



STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION FOR THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

PREDNOSTI I NEDOSTACI EVROPSKIH INTEGRACIJA REPUBLIKE SRBIJE

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Abstract

European integration represents the process through which European states are connected through legal, social, political, industrial, economic, and cultural associations. This is achievable with the help of the European Union and its regulations. Member countries support the values of the European Union and believe it is necessary to expand and strengthen European standards. European integration as a process strengthens the economy and encourages progress, guarantees market competition, and controls large companies, while at the same time protecting consumers and reducing the cost of living. In addition, it works to protect the environment and promote education, research, and culture. All of this can be summarized under the strengths that characterize the European integration process. On the other hand, among the weaknesses, one can mention the loss of independence, national identity, and the money transfer from developed to less developed countries. The Republic of Serbia is a candidate for membership in the European Union, and this paper aims to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the European integration of the Republic of Serbia through theoretical frameworks and empirical research.

Sažetak

Evropske integracije predstavljaju proces putem koga se vrši povezivanje država u Evropi na osnovu pravnog, društvenog, političkog, industrijskog, ekonomskog i kulturnog udruživanja. To je ostvarivo pomoću Evropske Unije i njenih propisa. Zemlje članice podržavaju vrednosti Evropske unije i smatraju da je neophodno širenje i jačanje evropskih standarda. Evropske integracije kao proces jačaju ekonomiju i podstiču napredak, garantuju tržišno nadmetanje i kontrolišu velike kompanije, ujedno štite potrošače i smanjuju troškove života, pored toga rade na zaštiti životne sredine, promovišu obrazovanje, istraživanja i kulturu. Sve to se može podvesti pod prednostima kojima se odlikuju procesi evropskih integracija. Sa druge strane među nedostacima se mogu navesti gubljenje samostalnosti, gubljenje nacionalnog identiteta, prelivanje novca iz razvijenih u manje razvijene države. Republika Srbija je kandidat za članstvo u Evropskoj Uniji, a ovaj rad ima za cilj da analizira prednosti i nedostatke evropskih integracija Republike Srbije putem teorijskih okvira i empirijskog istraživanja.

Keywords: European integration, strengths, weaknesses, Republic of Serbia

Ključne reči: evropske integracije, prednosti, nedostaci, Republika Srbija

Introduction

The choice of every country on the European continent is to join the European Union voluntarily. Accession to the European Union brings with it certain rules to which all member states adapt, and the European integration processes ensure that each country adapts based on its own economic, political, cultural, social, and industrial characteristics. In the modern world, which is faced with globalization and several challenges, it is necessary to focus on development cooperation, foreign policy, the world economy, protection against climate change, and others. Although the member countries are very diverse and under the influence of various crises, the cooperation of the states and mutual collaboration must solve crises and take proactive action against external threats, the opportunities should be used in the market.

The European Union emphasizes its values, such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, which are the essence of the European way of life. At the same time, the European Union invites all democratic countries to join it and attracts them with a successful market economy and stable democracy. The European Union member states entrust independent institutions to represent the interests of the European Union as a whole, their interests as member states, and the interests of their populations.

European integration and membership in the European Union represent the national interest and strategic determination of the Republic of Serbia, and this country supports and cherishes the values of the European Union, even though it is not yet its official member. The Republic of Serbia views the process of accession to the European Union as an incentive for reforms in many areas of functioning while simultaneously strengthening European standards. The European Union as a trade and investment partner is important for the economic stability of the Republic of Serbia.

This paper aims to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the European integration of the Republic of Serbia, considering that the Republic of Serbia signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union, which confirmed the membership perspective and regulated the mutual relations of the two parties. The results of the research on the respondents' opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of the European integration topic in the Republic of Serbia were used, to draw conclusions about the population's opinion about the accession of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union.

European integration during the 21st century

European integration represents the product of the selective association of national sovereignty, and jurisdiction over the body politic by post-war European nation-states [1]. In this way, the European Union was formed as the most successful experiment in international cooperation in modern history. The theory of European integration initially focused on the construction of supranational institutions. Since it is considered that the European Union as an "experiment" has succeeded, it is now possible to move towards further integration with other European countries that are not included in the European Union. The emphasis during the 21st century is that European integration brings increased benefits arising from common economic interests and provides a model for establishing an even more secure supranational foundation [2].

