

STRENGTHENING RELATIONS BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA AND THE EU THROUGH THE PRISM OF COOPERATION WITH THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE AND THE SERBIAN ARMED FORCES

The Republic of Serbia officially started negotiations for membership in the European Union on 21 January 2014, at the first International Conference in Brussels. On that occasion, the decision of the Council of Europe to start the accession process made on 28 June 2013 came into force

Jelena Andjelkovic

Researcher and Project Coordinator, Center for geostrategic research and terrorism (CeGRT), Belgrade, Serbia

The Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Serbian Armed Forces (SAF) represent important factors in the accession process of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union (EU). In accordance with their missions and tasks, the MoD and the SAF make a great effort to support the strengthening of relations between official Belgrade and Brussels, according to the field within which they perform their duties. As part of the negotiation process, members of the MoD and the SAF participate in negotiations in twenty-two opened chapters, which best demonstrates the importance they have in this process. Additionally, the trust that the institutions in Brussels have gained in the Ministry of Defense and the Serbian Army is not only reflected in the fact that they are part of the Serbian negotiating team but also in the fact that they actively cooperate in the field of international military cooperation through several different levels. The most significant of these is certainly taking part in international peacekeeping missions under the EU flag. Such activities on this level have been possible since 2012, when the forces of the Republic of Serbia, in accordance with the advanced process of achieving the goals of the “Stabilization and Association Agreement,” are engaged in missions on the African continent. However, special progress can be seen since 2013, when the EU made a decision to of-

ficially grant Serbia the status of a candidate for membership in the European Union.

Negotiation Process and Legal Framework

The Republic of Serbia officially started negotiations for membership in the European Union on 21 January 2014, at the first International Conference in Brussels. On that occasion, the decision of the Council of Europe to start the accession process made on 28 June 2013 came into force, as a result of years of thorough work on achieving the goals of the previously mentioned “Stabilization and Association Agreement” from 2008.

As part of the negotiations, a total of thirty-five chapters with different topics such as financial supervision, public procurement, science and research, education and culture, entrepreneurship and industrial policy, intellectual property rights, economic relations with foreign countries, free movement of capital, etc., were presented to the official Belgrade. During the decade-long accession process, the negotiating teams of the Republic of Serbia managed to open various chapters within the framework of six clusters. Since March 2020, the admission process has used this system (which divides

chapters into classes) whereby chapters 34 (Institutions) and 35 (Other Issues) remain undivided and will be discussed in the final phase of this process.¹

Members of the Ministry of Defense and the SAF are active participants in the negotiation process. The current role was preceded by a stable negotiating position within the activities related to the fulfillment of the objectives of the “Stabilization and Association Agreement,” during which the MoD and the SAF participated in three of the seven subcommittees for stabilization and association, namely: the subcommittee for trade, industry, customs and taxes, the subcommittee for the internal market and protection of competition and the subcommittee for justice, freedom and security. Today, their contribution can be seen in two directions, the first of which is reflected in the fact that members of the MoD and the Serbian Armed Forces, as already mentioned, are active participants in the negotiations in twenty-two of the thirty-five chapters. This includes participation in meetings of negotiating groups and meetings of explanatory and bilateral screening, performing an analytical review and assessment of compliance of the regulations of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia with the legal acquis of the European Union.

In accordance with its strategic goals and negotiating chapters and tasks, the institutions of the Republic of Serbia, including the Ministry of Defense, have been given the task of harmonizing domestic legislation with EU laws. In accordance with that, the institutions participated in the implementation of the alignment of domestic legislative regulations with EU regulations through the “National Program for the Adoption of EU Acquis” - NPAA. The primary NPPA and the revisions of the plans for implementation of NPAA that have followed since 2013 foresee all obligations and planned deadlines that Serbia needs to realize in order to fulfill the criteria for EU membership. The last revised plan from October 2023 includes only one item under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense, and it implies the strengthening of administrative capacities. In accordance with that, it can be said that the Ministry of Defense has almost completely harmonized its legal regulations with the EU member states, with the fact that it pursues a policy of military neutrality.

In addition to the legislative agreement, the Republic of Serbia also shares the EU’s goals in the field of common foreign and security policy. This strategic commitment of the official Belgrade significantly improved its foreign policy position, and this had a positive effect on the position of the Republic of Serbia in international organizations² and contributed to it being recognized as one of the crucial partners in the Balkans.³ The legal framework for this cooperation was established by signing the “Agreement on Security Procedures for the Exchange and Protection of Secret Data,” which became active on

Members of the Ministry of Defense and the SAF are active participants in the negotiation process. The current role was preceded by a stable negotiating position within the activities related to the fulfillment of the objectives of the “Stabilization and Association Agreement,” during which the MoD and the SAF participated in three of the seven subcommittees for stabilization and association.

