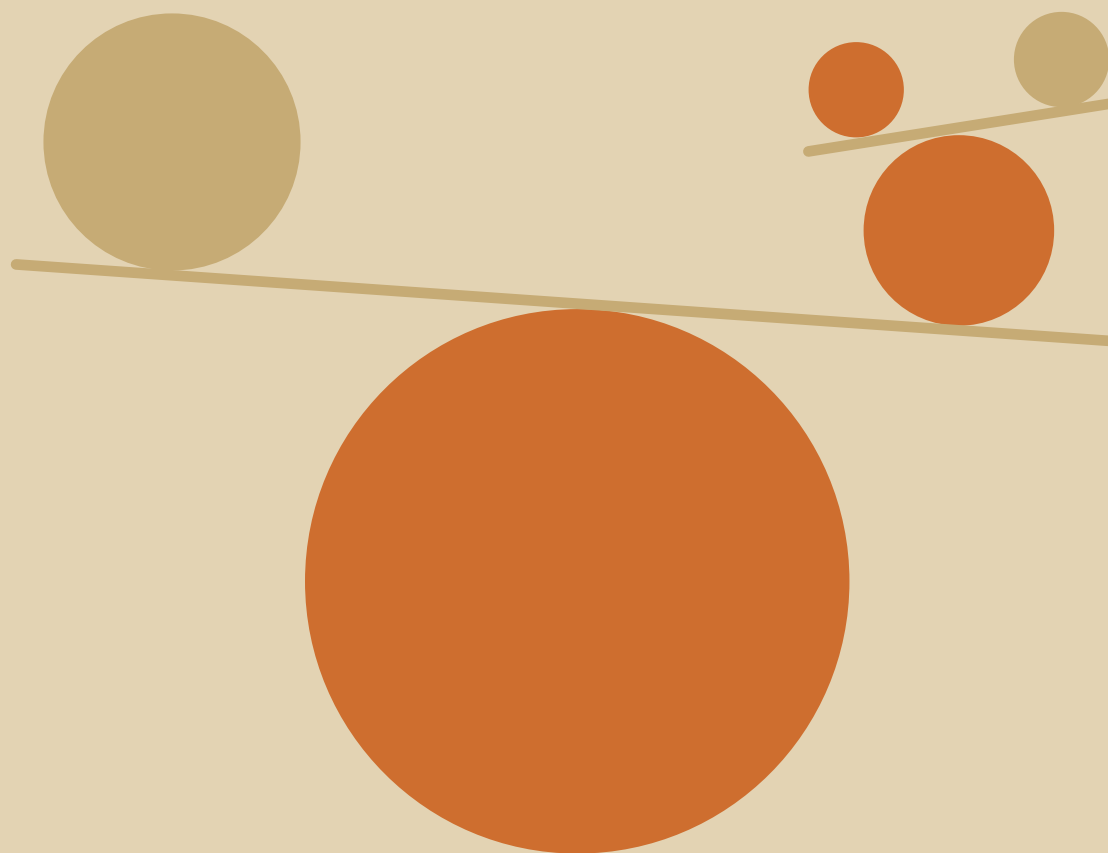


Instability in a Stabilitocracy

the significance of the
protests in Serbia

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INSTABILITY IN A STABILITOCRACY

the significance of the protests in Serbia

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Executive Summary

- The Serbian regime is experiencing one of its worst crises, which it has been unable to suppress or divert attention from, leading to a significant decline in President Aleksandar Vučić's popularity. If this trend continues, it could also mark the first cracks in the country's system of state capture.
- The student-led protests, triggered by the collapse of a canopy at the Novi Sad railway station in November 2024, have proven to be durable, well-organized with clear objectives, and long-lasting. They remain largely immune to the regime's usual tactics, including intimidation and violence, to diffuse them.
- Despite the protests persisting for more than ten months with steady and substantial support, the Serbian regime is reluctant to implement the demonstrators' demands. Snap parliamentary elections, which have become the main demand in recent months, are not a possibility, but even if elections are called, it remains uncertain whether they would lead to substantial changes in the country.
- Whether or not the protests lead to substantial changes, they are closely watched by neighboring countries—both their citizens and political elites—who face similar issues of state and institutional capture.
- International actors, particularly the EU and the USA, are hesitant to apply significant pressure on the Serbian government. The United States, instead, seems to provide a helping hand to the Vučić-regime instead. Although the European Commission's expectations regarding Serbia's EU reforms align with the protesters' demands, there is no genuine willingness or toolset to motivate or pressure Serbia effectively.
- Serbia is too important for the EU to be lost: given its geostrategic position and, more recently, rich soil in critical raw materials, the EU is forced to navigate a fine line when it comes to its sticks and carrots policy towards the Vucic regime.
- While President Vučić is perceived as a strongman, and despite international awareness of Serbia's anti-democratic system, Serbia continues to be characterized by "stabilitocracy", maintaining stability at the expense of democratic principles.
- Although the standoff between the protesters and the regime will persist, the regime seems to be stable enough to survive this crisis, albeit with a few deep wounds.
- However, a similar tragedy like the one in Novi Sad or further corruption-related scandals could potentially trigger a level of public dissatisfaction significant enough to warrant snap elections as the last resort.

As the protests against Aleksandar Vučić's regime are going on for more than ten months now, the Serbian regime is currently experiencing its most significant crisis in the post-2000 era. The [collapse of a canopy](#) at the Novi Sad railway station on November 1, 2024, which resulted in 16 deaths, triggered nationwide student-led demonstrations. These protests have since expanded to encompass a substantial portion of the Serbian population, reflecting a prolonged and escalating dissatisfaction with the government and President Vučić, especially concerning corruption, lack of political accountability, transparency, and, above all, state capture. While large-scale protests are not new to Serbia, the current movement stands out due to its remarkable durability, its independence from established political forces, and the government's inability to suppress it using its usual tactics, including violence.

