



# Helsinki bulletin

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## THE COLLAPSE OF ALEKSANDAR VUČIĆ'S FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICY

Although mass protests by citizens and students against the current regime across Serbia show no signs of abating, its definitive fall remains uncertain. A coherent political alternative has yet to be articulated, primarily because Serbian society has not fully confronted the most difficult chapters of its recent past. The political project founded by Slobodan Milošević has not disappeared – it has merely changed form. Serbian political and intellectual elites have not abandoned the concept of the so-called “Serbian world.” This project, repackaged in contemporary political discourse, continues to rest on ethno-confessional homogenization and territorial ambitions that in the past produced a catastrophe of historic proportions.

This unresolved ideological foundation directly benefits the current regime, above all President Aleksandar Vučić, as it enables him to manipulate social tensions and maintain his hold on power. Even after a year of continuous mass protests, Vučić shows no readiness to meet the key demands of the students, particularly the call for early elections. On the contrary, he continues to systematically obstruct free and fair



Ursula von der Leyen and Aleksandar Vučić

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electoral processes through open pressure and the misuse of state resources. This was most clearly evident during this year's local elections in several municipalities (Zaječar, Kosijerić, Mionica, Negotin, and Sečanj). To this end, all available mechanisms are deployed: public funds, captured media, false promises, as well as networks of criminal groups and party loyalists who intimidate observers and opposition candidates. Vučić himself appears as the formal holder of electoral lists, while a significant number of ministers actively participate in campaigns, visiting smaller communities and symbolically distributing various "donations."

On the international stage, Aleksandar Vučić has to a large extent lost the political capital he enjoyed for years. Key global actors – the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union – view him with growing distrust. Despite attempts to balance between Washington and Moscow at the expense of relations with the EU, Vučić has failed to secure a stable international position. On the contrary, both Russia and the West increasingly see his role as "expendable," particularly in the context of the uncertain fate of Serbia's energy sector and its leading company, the Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS), which is majority-owned by a Russian partner. For years, the European Union warned Serbia of the need to diversify its energy supply, even earmarking around €160 million for this purpose. However, the authorities showed no genuine political will to implement this process. Such irresponsibility has brought Serbia to the brink of serious energy and economic instability, with no real solutions in sight.

Vučić appears to have counted on a possible U.S.–Russian geopolitical deal over Ukraine, believing that this would lead to the lifting of sanctions on Russia and, consequently, to the stabilization of NIS's status.

Yet this calculation is not only speculative but fundamentally unrealistic: sanctions are not lifted quickly, while Serbia is already facing the consequences of its strategic missteps.

Overall, Aleksandar Vučić has overestimated both his own role and his self-image as an important global intermediary amid profound international upheavals. His foreign policy – indeterminate and opportunistic – has been reduced to transactional relationships with external partners, often accompanied by non-transparent financial benefits for a narrow circle around the president. Serbia has thus become easy prey for international investors – either through high state subsidies for projects that have proven dubious, or through the deepening of corruption that leaves the regime permanently vulnerable to blackmail and externally exposed.

The long-standing policy of indulgence by the Western international community toward Serbia, justified by the claim that it is a "factor of stability" in the Balkans, has proven deeply misguided. Instead of stability, this approach has produced the opposite effect – encouraging Belgrade's ethno-territorial ambitions and destabilizing behavior in the region. Serbia has thus become a problem rather than a solution for Balkan stability.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has led the Western international community to approach the Western Balkans almost exclusively from a security perspective. The region is primarily viewed as a potential zone of destabilization to be controlled, rather than as a space requiring democratic and political transformation. The European Union, for its part, seeks to keep the enlargement policy alive by project-linking the region to the EU, with the aim of neutralizing Russian influence.



However, without a clear political vision and strong, consistent engagement, these efforts remain of limited reach.

## THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE UNITED STATES

The fact that the United States currently has no ambassadors in three key Balkan countries – Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo – is a strong signal of the region’s marginalization amid ongoing international turbulence. In a context of global instability, the Balkans are clearly not high on Washington’s list of priorities. Moreover, U.S. State Department reports indicate that democracy and human rights are increasingly losing prominence in American foreign policy, representing a serious departure from previous decades.

The administration of Donald Trump operates in an exclusively transactional manner, without any strategic vision of the necessity of European integration for the Western Balkans. Within such a framework, there is no values-based policy, only short-term deals, concessions, and interests. This logic is particularly evident in relations with Serbia and Republika Srpska.