1 August 2012, as well as the Agreement between the EU and the Republic of Serbia on establishing a framework for the participation of the Republic of Serbia in EU crisis management operations. In addition, the legal basis was completed by the adopting of the “Law on the use of the Serbian Armed Forces and other defense forces in multinational operations outside the borders of the Republic of Serbia.” This law defines the concept of multinational operations, which include missions and tasks for the preservation of national, regional, and global security, namely operations to preserve, maintain and build peace, operations to prevent conflicts and establish peace, joint defense operations in accordance with defense regulations, operations to provide help to eliminate the consequences of international terrorism and terrorist attacks on a larger scale, as well as participating in humanitarian operations in the event of natural, technical-technological and environmental accidents on a larger scale and providing assistance in crisis situations.

With the entry into force of the aforementioned law, along with the implementation of the previously mentioned agreements, a legal framework was created for the involvement of members of the armed forces of the Republic of Serbia in missions and operations under the EU flag. Activities of training, selection, equipping, preparation, and deployment of individuals and units from the Ministry of Defense and the Serbian Armed Forces in multinational operations outside the borders of the Republic of Serbia are the tasks of the Center for Peace Operations, as part of the Operational Directorate J-3 of the General Staff of the Serbian Armed Forces. The main goals of the Center, before the previously mentioned ones, are monitoring, coordination, and control of the work and activities of engaged members, realization of seminars, courses, and workshops in the field of multinational operations, participation in the evaluation of the competence of units for multinational operations, issuance of certificates of competence for engagement, participation in drafting memorandums of

understanding, technical and other agreements regarding the engagement of the Serbian Armed Forces in multinational operations, etc.

Multinational Peacekeeping Operations under the EU Flag

By passing basic checks, training, and preparations through the activities of the Center for Peace Operations, members of the MoD and the Serbian Army are directed to perform tasks within the assigned missions. Cooperation with the EU is realized within the framework of the second mission of the Serbian Armed Forces, which includes participation in international military cooperation and participation in international peacekeeping operations. In the context of participation in multinational peace operations, four EU missions in which members of the MoD and the SAF participate are implemented on the African continent, two in Somalia and one each in Egypt and the Central African Republic. The activities of members of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Serbia in Somalia under the auspices of the EU are implemented through the peacekeeping operation EUTM Somalia (European Union Training Mission in Somalia) and the military operation EUNAVFOR Somalia (European Union Naval Force) - Operation ATALANTA.

The EUTM Somalia Peacekeeping Operation (EUTM-S) aims to strengthen the Somali Defense Forces by providing mentoring, training, and advice. This peacekeeping operation was established by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1872 in 2009 and EU Council Decisions No. 96 and No. 197 in 2010. EUTM-S is focused on increasing the expertise, efficiency, and credibility of the Somali security forces, despite the fact that they were initially based in Uganda for security reasons. Since 2015, the EUTM-S mission has moved to Mogadishu, where its center is still today. Members of the Ministry of Defense and the Serbian Armed Forces have been engaged in this mission since April 2012, when an officer of the Armed Forces was appointed to the position of the head of the medical service. The number of members of the contingent of the Republic of Serbia were increased already the following year when an entire medical team composed of one doctor and three medical technicians was sent, while in 2016 another doctor became a part of the team. The Republic of Serbia is the only country outside the EU that is an active member of this mission.

Another EU mission in which members of the Serbian Armed Forces are engaged is the EUNAVFOR Somalia mission - Operation Atalanta. This multinational naval military operation was established by the adoption of four Resolutions of the UN Security Council - 1814, 1816, 1838, and 1846. During its mandate, the mission



EUTM-S mission <https://www.mnop.mod.gov.rs/>

underwent changes in its primary tasks, so in 2022 it was decided that its executive tasks would be the protection of the World Program for the United Nations Food Program (WFP), identifying, preventing, and suppressing piracy and armed robbery at sea in the area of operation and disrupting the illegal trade in narcotics and arms. In addition to executive tasks, the mission is also required to implement non-executive tasks, such as contributing to the monitoring of drug and arms trafficking flows or providing support to other missions.⁴ Members of the SAF have been active in EUNAVFOR-Operation Atalanta since November 2011, when two river unit officers were sent for training on the French ship F 730 “Floreal.”