The paper summarizes the current protests in Serbia, examining their root causes, demands, and expectations. It analyzes the evolving perceptions and popularity of the protests in contrast to the Serbian government and President Aleksandar Vučić. The unique characteristics of these demonstrations are explored to understand their essence and potential for success. Furthermore, regional and international implications are discussed, highlighting the importance of the Serbian protests for the broader Western Balkans (and Hungary), and how the Serbian regime's international reputation, particularly concerning its so-called multivectoral foreign policy, might shift in the eyes of its key international allies.

Context and Catalyst

The catalyst for the large-scale demonstrations was the collapse of the newly renovated concrete canopy at Novi Sad railway station on November 1, 2024, which claimed sixteen lives. This renovation is part of the controversial Belgrade-Budapest railway project, which had already faced [criticism](#) for its inflated costs, rising from €3 million to €16 million, and the closed-doors deals signed between the leaderships of Serbia, Hungary, and China. The tragic event acted as a catalyst for Serbia's largest anti-corruption and pro-accountability protests since the fall of Slobodan Milošević in the fall of 2000.

Protests erupted immediately after the tragedy, spearheaded by student organizations from the universities of Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, rapidly spreading to smaller towns and municipalities. By the end of 2024, daily symbolic traffic blockades, dubbed "Serbia, Stop", were being staged, along with blockades in higher education institutions, and ever-growing protests in major cities. In the months to follow, high school students and teachers, along with broad segments of Serbian society, joined the peaceful demonstrations. On December 22, the protests [peaked with over](#) 100,000 people gathering on the streets of Belgrade. The movement's popularity and resilience continued to grow in early 2025, culminating in another large-scale, peaceful demonstration in the capital on March 15 and June 28. These protests also saw the controversial [use of sonic weapons](#), and unjustified police brutality against peaceful demonstrators, further escalating social tensions. In the meantime, a new government was established on April 16, triggered by the resignation of prime minister Miloš Vučević on January 28.

The protests in Serbia have been uniquely massive and sustained, spreading to over 400 cities and towns across the country. The movement evolved from mourning and student vigils into a nationwide uprising involving diverse social groups; protests involved university blockades, daily traffic stoppages, and participation from students, farmers, workers, and citizens demanding government accountability for the tragedy and broader systemic corruption. While tragic, the Novi Sad accident exposed underlying issues of corruption, poor governance, and a lack of accountability and transparency, especially concern-

ing large infrastructure projects often linked to deals with China. While authorities [have indicted](#) over a dozen individuals, including former Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure Goran Vesić, widespread doubts still persist whether judicial proceedings would genuinely expose the alleged corruption behind the collapse. Compounding this, pro-government media continue to push unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, even [suggesting](#) the collapse was a terrorist act, a narrative dismissed by police and official investigations, further fueling public distrust in the government’s commitment to genuine accountability. As a consequence, the popularity of President Vučić and the SNS-led government has also shown a sharp decline according to a recent poll. 42% of Serbians outright reject the current government, with only 26.8% expressing full support. Nearly 40% said they never trusted Vučić, and another 12% reported losing trust in recent [months](#). Although Vučić’s support has been in decline for years (though he has remained the most supported politician), the ongoing protests cast a dark cloud over his general image. Dissatisfaction is even more striking when comparing trust/support in protesters and Vučić: almost 60% of citizens trust the students, while Vučić is trusted by only one-third of the population. In light of these polls, it is understandable that the regime wants to avoid calling for snap elections, not only to preserve its reputation but also to prevent losing even a small part of its grip on power.

Comparison of Vučić, Disapproval, and Opposition Support (2025)