During the year 2024, the politicization of European affairs and the constant growth of unstoppable conflicts were observed. European integration is currently focused on the legislative process regarding the green agenda, future enlargement of the European Union, defense policy, and its own resources (natural, industrial, and human) [3]. At this moment, the member states and institutions of the European Union have assumed new and renewed existing obligations to preserve and protect population rights, especially the rights of people on the external borders of the European Union and members of marginalized communities.

The leaders of the European Union and the creators of European integration have adopted a five-year plan that directs the future direction and goals of the European Union for the period from 2024 to 2029. European integration and the new geopolitical reality emphasize the importance of investing in peace, security, stability, and progress on the European continent. European integration encourages reform efforts regarding the rule of law, regional integration, excellent relations between neighboring countries, reconciliation, and dispute resolution between two or more European countries.

The European Union presented the Growth Plan for 2024-2027, which includes six billion euros in grants and loans for social acceleration and economic accession to the European Union. To accelerate the process of enlargement and economic growth, the goal of European integration for the Balkan countries is to enable partner countries to intensify reforms and investments.

European integration for the period from 2024-2027, for the Balkan countries, is based on four foundations:

1. Strengthening European integration with the single market of the European Union,
2. Strengthening economic integration through a common regional market,
3. Acceleration of fundamental reforms, and
4. Increasing financial assistance to support reforms through reform and growth instruments.

European integration has a huge potential that can double the economies of the countries in the Balkans in the next ten years (until 2034). European integration, through a combination of reforms and investments, enables countries in the Balkans to benefit in key areas of the market where there is free movement of goods, services, and employees, where there is a unique area where all payments are made in euros (transport, energy, digital market).

The European Union and its members are prepared to open up, prevent, and overcome challenges. In this way, they contribute to the resilience of European democracy and the mutual trust of the member states. Since 2023, member states have improved their institutional environment for a more successful fight against corruption, including increasing resources for law enforcement, prosecution, and the judiciary. In the candidate countries, as the Republic of Serbia and other countries in the Western Balkans, legal and institutional arrangements have been strengthened. It is necessary to further enhance the investigation and prosecution of corruption cases. In the aforementioned candidate countries, important reforms were undertaken, among others at the constitutional level, to strengthen the independence of the judiciary and the quality of the judicial systems. However, additional work is necessary, especially in areas related to the functioning of self-governing bodies of the judiciary and the appointment of judges, which are particularly important for the Republic of Serbia. At the same time, further measures are needed to strengthen preventive frameworks, such as those governing lobbying conflict of interest and asset reporting rules, and to ensure effective investigations and prosecutions in corruption cases. In 2024, several member states still have concerns about the independent management or financial stability of public media services, the transparency of media ownership, the right to access public documents, and the transparent and fair distribution of state advertising. Member States continued to improve the quality of their legislative processes and to involve stakeholders in them. Some Member States have strengthened the status and resources of national human rights institutions, ombudsmen, and other independent bodies. However, in 2024, challenges still exist in some member states, such as the excessive application of accelerated legislation drafting procedures, while in the candidate countries, there are still challenges in the systematic treatment based on the recommendations of the Ombudsman and other independent bodies [4].

Strengths and weaknesses of european integration for the Republic of Serbia

The Republic of Serbia's path to membership in the European Union is taking place through the Stabilization and Association Process. The main goal of this process is to enable the Republic of Serbia to implement the political and economic transformation needed for progress in the process of joining the European Union. The determination of the Republic of Serbia to join the European Union requires the definition of key strategic directions for both economic and social development, with the ultimate goal of creating a stable and efficient market system for an economy that is competitive and capable of facing competition within the framework of the European Union [5]. The essence of European integration and the basic task of the Republic of Serbia is the establishment for a healthy market environment and the management of investments and consumption. To achieve competitiveness and enable the Republic of Serbia to be a competitor in the European Union market, it is necessary to establish a development strategy based on the real exchange rate on the market and the liberalization of foreign trade exchange [6].

During the 21st century, the Republic of Serbia entered a new period of democracy, rule of law, and respect for institutions. In addition, there is a lot of room for improvement in the rule of law, because there are certain problems related to adequate legal regulation and the functioning of the political system. The highest priority of European integration also emphasizes the democratization of society in terms of security policy, military reform, ensuring free and fair elections, regulating the independence of the judiciary, and sanctioning bribery and corruption. All this stems from legislative reform. [5]. Harmonization of the laws and regulations represents harmonization with the laws of the European Union and enables the domestic economy of the Republic of Serbia to be attractive to European and world investors for investments. The legal security of the Republic of Serbia may grow following European integration. If the standards are not reached, the Republic of Serbia cannot become an equal member state of the European Union, and the economy, businessmen, and population of the Republic of Serbia will be at a loss.