Officially, the contingent of the Serbian Forces joined the mission in 2013, consisting of two officers and one non-commissioned officer, reporting for duty at the Mission’s Operational Command in Northwood, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The number of members of the Serbian contingent increased in 2017 when four additional officers joined the mission, but that number was reduced to three in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. During the decade of active contribution to the mission, members of the Serbia Armed Forces were engaged in the tasks of staff officers, in addition to the Operational Command in Northwood, UK, and as part of the Operational Command of the mission in Rota, Spain. In addition, the Serbian forces were engaged in the command of the forces of Operation



*A contingent of the Republic of Serbia in the military mission EUNAFOR Somalia - operation ATALANTA
<https://www.mnop.mod.gov.rs/>*

Atalanta on the Spanish ship “Castile” and the Italian ship “Carlo Margotini.” Members of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Serbia participate also in the mission with an autonomous team for the protection of ships. The mandate of the mission has been extended until December 2024, after which the extension of the mission will be considered again.

In addition to the activities in the missions and operations in Somalia, the Serbian Army also participates in the EU military mission for the training of the security forces of the Central African Republic - EUTM RCA. This EU mission was established by UN Security Council Resolution 2016/610/CFSP in April 2016. Representatives of the Serbian Army joined it only a few months later, in December 2016, consisting of a level 1 medical team and a two-member emergency medical team. The fact that since 2017 the medical service has been headed by an officer of the Serbian Armed Forces and the members of the Ministry of Defense and the Serbian Armed Forces act as advisors to the mission commander, speaks of the contribution that the Serbian forces make to this mission. The primary task of the contingent of the Republic of Serbia in the mission in the Central African Republic is to provide primary health care

to members of the mission and ambulatory treatment in accordance with standard operating procedures, and if necessary, to engage in emergency medical interventions and training of the security forces of the Central African Republic.

“International Forces and Observers” is the name of the fourth EU mission in which the Armed Forces of the Republic of Serbia participate and is implemented in the Arab Republic of Egypt, on the Sinai Peninsula. The Army of Serbia is proud to point out that it is the successor of the former Yugoslav People’s Army, which had a tradition of activity in this region, from 1956 to

The strong relations between the EU and the MoD and the SAF are realized through the activities of the EU Military Committee, which is open to NATO members who are non-EU member states, as well as to candidate countries for membership in the Union.

The Republic of Serbia is equally engaged on the diplomatic level through the activities of its permanent mission to the European Union. As part of its tasks, this mission implements the foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia, which also includes maintaining contacts with EU bodies and other permanent representations of EU member states.

1967 it provided the mission with about 14,000 members in twenty-two rotations. Today, after returning to this mission in July 2023, an engineering unit of ten members was engaged in Sinai, which was sent to the mission with the aim of providing engineering and infrastructural support to the camp in the South Sinai region. Members of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Serbia are engaged under the operational control of the Commander of the forces, and according to operational tasks, in the contingent of the United States of America.

International Military Cooperation - European Defense Agency and the EU Military Committee

In addition to participating in multinational peacekeeping operations, the Serbian Armed Forces, as part of its second mission, maintains ties with the EU and in the field of international military cooperation. In addition to the previously mentioned concept of joint foreign and security policy, the connection is also realized through cooperation with the European Defense Agency, with which the “Administrative Agreement on Cooperation” was signed in 2013. This agreement established a framework for cooperation and possible participation in projects and programs that could support the further development and improvement of domestic industry, the capacities of domestic research and development institutes, as well as the modernization of the SAF.

The strong relations between the EU and the MoD and the SAF are realized through the activities of the EU Military Committee, which is open to NATO members who are non-EU member states, as well as to candidate countries for membership in the Union. It is of particular importance to point out that within the committee meeting held in 2016, it was agreed to sign the “Technical Agreement” for the accession of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Serbia to the HELBROC battle group. This EU battlegroup aims to support EU missions and operations in crisis situations. In this way, the Republic of Serbia additionally strengthened its position as a

trusted partner of the official Brussels outside the EU itself, which also helped develop bilateral relations with EU member states, both through the framework of military-to-military and within the framework of military-technical cooperation. In this context, it is important to note that the Republic of Serbia had significant purchases from EU member states, such as the Republic of France, during the previous years.

Military Diplomacy of Brussels and Belgrade

From the perspective of Serbia, as a country that has the status of a candidate for membership, taking into account all the above, significant progress has been made compared to the beginning of the negotiations. However, this does not mean that official Brussels did not take steps to strengthen relations with official Belgrade. On the contrary, by establishing the first military delegation in Belgrade, the EU showed that the Republic of Serbia is a willing collaborator in the field of preserving peace and stability in the Western Balkans region. In this way, the representative of the diplomatic department in charge of military affairs and cooperation joined the EU mission in Serbia. With that, official Brussels once again showed that the Western Balkans, and especially the Republic of Serbia as a key actor, is in its sphere of interest. Thus, in the diplomatic sense, the European Union has positioned itself as an important political entity in the Republic of Serbia, despite the fact that almost all its members have their military delegations in Belgrade. In addition, it was made clear that official Brussels strives to strengthen its position in the field of military cooperation, as well as its general image in public opinion.