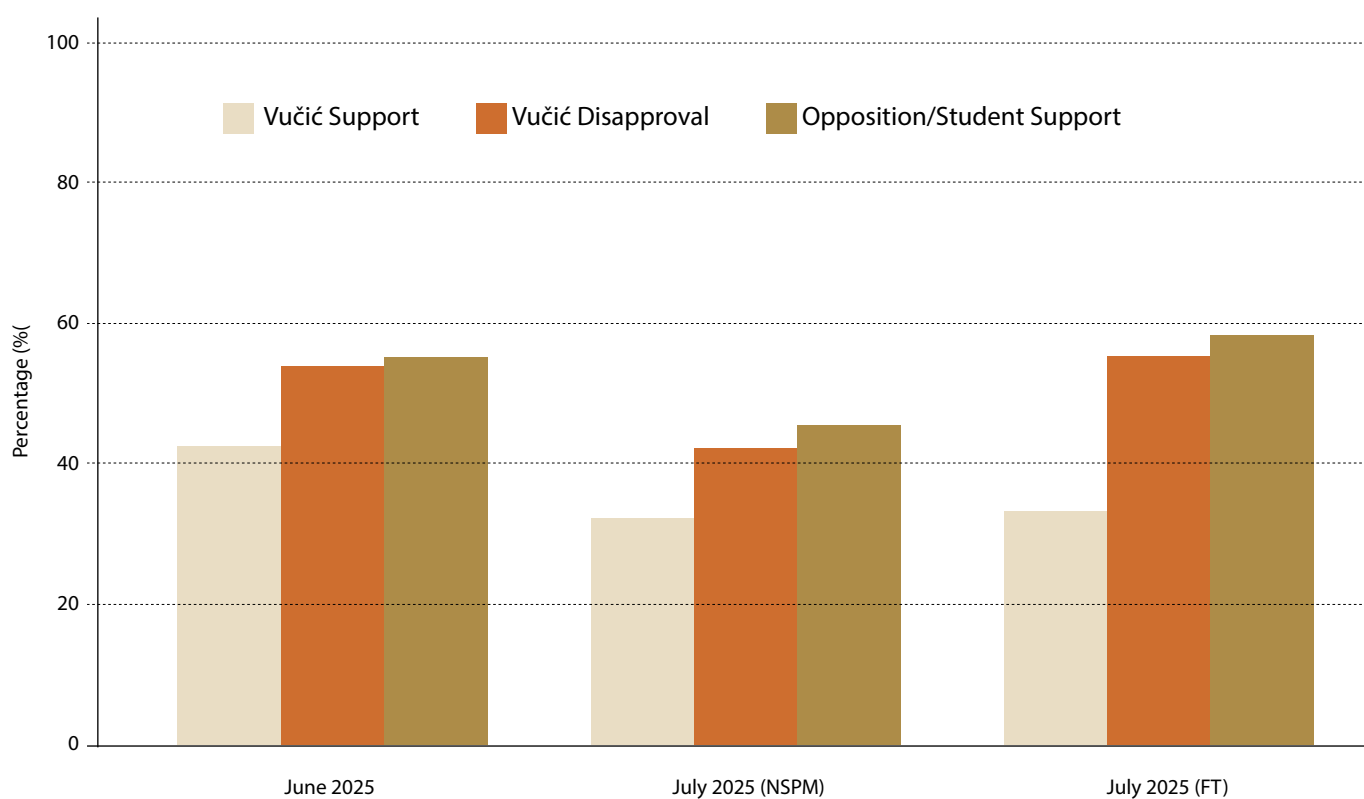


Figure 1: the Support of the Vucic-regime and its challengers according to different pollsters

Although the Serbian government and state officials initially attempted to downplay or partially address the tragedy only (i.e., publishing only a few documents related to the railway station’s renovation or issuing arrest warrants nearly ten months after the tragedy), they soon lost control over the narrative and the means of how such demonstrations can be handled. In addition, the emotional response was also profound, with one of the most widespread slogans, “Corruption kills”, underscoring society’s rec-

ognition that lives were indeed lost due to systemic political corruption. **No wonder that the government (and President Vučić in particular) has failed to address the protesters' demands effectively; as demonstrations have become a manifestation of deep-seated discontent with governance, political corruption, and a demand for democratic reform, every attempt to make amends with protesters would serve as first nails to the captured state's coffin.**

Durability and Uniqueness of the Protests

While Serbia has witnessed numerous demonstrations over the past decade, the ongoing protests exhibit remarkable resilience and resistance to traditional political maneuvering, smear campaigns by government-affiliated media, and even violence. What are the factors that make this wave of demonstrations durable and unique?

A key factor in the protesters' resilience is the absence of a single leader - that is more a strength than a weakness. This makes it difficult for politicians and government-affiliated media to discredit them, as there is no central figure to target. This leaderless structure also allows for flexibility and creativity in protest methods. However, individuals, particularly university staff and heads of student organizations, are not immune to smear campaigns and, at times, physical intimidation and violence.

So far, no politicians or political bodies are directly attached to the demonstrations, and no new political party or movement has yet emerged from them. Organizers have categorically rejected any cooperation or association with political parties, arguing that such involvement would hijack and sidetrack the protests and their demands. Moreover, it would provide the government and its media outlets with an easy target for discrediting the demonstrations by associating them with politicians. In preparation for possible snap elections, the search for the most suitable candidates to lead the electoral list is ongoing. However, the names of candidates, including the potential prime minister, have not been—and will not be—publicized until the President sets a date for early parliamentary elections. This tactic is used to mitigate the impacts of possible smear campaigns and to allow enough time for the student-led groups to thoroughly vet their candidates.

Demonstrations are able to reach a significant share of the Serbian population. Often perceived as protests primarily revolving around university students and staff, the demonstrations have quickly spread across all Serbian social strata. Their heterogeneous composition, encompassing intellectuals, farmers, and minorities from both urban and rural communities, makes it harder for the government to find an "effective strategy" to ease the volume of the protests or find half-solutions that would be acceptable for the entire community.

The government has actively employed its "usual tricks" in hopes that one of them, successful in the past, would discredit the demonstrations and protesters, and convince society that protesters seek violence. These tactics include labeling the demonstrations as potential "colorful revolutions" financed by unnamed Western powers, accusing neighboring countries (notably Croatia, Kosovo and Bulgaria) of supporting the protests, and even having pro-government/anti-protester supporters masked as university students (aged between 40 and 50) portrayed as "[real Serbian university students](#)". Violence against peaceful demonstrators, notably in Belgrade and Novi Sad, is not uncommon either; however, these attempts did only encourage further demonstrations.

Interestingly, protesters have drawn the international community’s attention to the fact that the ongoing protests **are not about** the “usual” geopolitical rivalries, great power competitions in Serbia or the country’s foreign policy posture. Instead, they are focused on demanding structural and long-lasting internal changes that are unrelated to the country’s foreign policy orientation and potential influences from abroad.

