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Serbia's PM says country willing to take its share of refugees

Country outside EU ready to take asylum seekers as part of continent-wide solution

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by: [Neil Buckley](#), Eastern Europe Editor

Even though Serbia is outside the EU's borders, its prime minister says it is prepared to do something many EU neighbours are refusing to do: take a "quota" of refugees as part of a continent-wide solution to the migrant crisis.

Aleksandar Vucic, whose country sits astride the [main migrant transit route](#), says European states should agree to take up to 2m genuine asylum-seekers, then share them out fairly.

"That's nothing for Europe," the Serbian premier told the Financial Times in London this week, noting such a figure equates to less than half a per cent of the EU population. "It's not a big deal. It can even create new value economically."

At the same time, Mr Vucic said the EU should pour more help into improving conditions in countries around conflict-torn Middle Eastern states, and strengthen its borders. Otherwise, Europe risked being overwhelmed by migrants from even further afield — and already faced an [imminent new upsurge](#) once spring weather arrived, he warned.

Why would someone suffer in Sudan ... when they can easily reach Paris or London?

Aleksandar Vucic

"Every single guy in the world has or shares a smartphone, and they know that it is a better life in Britain, France or Germany than in Morocco, Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq," Mr Vucic said. "You will have sub-Saharan countries very soon. Why would someone suffer in Sudan ... when they can easily reach Paris or London?"

Yet while such a continent-wide solution might have been possible earlier, too many states and politicians had instead chosen a "xenophobic" reaction. It might now be too late, Mr Vucic warned.

Such words might seem rich from a man with a nationalist past during the post-Yugoslav wars. He was an information minister under Yugoslav strongman Slobodan Milosevic, and a one-time associate of Vojislav Seselj, currently awaiting a verdict on war crimes charges at The Hague.

But Mr Vucic, an intense, quietly-spoken figure with flashes of acid humour, has [reinvented himself as a pro-European](#), leading Serbia's bid for EU membership as deputy premier, and — since 2014 — as premier. He has acknowledged past "mistakes", saying his personal journey is one many Serbs can identify with.

After war delayed its post-communist transition, Serbia is still struggling to establish a modern, competitive economy, though it looks more stable than

neighbours such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. Weak growth of 0.8 per cent returned last year, after three years of negative growth in the past six; unemployment is down from a 25 per cent peak, but still 17 per cent.

Opponents have criticised forthcoming elections called two years early by Mr Vucic — Serbia's third in four years — as a cynical move to capitalise on his current popularity, with his Progressive party already holding a parliamentary majority. They allege Mr Vucic has clamped down on opposition and media freedom.

Migrant flows: Western Balkans route



Mr Vucic dismisses such accusations as unfounded and insists he is seeking a new mandate to complete structural reforms and EU accession negotiations by 2020. An election, he contends, will also refocus Serbian politics on reform priorities after a distracting debate on whether the country should [move closer to western institutions, or to Russia](#).

“I wanted to cut [through] all these topics and say, ‘OK, now it’s your chance to create a government the people of Serbia would like to see,’” he says. “And I’ll go with my programme, which is to finish our EU homework before 2020. Then it will be up to EU countries whether they accept us or not.”

That timetable is ambitious but, Mr Vucic insists, achievable. Serbian EU membership would be a big step in cementing peace and democracy in the Balkans after [Croatia acceded in 2013](#) and Bosnia-Herzegovina this month [formally applied to join](#).

Serbia faced EU criticism after it [hosted Russian president Vladimir Putin](#) in 2014. Mr Vucic says it is natural for an Orthodox, Slavic country to preserve a “traditionally good relationship” with Moscow, but says the country’s geopolitical direction is set.

“We have a very clear policy. Our strategic goal is to be a part of European Union. That’s what I say everywhere ... even in Russia,” he says.

How did Moscow react? “They didn’t say anything. I don’t say they were jubilant.”

Unlike other recent EU entrants that all joined Nato first, however, Serbia intends to preserve military neutrality. Mr Vucic says priorities are shrinking the public sector, reforming state-owned enterprises, boosting investment and entrepreneurialism.

The EU’s image has been dented by the Greek debt crisis and its stumbling response to the migrant issue, Mr Vucic admits, and he sees the irony in Belgrade striving to join while one of the bloc’s biggest members — the UK — is [voting on leaving](#).

“[Many Serbs] say maybe the EU is not any more the best place in the world,” he says. “But I think the type of society we are striving to belong to is something very valuable for us. We will carry on with it.”

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