressed that he was "not jubilant" about the EU⁴⁸, which also reveals consistency between his unfriendly rhetoric towards the EU at home and abroad. This trend was accelerated at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Vučić, in response to the EU's inability to provide medical aid to Serbia, described European solidarity as a "fairytale on paper"⁴⁹. In March 2021, the trend culminated in the aftermath of an *ad hoc* European Parliament report criticizing Serbia's anti-corruption and rule of law efforts, to which Vučić responded by describing the parliamentarians as being "lost in time and space"⁵⁰.

The desire by the Serbian government to discursively position itself in the EU accession process as a sovereign state with unique national interests (which, *for the time being*, are

⁴⁷N1 (2019b) *Vučić: Ako će neko biti sledeća članica EU, to je Srbija*. Available at: <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a534874-vucic-ako-ce-neko-biti-sledeca-clanica-eu-to-je-srbija/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁴⁸Euronews (2020) *Serbia president 'fed up of being lectured' over ties with Russia*. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/21/serbia-president-vucic-fed-up-of-being-lectured-over-ties-with-russia-and-china> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁴⁹Euractiv (2020) 'Serbia turns to China due to "lack of EU solidarity" on coronavirus', 18 March. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-turns-to-china-due-to-lack-of-eu-solidarity-on-coronavirus/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁵⁰AP (2021) *Serbian leader blasts EU report on corruption, rule of law*, AP NEWS. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/europe-kosovo-serbia-aleksandar-vucic-china-2eb20f68fa1906dc17e5c1b8e6f758fd> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

compatible with EU membership), rather than as a path-dependent EU candidate member, is also visible in its reactions to the regular EU progress reports. A series of defiant statements over the years from both Vučić and Brnabić suggest that their government has sought to reject the very premise behind the progress reports, i.e. the EU's authority to evaluate Serbia's democratic performance. In May 2019, Brnabić described what was then the latest progress report as "somewhat subjective", while adding sarcastically that she was "amused, not annoyed" by the report, which, in her view, abounded with "political[ly motivated] assessments"⁵¹. With regards to the same report, Vučić pointedly remarked that it was important not to treat "every word [in these reports] as the Bible"⁵², which echoes a later statement about being "fed up with being lectured"⁵³ by Brussels. Moreover, in October 2020, when responding to the most recent EU progress report on the country, Vučić reiterated that he was "only accountable to the Serbian people", thus implicitly dismissing the EU's assessment as irrelevant. On the same occasion, he also accused the EU of bias by sarcastically asserting that "what they fault me for is my close relationship with Russia and China, my decision to purchase "Pancir" [Russian missile system]", thus attributing any negative assessment by the EU of his *domestic* governance to his foreign policy, which he believes is unpopular with Brussels.

Overall, the lukewarm stance by the Serbian government towards EU membership is the most distinguishing feature of its Euroopportunistic discourse. Here, Euroopportunism manifests itself on two levels. First, it becomes prominent in the strictly pragmatic portrayal of Serbia's EU integration, with EU membership being depicted as merely one component of the broader strategic calculus of the country, which must not be achieved at the cost of conceding any authority to the EU in evaluating Serbia's democratic performance. Second, the gradual hardening of an otherwise consistently lukewarm discursive stance towards the EU signals an opportunistic portrayal of EU membership *over time*. The fading prospects for future EU

⁵¹N1 (2019a) *Brnabić: Izveštaj Evropske komisije delimično neobjektivan*. Available at: <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a487658-brnabic-izvestaj-evropske-komisije-delimicno-neobjektivan/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁵²Al Jazeera (2019) *Vučić: Izveštaj Evropske komisije generalno pozitivan, Al Jazeera Balkans*. Available at: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2019/6/10/vucic-izvestaj-evropske-komisije-generalno-pozitivan> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁵³Euronews (2020) *Serbia president 'fed up of being lectured' over ties with Russia*. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/21/serbia-president-vucic-fed-up-of-being-lectured-over-ties-with-russia-and-china> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

enlargement over the last few years have prompted a (partial) discursive shift in Serbia that has not been observed in North Macedonia. Back in April 2018, when EU accession seemed more imminent, and when the EU's assessment of the country was more favorable, Brnabić did not hesitate to float the 2018 EU progress report as a confirmation of the positive performance of her government. In Serbia's fluid Euroopportunist discourse, Brnabić's description of this report as "reflective of the current picture in Serbia, with all its virtues and flaws"⁵⁴ would appear distinctly obsolete today. The fact that Euroopportunism is heavily shaped by the political climate has resulted in inconsistent rhetoric towards the EU over time.