During the 21st century, the European Union has played a major role in the economic and political sense, so progress is ensured in all areas for its member countries. The European Union represents the foundation of democracy, political stability, and security [7]. Among the strengths of European integration and joining the European Union for the Republic of Serbia the following can be mentioned [8]:

1. European integration encourages growth, employment, and prosperity. Better coordination of economic policy at the level of the European Union helps to solve unemployment problems in potential member countries such as the Republic of Serbia. The European Union provides loans for small and medium-sized enterprises and is particularly oriented and favorable towards enterprises that invest in the future. The single market of the European Union functions as a stimulus due to cross-border trade, without customs duties, so the population is provided with a more affordable price. The past few decades have seen improvements in competitiveness, economic growth, and greater prosperity, so the Republic of Serbia, as a potential member, should take advantage of this;
2. European integration stimulates economic recovery and supports less developed regions of Europe, which includes the Republic of Serbia - poorer regions affected by structural changes receive support from the European Union in order to keep pace with more developed regions and compensate for the weaknesses arising from their position. Funds from the European Union are used to help the population raise their standard of living and find suitable jobs because they encourage not only urban but also rural development, as well as innovation and research;
3. Through European integration, the European Union stands for fair trade with other parts of the world - thanks to trade agreements, companies enter new markets, increase profits, and create jobs, while the population also feels the benefits of such trade. The stable trade policy of the

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- European Union also includes trade protection instruments, given that only fair trade is also free trade. Through European integration, and following the rules of the World Trade Organization, several instruments have been developed to fight against dumping and unfair competition, which would benefit the Republic of Serbia;
4. Through European integration, the European Union largely supports farmers and rural development. Financial assistance includes funds that represent a necessary factor for the realization of income for small and medium-sized agricultural farms, as well as for farmers in underdeveloped areas such as the Republic of Serbia. In addition, a third of the total direct payments are conditional on requirements for environmental protection;
 5. Through European integration, various market manipulations are suppressed and large fines are foreseen. Large companies are prohibited from exploiting their leading position in the market thereby eliminating competition, as this prevents market competition and harms consumers. The money collected through fines flows into the budget of the European Union, and in this way, the tax obligations and contributions of taxpayers are reduced. This situation would suit the Republic of Serbia to a great extent;
 6. Through European integration, excellent measures are taken in the fight against tax evasion. The European Union offers member states and potential members such as the Republic of Serbia instruments for a more effective fight against this problem. In addition, the common consolidated corporate tax base should ensure that companies cannot reduce their profits artificially or transfer them to another EU member state to reduce their tax obligations;
 7. Through European integration, banks are supervised in such a way that the European Union has established a banking union that makes financial institutions safer and protects savers and taxpayers, and has two foundations:
 - - The European banking supervisory body which centrally supervises 130 leading financial institutions of the eurozone and ensures that national supervisory bodies do not overlook their institutions; and
 - - If a bank goes bankrupt, it will be taken care of by the competent EU body at the central level, following precisely defined rules. In this way, panic among the citizens of the member states is prevented;
 8. Through European integration, the goal of the European Union is to establish a European space without internal borders within which the free flow of goods, people, services and capital is possible. Such liberalization of the single market encourages progress and sustainable development of the economy, which represents a great strength for the Republic of Serbia when it joins the European Union;
 9. As the European Union has high standards as far as food is concerned, European integration has set rules that regulate food labeling. In addition to food, the European Union has introduced other unique quality marks, such as the well-known CE mark or logo for organic products. Thanks to this, consumers make an informed choice when purchasing;
 10. European integration puts pressure at the global level to improve environmental protection and set ambitious goals for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, which are partly responsible for global warming. The European Union is leading the transition to a low-carbon economy by reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030. Clean air is one of the basic objectives of the European Union's environmental protection policy. The European Union has determined the limit values of pollutants, which must be respected by all member states to protect the health of citizens and these values have been set as a goal for countries that want to join the European Union, such as the Republic of Serbia;
 11. European integration enables the population to enjoy the right and freedom to choose the country in which to study, work, or retire. That right is an integral part of the contract with the European Union and is designated as freedom of movement for workers, freedom to establish a company, and freedom to provide services. Each member state is obliged to treat the citizens of the European Union equally to its nationals in terms of employment, social protection, and taxation;

12. European integration does not only refer to politics and the economy, but also includes the cultural sector. The goal of European integration is to promote cultural diversity, support artists in their creativity and encourage cultural exchange. In addition, Europe is the absolute world leader in the field of culture. Nowhere in the world are there so many cultural monuments under the protection of UNESCO. The European Union has also established a label of European heritage, which is awarded to places of special importance for the history or ideals of the unification of Europe. The Republic of Serbia can boast of many natural and anthropogenic attractions that have not been protected by UNESCO.