The Republic of Serbia is equally engaged on the diplomatic level through the activities of its permanent mission to the European Union. As part of its tasks, this mission implements the foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia, which also includes maintaining contacts with EU bodies and other permanent representations of EU member states. When it comes to contacts in the field of military representation, it is carried out through the Military Representation of the Republic of Serbia to NATO, which is entrusted with the task of achieving military cooperation with the European Union. Within the mentioned mission, the Office of the Serbian Army and the Office of Defense, both located in Brussels, are very active.

Potential Challenges – Multiple Perspectives

However, such multi-layered and multi-year cooperation between the institutions in Belgrade and Brussels was put to a special test by the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Serbia, as a candidate for

membership, was expected to impose sanctions against the Russian Federation, within the framework of harmonization with the standards of common foreign and security policy. However, political elites in Belgrade believed that the decision should be postponed, which was certainly not well received by Brussels. Additionally, the situation is complicated by the introduction of a moratorium on military exercises for more than two years now, as long as the conflict itself. Although such moves by Belgrade are in line with the policy of military neutrality pursued by the Republic of Serbia, it cannot be said that it is in line with the strategic goal of joining the EU. Although the official Belgrade insists on sovereign decisions, Brussels reacts negatively to them, which is supported by the frequent mention of possible sanctions against the Republic of Serbia.

In that case, it could potentially cause multiple negative consequences on both sides. In the military sense, the moratorium would certainly be continued, without the possibility of any changes, as was the case during June 2023 with the “Platinum Wolf 2023” exercise. This would significantly affect the level of development of interoperability among international forces which during exercises similar to the one mentioned above are preparing for participation in multinational peace operations and missions around the world. In addition, it is clear that such decisions by Brussels would have a consequent impact on EU member states that have bilateral cooperation with the Republic of Serbia, especially in the field of military-technical cooperation. This, especially in this year - the year of elections for the European Parliament - would have a negative impact on the stability of the EU institutions.

The fact that such decisions would also call into question the cooperation achieved by other institutions of the security sector, namely in the field of the fight against organized crime, the fight against irregular migration, drug trafficking, and the fight against terrorism with institutions such as EUROPOL. Maintaining such cooperation outside the scope of

sanctions is equally important for the security of the citizens of the European Union and the security of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia.

From the point of view of the position of the EU in the public opinion in Serbia, the introduction of sanctions would significantly degrade its position, which, regardless of the progress made in the accession process during the previous years, is in decline. According to the available data from various public opinion polls, the Serbian Armed Forces is one of the three institutions most trusted by the citizens of Serbia. Therefore, it is clear that this would have an extremely negative impact on the position and atmosphere in which the accession process would take place.

From the perspective of official Belgrade, the situation is not much different. By disrupting relations, the economic situation would be significantly shaken, since the EU is the largest foreign trade partner of the Republic of Serbia.

However, for now, it seems that there will be no introduction of sanctions, and the cooperation that has been developing over the past decade could continue. This is supported by the possible joining of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Serbia in the EU mission in Mozambique. In addition, the implementation of bilateral cooperation with EU member states in all forms of military cooperation could certainly be further improved, which would further help strengthen the negotiating position of officials from Belgrade.

In the end, it can be concluded that the cooperation achieved by the Ministry of Defense and the Serbian Armed Forces with the institutions of the European Union is of essential importance for the development and progress of the negotiation process for admission to EU membership. In the previously mentioned connections and contacts of the two parties, it can be seen that they are strong and stable, regardless of political decisions, with a view to realizing further progress.

Endnotes

- 1 The Ministry of European Integration deals with general issues and division into clusters, coordination, monitoring, and reporting in connection with the process of accession and accession to the European Union; coordination of accession negotiations with the European Union and the work of bodies established for the purposes of negotiations; directing the work of the Negotiation Team for conducting negotiations on the accession of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union and providing mandatory instructions and instructions, in accordance with the Government's policy; analytical support to the work of the Negotiation Team, etc; more available at <https://www.mei.gov.rs/>
- 2 Primarily in the United Nations and its other institutions;
- 3 With special reference to the bilateral cooperation that the Republic of Serbia achieves with EU member states, especially in the field of military-military, military-technical, and military-police cooperation;
- 4 It especially refers to other civilian missions of the EU.