Eurofundamentalism and Euroopportunist: Possible Ways Forward

Having examined the development of these two discourses over the past three and a half years, this paper proposes several predictions about the future impact of these discourses on the following three aspects of Macedonian and Serbian politics: (1) quality of governance; (2) the popularity of the national governments; (3) pro-EU public sentiment.

Eurofundamentalism

As demonstrated above, Eurofundamentalism largely views EU accession as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Like in some previous candidate members, neglecting the fact that EU membership is, at best, an "*instrument* for the achievement of development goals and national interests" (Maldini 2016: 26; emphasis added), rather than an automatic generator of those objectives, can produce serious issues for the quality of domestic governance. Paradoxically, Eurofundamentalism provides two mutually exclusive dangers for the quality of governance. If EU membership is obtained quickly, Eurofundamentalism risks transforming any milestones in this process into substitutes for good governance by complacently equating the political process of EU accession with the substantive process of democratic consolidation. On the other hand, if the EU accession process stalls, Eurofundamentalism risks crowding out any genuine motivation for domestic democratic consolidation. In the Eurofundamentalist discourse, the latter objective is framed as

⁵⁴Danas (2018) *Brnabić: Izveštaj EK slika stanja u Srbiji*. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/politika/brnabic-izvestaj-ek-slika-stanja-u-srbiji/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

attainable only through EU membership, whose potential unavailability could thus undermine public confidence in the very possibility of continued democratization.

The implications of Eurofundamentalism for the future popularity of Zaev's government are more difficult to predict. If accession talks are finally launched and EU accession proceeds at a stable pace, Eurofundamentalism could help Zaev perpetuate his status of the best conduit of North Macedonia's EU accession. However, if the launch of accession talks is delayed further, which seems increasingly likely amidst the ongoing dispute with Bulgaria, Eurofundamentalism could paradoxically hurt its very champion by causing (undeserved) political damage to Zaev's government over a stalled political process largely outside of its control. An early glimpse of this danger could be observed in the aftermath of France's veto for the launch of EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania in October 2020. Trapped by his own discursive equation of progress in the EU accession process with government performance, Zaev felt compelled to take responsibility for the negative decision by the European Council and call an early election halfway through his term in office⁵⁵. As the prospects of membership recede, staking one's political fortunes in the EU accession process could prove politically costly even in a strongly pro-EU country. The possible duration of the relatively unexpected blockade by Bulgaria, let alone its effects on the popularity of Zaev's government, are still uncertain. Should the blockade persist, Zaev's government might struggle to preserve its already shaky popular approval. Over half of Macedonians believe, partly in conjunction with Zaev's own Eurofundamentalist framing, that the prime minister is incapable of delivering domestic reform without the external incentive of EU accession⁵⁶.

Finally, the impact of Eurofundamentalism on pro-EU sentiment can be expected to be highly negative regardless of the pace of EU accession. Interestingly, there is currently no indication of such a trend, as pro-EU sentiment has remained largely stable (IRI 2020; IDSCS 2021) in

⁵⁵Balkan Insight (2019) 'North Macedonia Prime Minister Calls for Snap Elections', 19 October. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/19/north-macedonia-prime-minister-calls-for-snap-elections/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁵⁶MCMS (2021) *Граѓаните се сомневаат во капацитетот на властите за спроведување реформи без надворешен притисок* - Macedonian Center for International Cooperation. Available at: <https://mcms.mk/en/news-and-publicity/news/2285-gragjanite-se-somnevaat-vo-kapacitetot-na-vlastite-za-sproveduvanje-reformi-bez-nadvoreshen-pritisok.html> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

face of the two recent blows to North Macedonia's membership prospects (France and Bulgaria's respective blockades of the launch of accession talks). However, this paradox can be attributed to the unrealistic expectations about the EU accession timeframe discussed in detail in this paper. Citizens might feel undeterred by recent setbacks due to their (erroneous) belief that accession can nonetheless be completed within five years. However, judging by the experience of the last successful candidate member, Croatia, pro-EU attitudes tend to decline as the accession process progresses (Štulhofer 2006: 146), as unrealistic expectations about the speed of accession are increasingly shattered. North Macedonia might already be seeing an early sign of this trend. Opinions about the EU (as opposed to support for membership) have deteriorated, with almost half of Macedonians (44.6%) in December 2019 describing the EU's attitude towards their country as "pretentious and arm-twisting" (2019: 15), as opposed to a mere 30.3% feeling the same way before the French blockade. For a discourse so exclusively focused on EU membership, any future declines in pro-EU sentiment would certainly constitute the clearest failure of North Macedonia's Eurofundamentalism.