A special enlargement process called the Stabilization and Association Process is applied to partners from the Western Balkans, including the Republic of Serbia as previously mentioned. The partners currently involved in that process are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and the Republic of Serbia. The goal of this process is for the partners to become politically and economically stable enough to be ready for accession to the European Union. The European Union intends to help the Republic of Serbia by providing financial assistance, by providing easy access to the markets of the European Union, and encouraging cooperation between neighboring countries. The European Commission recently adopted a new growth plan for the Western Balkans. That plan aims to prepare partners from the Western Balkans for accession through economic reforms and investments and enable the population in the region to feel the benefits of membership in the European Union [9].

In addition to the above, it is important to note that with more than three billion euros in grants over the past two decades, the European Union is the largest donor in Serbia and the main partner in supporting development and reforms. The European Union is Serbia's largest foreign trade partner. About 65% of Serbian exports last year went to member countries of the European Union, and more than half of the total import of goods to Serbia came from the European Union [10].

Given that there are not only strengths of European integration when talking about the Republic of Serbia, it is necessary to mention the weaknesses as well:

1. Smaller and inefficient companies will have to leave the market to more successful and organized companies, but at the same time it is necessary to have a state policy that will protect national interests and prevent globalization [5];
2. Financial crisis - the Republic of Serbia could not avoid negative economic trends that are present in all societies undergoing transition [11];
3. Skepticism among citizens of member states regarding enlargement. The growth of Euroscepticism can also be understood in light of the difficult economic situation felt across the continent. These are serious problems and long-term, systematic solutions have not been found by the European Union itself [11];
4. Membership costs - the process of harmonization with the standards and regulations of the European Union implies significant costs for the implementation of the necessary reform, such as the adjustment of legislation and the improvement of infrastructure [12];
5. Loss of state independence and national identity is one of the fears faced by potential members of the European Union, given that it enhances supranational interests.

In addition to the mentioned key shortcomings of European integration for the Republic of Serbia, the following can also be said [13]:

1. Economic disparities can hinder the social and economic relationship between the members of the European Union, with an emphasis on different degrees of political and economic development. These differences can lead to regional imbalances and a disruption of mutual solidarity;
2. The allocation of resources by the European Union, which leads to an increase in prices and an oversupply of goods and services, so economic policy reform and a better distribution of resources are necessary;
3. undermining the system of social protection and economic growth, to maintain fiscal discipline;

4. free movement and the impossibility of limiting migration;
5. Environmental pollution, although the European Union emphasizes the implementation of environmental policies and places emphasis on sustainable growth and development;
6. Challenges of competitiveness in the world market that require adjustments to improve the economic position and adapt to global changes.

Given that the Republic of Serbia intends to become a full member of the European Union and supports European integration, it is currently in the process of closing certain chapters. Unfortunately, COVID-19 and the world crisis it produced have led to stagnation when talks about the accession of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union are discussed. Predictions based on the Enlargement Strategy predict that the Republic of Serbia will not be able to fulfill the requirements for accession by 2025 [14].

Research on respondents' attitudes on european integration

The empirical research relied on previously conducted research on the topic of citizens' attitudes toward the process of accession of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union and the strengths and weaknesses of European integration. The results published in 2019 show that the support for the European Union membership was 53% and that 39% of respondents had a positive association with the European Union. As strengths of European integration, the interviewees mentioned: opening up more opportunities for employment, the path to a better future for young people, and the possibility of travelling freely to the member states of the European Union. The negative effects on the Serbian economy and the loss of national identity [15] were cited as shortcomings of European integration regarding the accession of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union. The results published in 2022 show that support for membership in the European Union was 35%, significantly less than in 2019. In the same survey, respondents cited the following strengths of European integration: passport-free travel and space without borders, better standards of living, and free trade. Respondents cited the following weaknesses of European integration: higher borrowing, new rules and restrictions on the development of the Republic of Serbia, and a different (worse) value system [16].