The greatest advantage of the protests lies in their well-defined demands for full political accountability, transparency, and structural changes. **Addressing systemic corruption that led to the Novi Sad tragedy and implementing democratic reforms to free institutions and ending media censorship are among the top demands.** The perception of corruption has somewhat increased over the last few years. Partial fulfillment of these criteria is deemed unacceptable and will not diminish the volume of protests, as has been witnessed in recent months

Corruption Perception Index (CPI) Scores 2012-2024

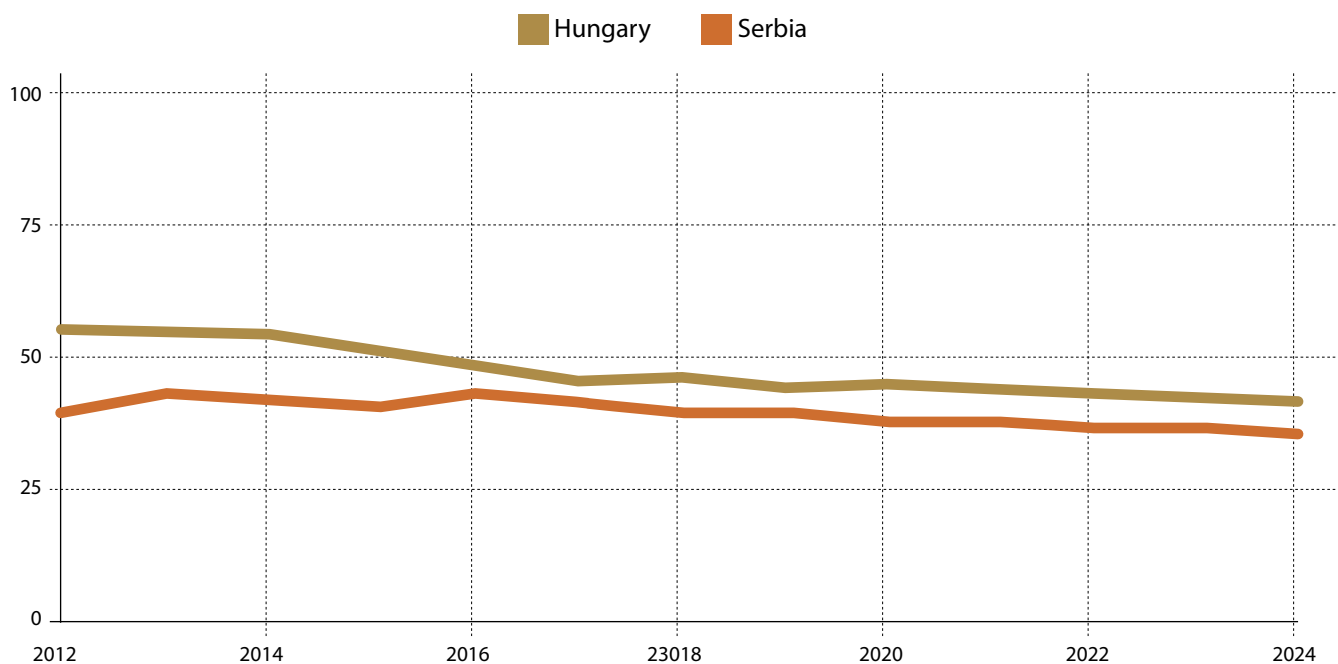


Figure 2: Transparency International: Corruption Perception Index (CPI).
The results are given on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean).

While initially focusing on accountability and systemic corruption, the protests have recently supplemented their demands **to include calls** for snap parliamentary elections, a shift from their earlier stance. This demonstrates a growing conviction among the protestors that the current government cannot meet their demands for justice and rule of law, necessitating a complete change in leadership. **Calling for early elections**, as discussed above, would potentially cause more harm than good for the regime, and **it is unlikely** that President Vučić would deem this option the most suitable one to maintain the regime’s power.

Polls conducted by CRTA confirm that support for the protests remains strong and steady: in February 2025, nearly two-thirds of the population (61%, compared to 64% three months earlier) supported the demonstrations. Furthermore, it is corruption that ranks as the country’s most pressing issue, alongside economic problems; this proves that citizens and protesters are aligned in terms of what they perceive as the most severe issues of Serbia – and with the enthusiasm of protests still stable and high, there is a clear demand for systemic reforms.

A major risk for the Serbian political elite lies in the demand for structural reforms, such as freeing the judiciary and media from political influence. If these conditions are met, the first cracks in the system carefully built and maintained by the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS) and Vučić himself, could emerge. This might, theoretically speaking, enable institutions to hold politicians accountable without political interference, potentially weakening SNS and Vučić's support. Moreover, as further chapters will detail, this would serve as a "good practice" for neighboring countries facing similar trends in anti-democratic practices, captured judiciary and media, and overarching political corruption.

Precedent and Past Protests in Serbia

Serbia has experienced numerous protests and demonstrations over the last decade, largely driven by growing concerns over political violence, widespread state corruption, environmental issues, and the erosion of the rule of law under President Vučić and the SNS. These past protests, despite their varying triggers, share some similarities with the ongoing student-led demonstrations in their underlying causes, yet most achieved little to no success.