However, the new administration has so far not altered its approach to the Balkans. In this context, the message sent from the recent conference in Dayton marking the 30th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement is especially troubling. On that occasion, a U.S. representative stated that the agreement is “no longer functional” and that the matter should be left to “the three peoples to reach an agreement.”

Such wording is politically extremely dangerous, as it opens space for various interpretations that could lead to further destabilization and even the renewal of conflict.

Aleksandar Vučić’s attempts to draw closer to Donald Trump ended in failure, as was clearly demonstrated by his fiasco in Florida, where he attempted to enter the Republican convention uninvited. Nevertheless, he continued to seek favor with key figures from Trump’s inner circle, above all Jared Kushner, by offering the General Staff complex. This attempt also failed, as Jared Kushner decided to withdraw from the project out of “respect for the people of Serbia and Belgrade, because major projects should unite rather than divide.”

In fact, part of the public had for months pointed to the harmful and corrupt nature of that project, which ultimately led to the filing of an indictment proposal by the Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime against Minister of Culture Nikola Selaković and three other individuals. Vučić, in his customary manner, shifted responsibility onto students and the Prosecutor’s Office, accusing them of economically undermining the country and announcing criminal charges.

The crisis surrounding NIS further demonstrates that the U.S. administration is toying with Vučić, sending him signals that he is not an important partner. Information about the possible continuation of NIS’s operations has still not been confirmed, while Vučić rejects nationalization, claiming that it would directly harm Russian interests. It is evident that there is no political space for such a move, for reasons that are not publicly known but can be inferred.



The greatest political shock for Belgrade is the Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act, which was adopted by the U.S. House of Representatives and signed by President Donald Trump. This document, in both tone and substance, is significantly harsher toward Serbia than all previous resolutions and reports of the European Parliament and the European Commission, thereby marking the first time Washington has explicitly signaled deep dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in Serbia.

The law unequivocally states that the condition of democracy in Serbia is “concerning,” while electoral conditions are described as “unfair,” placing Serbia among countries with serious and systemic deficits in the rule of law, media freedom, and political pluralism. Such an assessment is not merely criticism, but a political message that Serbia is no longer viewed as a problematic yet reformable partner, but as a state that is deliberately moving away from democratic standards.

As former ambassador Srećko Đukić assesses, this shift in the U.S. approach represents a serious deterioration of Serbian–American relations—something that seemed unimaginable at the moment when the neo-radical regime in Belgrade euphorically celebrated Donald Trump’s return to the White House, expecting the legitimization of its own authoritarian model of governance and the strengthening of Trumpism in international relations.

For Belgrade, it came as a surprise that Kosovo is given special protection under this law. The United States explicitly supports Kosovo’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations and rejects any idea of ethnic partition or territorial exchange. Kosovo can count on U.S. support on its path toward NATO and the EU, but within the framework of an acceptable

compromise between Belgrade and Pristina that must be based on mutual recognition—explicitly stated in the law.

Although U.S. actions are unpredictable and unreliable, in line with the broader pattern of foreign policy during the Trump era, this law reaffirms the policy of previous administrations in the Balkans. As formal peace currently prevails in the region, Washington evidently sees no reason for more serious engagement.

A symbol of this attitude is the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade, which was once strongly present in the public sphere but now appears almost nonexistent. The withdrawal of an already appointed ambassador further confirms that the Balkans are no longer an important focus of U.S. foreign policy—except as a security issue.

## **SERBIA AS RUSSIA’S HOSTAGE**

Although Russia itself is grappling with serious internal problems, it seeks to emerge from the war in Ukraine as a “winner”—an outcome that is unrealistic without the support of the United States, that is, the administration of President Trump. The current so-called “peace negotiations” are proceeding slowly, accompanied by Russia’s persistent refusal to make any substantive concessions. This situation has direct repercussions for the Balkans, above all in relation to the Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS), whose majority owner is Russia. Moscow has shown no readiness to sell its stake, despite the expectations of President Vučić—expectations that have proven to be without any real foundation. As former ambassador Srećko Đukić points out, the issue of NIS is neither economic, nor financial, nor technological, but primarily political. In



his assessment, the Russians will postpone any decision regarding NIS until the issue is incorporated into a broader U.S.–Russian political package, in the expectation that the normalization of relations with the United States will begin in the near future.