Euroopportunism

Like North Macedonia's Eurofundamentalism, albeit in a distinctly different form, Euroopportunism poses a major danger to the quality of governance in Serbia. The reputation of a wise statesman balancing between different global centers of power that Euroopportunism has helped Vučić nurture over the years has already been enabling his government to deflect attention from its domestic shortcomings. As mentioned earlier, Serbia has been experiencing a free fall in most international democracy indexes. However, this form of "foreign policy for domestic consumption" seems to have paid strong domestic dividends, with Vučić's party, SNS, currently enjoying a supermajority in the Serbian parliament after receiving an all-time-high number of votes⁵⁷ in the 2020 parliamentary election⁵⁸. While the successes of SNS are also attributable to other factors beyond the scope of this paper, it is

⁵⁷Balkan Insight (2020) 'Serbia President's Party Scores Landslide in Election Boycotted by Opposition', 21 June. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/21/serbia-presidents-party-scores-landslide-in-election-boycotted-by-opposition/> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

⁵⁸The election was boycotted by most opposition parties, which resulted in a near-total sweep by SNS, as only two other parties (with the exception of small parties representing ethnic minorities), including SNS' long-term coalition partner, entered the Serbian parliament.

reasonable to assume that the foreign-policy bravado portrayed in Serbia's Euroopportunism has served as a major contributing factor.

Of course, even on the foreign-policy front itself, Serbia's image of geopolitical balancing might be illusory. For instance, its relations with Russia, a country with strong historical and cultural ties to Serbia, have been marred by several squabbles in recent months amidst changing political circumstances that fall outside of the scope of this paper. However, as demonstrated compellingly by Tena Prelec in her study of Serbia's relationships with non-Western powers (2020), Vučić's "balancing act" is ultimately focused on promoting his own "winning narrative", regardless of the specific foreign power used to conjure this image. Thus, Vučić's Euroopportunism is meant to anchor his own portrayal as a conduit of strong, albeit pragmatic and ultimately expendable, international relationships. Moreover, despite its erratic and often inflated nature, the multidimensionality of Vučić's geopolitical balancing does occasionally produce policy results, such as the successful procurement of COVID-19 vaccines from Russia and China⁵⁹. In contrast to North Macedonia's Eurofundamentalism, Serbia's Euroopportunism can be expected to benefit the future popularity of its exponent.

Finally, unlike in North Macedonia, it is difficult to speculate about the future direction of pro-EU sentiment in Serbia. This difficulty is mostly down to the unclear goals of Euroopportunism in this regard. As shown earlier, Vučić's optimistic yet relatively tempered rhetoric on Serbia's EU accession timeframe has mostly kept unrealistic expectations at bay. Given Serbia's maintenance of a nominally pro-EU orientation *and* its increasing rhetorical bellicosity towards Brussels, one can assume that Vučić's government would prefer preserving the status quo of divided EU-related attitudes. With pro-EU sentiment hovering around 50% relatively consistently in recent years, this may be achievable, but it might require a shift in Serbia's Euroopportunism towards a more enthusiastic posture vis-à-vis the EU. Otherwise, support for membership is likely to drop, especially if Serbia's EU accession process continues to slow down, as Euroopportunism (in its currently bellicose form) would be ill-equipped to cushion the growing disappointment that would emerge among the pro-EU layers of the population.

⁵⁹Financial Times (2021) EU move on vaccine exports puts Serbia's leader on edge. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/285bc936-4041-4623-aaea-e20e5d66b2f2> (Accessed: 22 April 2021).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the similarly protracted EU accession processes in North Macedonia and Serbia have been accompanied by dramatically different EU-related discourses by their governments, which are nonetheless likely to prove similarly harmful to pro-EU sentiment *and* the quality of governance in these countries. In conceptualizing these discourses as Eurofundamentalism and Euroopportunism, this paper has shown that EU-related discourses (at least in these two countries) are much more heavily influenced by local political actors and public sentiment towards the EU than by the formal structure of the EU accession process. An obvious possibility for future research would be to test whether North Macedonia's Eurofundamentalism can be observed in other strongly pro-EU countries in the region, such as Albania and Kosovo, or whether Serbia's Euroopportunism might also be present in other countries with ambivalent EU-related sentiment, such as Montenegro. Another fruitful research direction would be to prioritize approaches that award more agency to local dynamics, as this paper has helped highlight the limits of the "stabilitocracy" notion and other EU-focused analytical frameworks of the Europeanization of the Western Balkans.

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