Notable past protests include:

- 2016 Savamala (Belgrade Waterfront) protests: These demonstrations opposed the demolition of the Savamala neighborhood and highlighted political corruption. While they did not bring about immediate systemic change, they led to the emergence of a new political force out of the "Ne davimo Beograd" (Don't Let Belgrade Drown) organizing group.
- 2018-2020 "1 od 5 miliona" (1 of 5 million) protests: This was one of the longest-running series of protests in Serbian history, aiming to bring press freedom, highlight political corruption, and expose repressive measures employed by the system. While they did not lead to an immediate change of government or a full fulfillment of demands, they highlighted public discontent and strengthened opposition movements. The COVID-19 pandemic ultimately halted these gatherings.
- 2021-2022 "Ne damo Jadar" (We don't give up Jadar): Spearheaded by environmental and local groups, these protests opposed a large-scale lithium mining project by the Rio Tinto company. In a significant victory for the environmental movement, the Serbian government ultimately annulled all contracts with Rio Tinto for the Jadar project in January 2022. Protests continued, however, with demands for a moratorium on all boron and lithium exploration in the country.
- 2023 "Serbia against Violence" protests: Triggered by two mass shootings in and near Belgrade, these protests brought together diverse segments of society and lasted for several months. They led to the formation of the "Serbia Against Violence" opposition coalition, which later contested the December 2023 elections.
- 2023-2024 protests related to election fraud: These demonstrations, particularly concerning the Belgrade City elections, highlighted public dissatisfaction with electoral irregularities and accused the ruling political elites of wide-spread election frauds.

Regional Implications

If successful, the protests in Serbia could serve as an example for the rest of the Western Balkans and beyond on how to free up a captured state (and society). Given the region's interconnectedness through shared history, language, social media, and common socio-economic and political problems (e.g., political corruption, captured institutions, lack of transparency), the student-led protests across Serbia are being closely observed by citizens and politicians alike.

The Western Balkans is no stranger to various forms of demonstrations. The past few years have shown that people use demonstrations as a means to express dissatisfaction on various grounds, including discontent with the government, environmental issues, corruption, and in the wake of tragedies. However, these protests, like previous ones in Serbia, have brought little to no substantial changes to their respective countries and certainly have not led to the end or easing of state capture.

The Serbian demonstrations, solely by their durability, resistance, and resilience, are already serving as a good example to neighboring countries. So far, however, given the lack of tangible, systemic results, they cannot yet be considered definitive models for success.

A particularly similar example is the protests in North Macedonia, triggered by a tragic fire accident in Kočani that claimed more than sixty lives on March 16, 2025. Similar to the Novi Sad tragedy in Serbia, the public uproar was not only caused by the significant loss of life (the largest such accident in the country's history) but also by lax safety standards and political corruption overarching governments. Soon after the tragedy, [student-led protests emerged](#) and spread across North Macedonia. From their characteristics (student-led, similar slogans and objectives), they appeared to adopt the "Serbian model" of demonstrations. The North Macedonian government even accused organizers of "importing" tactics from neighboring Serbia to create chaos and social unrest. Their demands for accountability, transparency, and systemic reforms mirror those in Serbia.

North Macedonia's case highlights that governments and ruling political elites are closely following the demonstrations in Serbia, and, more importantly, how the Serbian government acts and reacts—and whether those actions and reactions are deemed successful by protesters and the general public, or what actions might prove counterproductive. In case of North Macedonia, the government, led by the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE that came back to power in 2024, has either accused the previous government of negligence and corruption or took a visibly more proactive stance on investigation and indictments, most probably learning from the mistakes (reluctance) of their Serbian counterpart.

International Implications

Serbia’s so-called multivectoral foreign policy, coupled with its anti-democratic posture, has raised questions among international actors about its political elite’s willingness to undertake reforms necessary for EU membership. Yet, both the EU and the USA perceive Serbia as the main player in the Western Balkans (given its economy, size, history, and alleged influence over other countries) and the Vučić-led political elites as the only pro-EU alternative for the country.

The “Serbia problem” is certainly not new and is part of the [discourse over “stabilitocracy”](#), which revolves around supporting regimes that, at least theoretically, can provide (regional) stability, while turning a blind eye to the use of authoritarian means in governance (e.g., rule of law issues, media freedom, lack of independent judiciary - See the graphs below). Although Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022) brought some issues (e.g., alignment with EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy directives) to the forefront, the EU continues to tread carefully around Serbia. Vučić still enjoys Western support, is welcomed by EU officials, and usually does not have to face with the music because of his political decisions (i.e., his [participation](#) at the May 9 parade in Moscow).