As the outcome of an agreement on Ukraine remains highly uncertain, the only rational solution for Serbia at this moment would be the nationalization of the oil company – a move President Vučić stubbornly refuses. He evidently lacks the political courage for such a decision, even though under the current circumstances it would be the most realistic option. Reliance on Russia has proven to be an extremely risky strategy, particularly in recent years. The earlier handover of NIS to Russia was linked to expectations of political support from Moscow over Kosovo, as well as the construction of the South Stream pipeline, which was never realized. However, Russia did nothing in this regard, except use the Kosovo case as an argument for its own imperial policy and as justification for annexations in its neighborhood, especially in Ukraine.

The Radicals (the original predecessors of today's Serbian Progressive Party) have historically been strongly tied to Russia, but it can be said that this connection is largely based on a kind of mythology, without firm grounding in reality – especially when one analyzes Russia's attitude toward Serbia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Slobodan Milošević likewise expected political support from Moscow at the outset of the wars in Yugoslavia in 1991 for his authoritarian moves and what amounted to a de facto coup, but that support never materialized. On the contrary, Russia recognized Croatia and supplied it with weapons.

Moscow has no interest in selling NIS, because through that company it finances and maintains a network of its agents, thereby directly exercising influence in the Western Balkans. In addition, Russian influence is deeply embedded in the security structures, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), a significant segment of the academic community, and the media. It is precisely through the media that disinformation is systematically disseminated, continuously nurturing anti-Western sentiment in Serbian society. NIS is thus a geopolitical lever for Russia, an intelligence platform, and an instrument for destabilizing the region – and consequently Europe. Because of Aleksandar Vučić's cowardice in refusing to nationalize NIS, Russia holds Serbia hostage.

Moscow has openly and brutally reproached Serbia for selling weapons to Ukraine. The spokeswoman of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, warned Belgrade: "We are confident that Serbia clearly understands the full range of risks associated with the possibility that products of the national military-industrial complex could end up in the hands of the Kyiv regime, and that it will take effective and sufficient measures so that nothing casts a shadow over the good relations between our countries."

It is noteworthy that the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to this warning by reminding that Serbia is "a sovereign and independent state that makes its decisions exclusively in accordance with its national interests," and that it expects representatives of friendly states, as well as official spokespersons of their institutions, to respect that fact.



Serbia missed the opportunity to formulate a clear and consistent foreign policy strategy reflecting its real interests, instead of pursuing a policy of “sitting on four chairs” (Brussels, Washington, Moscow, Beijing). The regime was not proactive and evidently failed to understand in time the change in international circumstances – partly due to the absence of a competent and strong Ministry of Foreign Affairs – and instead continued with petty manipulations and political calculations, ultimately bringing Serbia into an almost hopeless position. President Vučić has repeatedly stated that the “hostile takeover” of the Russian stake in NIS is the last option. Yet Bulgaria was also highly dependent on Russian gas, oil, and nuclear fuel, and nevertheless managed to regulate majority ownership in its energy sector. It is evident that there are other, political reasons behind Vučić’s hesitation to resolve the problem in a similar way.

Vučić’s daily addresses to the nation, insisting that the situation is “extremely complex,” spread a climate of fear, placing citizens in a state of psychological tension with unpleasant reminders of the circumstances of the 1990s (inflation, shortages...). Even if an adequate solution is eventually found, it will once again be presented as the result of his personal “merits” – a pattern he regularly uses to portray himself as indispensable and all-powerful.

At the height of both domestic and foreign-policy crises, the Russian Academy of Sciences, together with Russian state media RIA Novosti and Interfax, established a branch of the Russian Historical Society in Belgrade on October 26. The president of the Belgrade branch’s council, Aleksandar Vulin, stated that the Society would be a gathering point for all those who see Serbia as a state that will “fight without any

reservations for the peaceful creation of the Serbian world” and to be a true ally of Russia and China.

Alongside Vulin, the founding assembly was attended by Serbia’s Minister of the Interior Ivica Dačić, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church Porfirije, and the president of the Socialist Party of Republika Srpska, Goran Selak. The Russian organization is headed by Sergei Naryshkin, director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation.

Meanwhile, disturbing news arrived that in Moscow the representative of Yugoimport SDPR (the state-owned arms export company), Radomir Kurtić, died under unclear circumstances. Vučić said he would fight for the truth about his death but did not wish to engage in speculation. He also stated that hard drives and some other items had disappeared from the company’s representative office, and that nothing had yet been received from forensic investigators. He emphasized that he did not want to spread suspicions or conspiracy theories.