A total of 206 respondents from the territory of the Republic of Serbia, who filled out the questionnaire from May to July 2024, took part in the survey on respondents' views on European integration. The demographic structure of the respondents can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic structure of respondents

Question	Answer	N	%
Gender	Male	111	53.88
	Female	95	46.12
Education	Elementary school	6	2.91
	High school	53	25.73
	Bachelor's	93	56.15
	Master's/ PhD	54	26.21
Age	Till 20 years	13	6.31
	21-30 years	73	35.44
	31-40 years	63	30.58
	41-50 years	25	12.14
	Over 50 years	32	15.53
Place of living	Village	103	50.00
	City	103	50.00

Source: Author's calculation

The largest number of respondents are male (53.88%), having completed high school or university (56.15%), and are between 21-30 years old (35.44%). The number of respondents living in the village and the city is the same (50.00%).

In the second part of the questionnaire, the respondents evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of European integration related to the Republic of Serbia (with grades from 1-5, where 1 is the lowest grade and 5 is the highest grade). The responses of the respondents can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Strengths of European integration for the Republic of Serbia

Claim	MV	SD
Better and faster economic development	3.32	1.19
The higher standard of living for people	3.76	1.04
Getting to know the cultures and religions of other peoples better	3.47	1.17
Better employment opportunities	3.02	1.21
Better and higher quality education	2.36	1.19
Better military protection	3.62	1.29
Greater opportunities to travel and make friends	3.39	1.18

Source: Author's calculation

Respondents believe that the greatest strength of European integration to the Republic of Serbia is the higher standard of living of people, with an average score of 3.76 out of 5. At the same time, the respondents state better and higher quality education as the least strengths, with an average score of 2.36 out of 5.

Table 3. Weaknesses of European integration for the Republic of Serbia

Claim	MV	SD
It threatens the national identity	3.30	1.26
It violates the sovereignty of the state	3.15	1.29
It increases the possibilities of economic exploitation	3.21	1.13
It makes the country dependent on developed European countries	3.01	1.23
It limits the economic development of the country with standards and measures	3.56	1.04

Source: Author's calculation

As the biggest shortcoming of European integration when it comes to the Republic of Serbia, the respondents state that standards and measures limit the economic development of the Republic of Serbia with an average score of 3.56 out of 5. The smallest shortcoming is the dependence of the Republic of Serbia on developed European countries with an average score of 3.01 out of 5.

When the obtained results are compared with the results from the research conducted in 2022, it is concluded that there is no correlation between the results of this and the previously conducted research. In 2022, the higher standard of living had one of the lowest ratings when it comes to the strengths of European integration, while in 2024 it had the highest average rating. During 2022, greater opportunities for travelling and making friends as well as better employment opportunities were listed as the leading benefits of European integration.

As with the strengths, there is a difference in the answers related to the weaknesses of European integration. During 2022, the Republic of Serbia's dependence on developed European countries was listed as the biggest drawback, which was listed as the smallest drawback in 2024. In 2022, endangering the national identity and violating the sovereignty of the Republic of Serbia were listed as the least significant weaknesses, while in 2024 it was the limitation of economic development of the Republic of Serbia by standards and measures.

The last question was related to whether the respondents advocate for the membership of the Republic of Serbia in the European Union. Out of the total number of respondents, 81 respondents (39.32%) are for the membership of the Republic of Serbia in the European Union, while 125 respondents (60.38%) are not for the membership of the Republic of Serbia in the European Union. If these results are compared with the results from 2022, it can be seen that 35% of respondents advocated for the Republic of Serbia joining the European Union, 38% were against it, and 27% of respondents abstained. In this research, the respondents were not allowed to abstain.

Conclusion

European integration brings numerous benefits so the respondents are in favor of the membership so the Republic of Serbia could use them on its path of growth and development. Stable politics and a political environment along with the creation of a stable economic environment that guarantees European integration, can help the Republic of Serbia achieve its economic, social, and political goals. In addition, Europe and the entire area of the European Union allow the population to work, live, travel, and culturally rise unhindered, which are also advantages of economic integration that the Republic of Serbia should take advantage of.

The shortcomings of European integration can negatively affect the Republic of Serbia and its desire to join. By conducting regular research, providing better information and education, as well as initiating various discussions, it is possible to contribute to the understanding of the importance of European integration, the process the Republic of Serbia joining the European Union, and the strengths and opportunities that membership can bring. This is a long-term positive change for the Republic of Serbia and its legal, social, political, industrial, economic, and cultural growth.

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