Serbia scores for Constrain on Government Powers drom 2015 to 2024

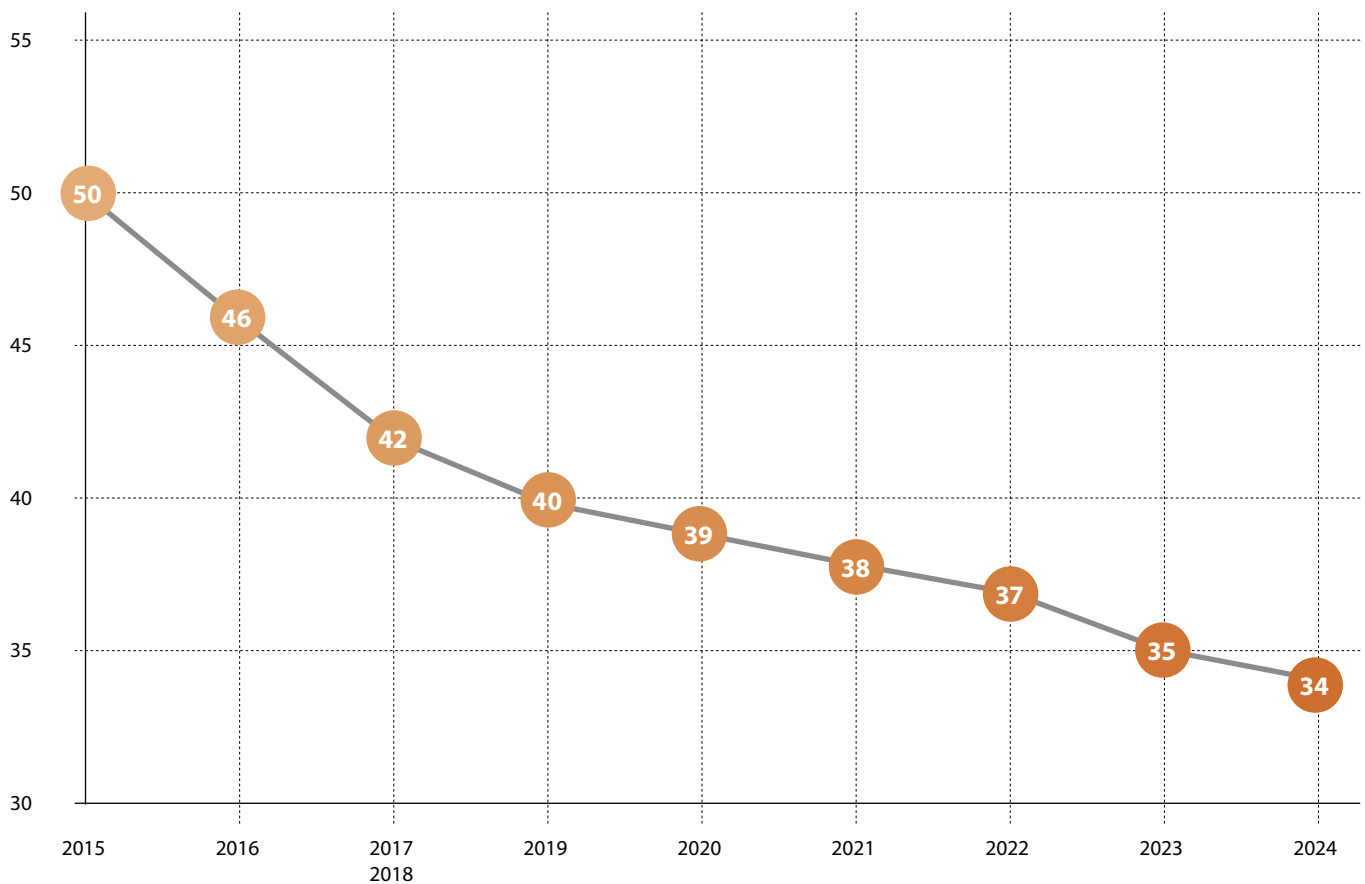


Figure 3: WJP’s Serbia’s [constraints on government powers index score](#).

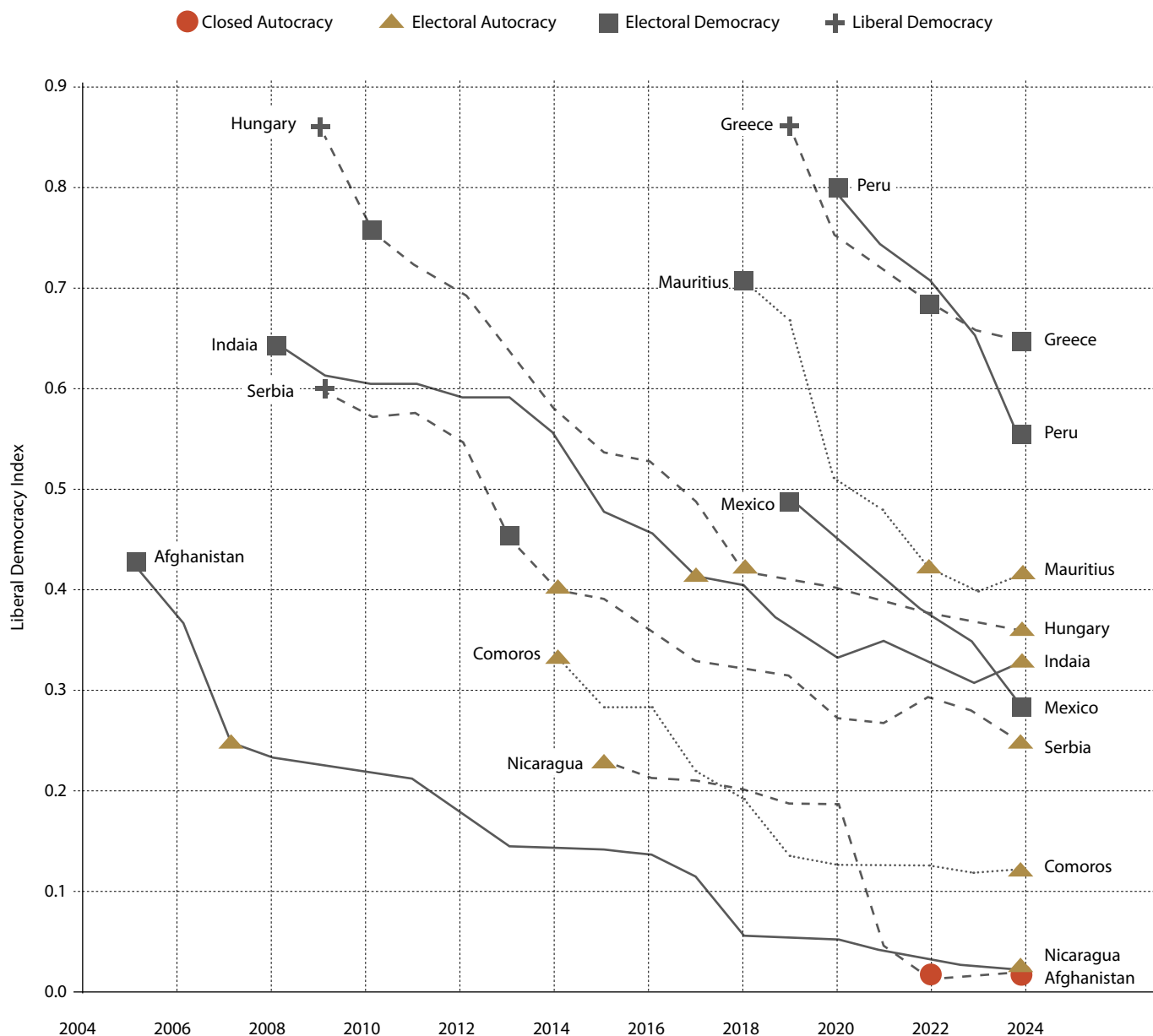


Figure 4: Serbia is indicated among the “stand-alone autocratizer countries in terms of the decline of liberal democracy (Source: V-Dem).

Serbia is considered too important to “let go” or be publicly punished (beyond words) by the EU.

Its geographical location and size, as well as Europe’s need for a partner that can maintain stability in the Western Balkans (even though Serbia sometimes acts to the contrary in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro), influence statements and actions concerning Serbia. Over the past decade, Vučić has successfully convinced major EU capitals and US administrations that his leadership of Serbia, regardless of his official capacity, guarantees stability not only for the country but for the entire Western Balkans.

There are two more recent examples/reasons why the EU often overlooks Serbia’s democratic backsliding. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Serbia, although it has not introduced sanctions against Russia (or China), [has supplied](#) Ukraine with Serbian-produced artillery. Moreover, in the race for critical raw minerals, Serbia’s lithium deal with the European Commission (overseen by Germany), signed as a [memorandum of understanding](#) in July 2024 on a strategic partnership for sustainable raw materials, battery value chains, and electric vehicles, is an important element in the EU’s quest to accelerate its green transition, build its electric vehicle industry, and reduce dependence on China. Serbia is a key partner for the EU

in providing security both in terms of physical and economic. Although the EU continues to highlight the country's fundamental issues, it remains committed to its "stabilitocracy" principle, even though Serbia's EU accession has never seemed as distant as it does today.

Serbia's Western partners—the EU and the USA—were surprisingly silent regarding the Novi Sad protests and the government's lack of accountability. Apart from expressing solidarity and urging political will and reforms with the "same-old mantras", the EU considered the demonstrations and their aftermath to be internal problems of the country. Marta Kos, Commissioner for Enlargement urged the Serbian government to push forward democratic reforms needed for EU membership, stating that without significant democratic reforms, Serbia will not advance toward bloc membership. These reforms include strengthening the fight against corruption, ensuring the independence of the judiciary, promoting media freedom and pluralism, and improving electoral conditions, which [coincide with the demands](#) of the protesters.

Despite the gravity of the situation and the clear demands for democratic reforms mirroring EU accession criteria, the EU's response has largely been perceived as cautious, often limited to general calls for dialogue and human rights. Critics argue that this "[whispering](#)" approach, in contrast to the roaring student movement, risks eroding the EU's credibility in the region and may embolden the Serbian government's authoritarian tendencies.

The international community (namely the EU and the USA) seems to lack the right toolkit to motivate and, if needed, put pressure on certain countries to respect democratic values. This can be explained by the deterioration of their normative power—to influence norms, values, and standards through soft power and the attractiveness of their own set of norms, values and standards—, but also the emergence of antidemocratic tendencies in the USA and among EU member states. In other words: how can the EU push Serbian authorities to go through with democratic changes if it does not seem to find the right solution to deal with Hungary (or Slovakia). A concrete, recent example is President Vučić's attendance at the May 9 parade in Moscow. Although it drew heavy criticism from top EU politicians, yet concrete consequences are not visible, especially since Robert Fico, Prime minister of Slovakia was also one of the high-level attendees.

The presence of Fico in Moscow highlights another issue: the EU's lack of effective tools to discipline its own leaders. Hungary's Viktor Orbán, one of Vučić's closest allies, has challenged EU decision-making and rule-of-law principles countless times over the past decade. Yet, little to nothing has been done to apply real pressure on his regime. The same logic is being followed—if not outright copied—by Serbia. As long as the EU is unable to discipline one of its ill-behaved member states, how can it credibly "preach" to candidate countries, especially given its relatively slow enlargement policy? Serbia can, in this sense, perceive Hungary as a role model to follow in terms of its internal political struggles.

Multivectoral foreign policy: This foreign policy approach involves a state actively seeking and maintaining balanced (political, economic, etc.) connections with multiple great and regional powers. Primary objectives include economic gains and navigating the risks that may arise from multipolarity, including leveraging competition between global powers. Serbia's multivectoral foreign policy, that predates Vučić has four pillars: the EU, the USA, Russia, and China, with Turkey and Gulf countries (especially the UAE) also playing important roles. Serbia's lithium deal with the EU (2024) demonstrates multipolarity in action: while Serbia has committed itself to cooperate on this subject with the EU and EU companies, it simultaneously maintains strong ties with Russia and especially China, whose companies are also heavily invested in Serbia's economy and infrastructure.

Hungary and Serbia: Shared Challenges and Distinct Approaches

Hungary and Serbia, characterized by similar and authoritarian regimes have both witnessed the deterioration of the rule of law, checks and balances, and media freedom in the last 10-15 years. Interestingly, both regimes are now facing their greatest crises yet, which may challenge their respective regimes' reign and could force them into opposition in the next parliamentary elections.

The root causes for the student-led protests in Serbia and the Péter Magyar-led political movement in Hungary show similarities. The rise of both movements/social unrest and public outrage were triggered by events that mobilized the public (including outside of the respective capital cities and urban zones) and proved to be long-lasting. The Novi Sad tragedy in Serbia and the presidential pardon scandal in Hungary both carried significant emotional weight too which resonated with a wider (non-capital city) public too. Both the student-led protesters and Péter Magyar, who emerged from Fidesz circles, seem immune to the usual tricks employed by their governments to discredit their character, movement, and those associated with them.

The biggest difference lies in how these movements are organized. In Hungary, Péter Magyar's movement, Respect and Freedom party (often referred to as Tisza party), can still be considered a "one-man-show". While politicians and political activists attached to Magyar are present and active, it is the leader of the movement who is not only its public face but also the driving force behind its policies. In contrast, the student-led movement in Serbia, though well-organized through a bottom-up approach, does not yet have a particular leader or group of leaders. In the latter's case, this kind of "leaderlessness" is one of the strong suits of the protests.

So far, there are few, if any, synergies or pools of inspiration between Hungary and Serbia regarding these movements. A possible way of connection (inspiration?) can be drawn between Serbian walking protests and bike ride from Serbia to Strasbourg, and Péter Magyar's walking march to Budapest to Oradea, one of the cultural centers of Hungarians in Romania. These acts of political activism are showy, creative, and bring the (rural) society closer to what is happening in larger towns and municipalities. Coupled with significant media coverage that has followed these marches, these are powerful tools to reach the population and maintain support for the demonstrations.

In the meantime, Orbán and Vučić continue to support each other. However, top leaders of the Hungarian government have not commented on the student protests in Serbia. The Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ), the largest, Budapest-backed Hungarian party in Serbia with close ties to Vučić and the SNS, has tried to downplay the significance of the protests and called them politically motivated. VMSZ is attempting to maintain a pro-SNS position (i.e., not supporting the protests) but keeps it pragmatic and advocates for dialogue. Vučić, on the other hand, often tries to deflect or seeks support from more prominent foreign politicians, such as Russia's Putin, either to discredit the demonstrations and protesters or to deflect from Serbia's internal issues.

The Empire Fights Back

After months of speculations whether snap parliamentary elections would be called after the resignation of prime minister Miloš Vučević in late January, a new government has been established. This choice (rather than going to the voting booths) seems the most rational option from the perspective of the ruling party and President Vučić, at least for two reasons. Firstly, given the decline of popularity of SNS and the president himself, snap elections would have resulted in a risk of losing political power, at least partially. Secondly, by establishing a new government, President Vučić could, for a second, reclaim the narrative of a constructive leader who is trying to make the demands of protesters—in this case, the establishment of an expert government—a reality. President Vučić’s strategic decision to avoid snap elections by establishing a new government, replete with “new faces that can be sold as experts and old allies”, is a calculated play to maintain the solid majority of the ruling SNS party. While snap elections will and would not threaten his presidential position, they could indeed weaken the parliamentary power of his party, which is crucial for sustaining the framework of the Serbian captured state.

In recent months, realizing the unpopularity of SNS, the President has started a nation-wide campaign to rebrand the party. Bringing in new/unknown but loyal faces from smaller communities while keeping the tried-and-tested politicians close, can serve as a tactic to get rid of the negative reputation of the party and party members.

The introduction of figures like prime minister Đuro Macut, a newcomer to politics with an academic background, as the new premier, exemplifies this strategy. Macut’s academic affiliation is likely intended to lend an air of legitimacy and technical expertise to the new government, aligning with the narrative of a “technocratic government”—a demand previously advocated by protesters but loudly and vehemently rejected by Vučić. By appearing to meet a key demand of the opposition, albeit through a carefully orchestrated appointment, Vučić attempts to diffuse tensions and portray a façade of responsiveness without genuinely ceding power or addressing the fundamental issues raised by the protests.

A prime example of the escalating pressure is the controversial appointment of the new Minister of Science. Their explicit mandate to compel academics to withdraw their support for student protests and to “restore normal functioning” to educational institutions, including occupied university buildings, reveals a clear intent to quash dissent rather than address its root causes.

Outlook

With the establishment of a new “expert” government and protests marking their tenth month anniversary, enthusiasm remains as strong as in the past. Can either side claim victory? Highly unlikely.

It is improbable at this moment that protests will lead to substantial changes—such as the beginning of Serbia’s re-democratization process or at least holding early parliamentary elections. The government, especially President Vučić, is too entrenched to fail and too afraid to implement reforms that might ease the current state of state capture. Any such move would be a grave mistake for them, as it could enable the public and institutions (media, judiciary) to hold them accountable in the future.

Snap parliamentary elections, a recent demand by protesters, are also unlikely to bring significant change. The most optimistic scenario would be freer and fairer elections, free from fraud, intimidation, and undue political influence on vulnerable groups. However, there are no guarantees that, without a change in government, protests would cease or that a potential government change would reform institutions and advance Serbia’s path toward democratization and EU integration.

Serbia—its regime and protesters—has found itself trapped in a vicious circle. Both sides may claim victory, at best only partial, as their red lines have become firmly entrenched. Concessions from either side could jeopardize the success of the demonstrations or undermine the governing structures.

Despite the challenges in overcoming state capture, Serbia’s vicious circle sends mixed messages to other Western Balkan countries: while they are powerful, unique, and enduring, protests alone may not be enough to bring about systemic change—at least not yet. Furthermore, as EU integration for Serbia approaches a near deadlock, European powers can no longer effectively use carrots or sticks to influence the regime. This leaves the country, and its citizens, caught in a cycle of social and political crises.



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