A segment of Serbia’s social and political elite with a pronounced pro-Russian orientation sharply criticizes President Vučić for, as they claim, undermining traditionally friendly relations with Russia. They particularly warn that the introduction of sanctions against Russia would represent a moral precedent and a paradigm shift aimed at undermining historical and political ties with allied states. Such a step, in their view, would simultaneously open space for the realization of foreign geopolitical interests in the region, placing Serbia in a dependent position in international politics.



When Miloš Ković, a historian and outspoken advocate of the concept of the “Serbian world,” warns that Serbia’s break with Russia and the abandonment of Kosovo and Republika Srpska would represent a continuation of the dismemberment of the Serbian people, the depth of the narrative dominating pro-Russian and nationalist circles becomes clear. According to this logic, such a turn would lead to the final transformation of the remaining part of Serbia and Republika Srpska into economic and “spiritual” colonies of the West, while fertile land and water resources would be reduced to desert and mining waste.

This discourse further claims that the assimilation of Serbs in Montenegro, Croatia, and North Macedonia would be accelerated, while Serbia would, “in one way or another,” become an accomplice in a NATO war against Russia — a war described in advance as inevitable and civilizationally catastrophic for all participating countries.

From this perspective, Serbia’s break with Russia is declared not only politically irrational, but also morally impermissible. Such a narrative leaves no room for rational foreign-policy debate, serving instead as an ideological framework for maintaining permanent confrontation with the West and legitimizing Serbia’s isolationism.

## THE EU’S INCREASINGLY CRITICAL STANCE, ESPECIALLY GERMANY’S

No one expected that the protests in Serbia, launched at the end of 2024, would last so long or that — despite failing to bring about a change of regime — they would fully expose its corrupt, violent, and criminal nature. The European Union initially reacted cautiously,

limiting itself to neutral statements, but over time it was compelled to adopt a far more critical position. The first to react were leading European media outlets, which began reporting extensively in this vein, particularly after March 15, when an unknown supersonic weapon — the so-called sound cannon — was used against demonstrators.

As violence against rebellious students and citizens escalated, taking various forms of intimidation — from dismissals of those who supported the students, through organized media campaigns, to unlawful detentions — this ultimately led to a debate in the European Parliament and the adoption of a highly critical resolution by that body. This was followed by an exceptionally critical annual report by the European Commission.

In November, two important visits by German officials also took place: Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul and the Chair of the Bundestag’s Defense Committee, Thomas R  wekamp. Wadephul delivered an unequivocal message to the Serbian authorities that there can be no negotiations when it comes to the rule of law, the fight against corruption, and the protection of fundamental rights. During R  wekamp’s visit, the authorities introduced new obstructions, attempting to prevent his meeting with opposition representatives — something he had explicitly requested.

This was followed by a meeting in Belgrade between Serbian MPs and representatives of the German Bundestag, which ended in harsh words and insults by Serbian MPs directed at Germany, ultimately prompting the Bundestag delegation to leave the meeting. Whether these diplomatic incidents have damaged relations between Belgrade and Berlin remains an open question. As Borko Stefanovi  , MP of the Freedom



and Justice Party (SSP), put it, this was an opportunity to see the true face of the Serbian Radical Party, which for the past 13 years has misleadingly called itself the Serbian Progressive Party.

Serbia has received multiple warnings from the EU as well as from individual member states. Thus, Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos warned on the margins of the Enlargement Forum in Brussels: “If you participate in the actions of an army that is killing people in Ukraine, forget about the accession process, about chapters—such a country can never become a member of the EU. But that is your choice.” President Vučić’s recent visit to Brussels also yielded no results: the demands from the European Commission’s report for the implementation of credible reforms were reiterated, while his proposal that all Western Balkan countries be admitted to the EU simultaneously was rejected. This outcome further confirms Serbia’s limited international credibility and shows that rhetoric about a “rapid entry into the EU” cannot compensate for the lack of real reform progress.

Serbia’s absence from the EU–Western Balkans summit in Brussels represents yet another in a series of ill-considered and politically counterproductive decisions by the current authorities. At that summit, a joint declaration was adopted confirming the strategic partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans, as well as full commitment to the enlargement policy. The declaration reaffirmed the strength of relations between the European Union and the region, emphasizing that Russia’s aggressive war against Ukraine and growing geopolitical challenges further increase the need to strengthen mutual ties. It was

clearly confirmed that the future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union, but on the condition of implementing credible reforms, respecting fair conditions, and consistently applying the merit-based principle.

A particular warning was issued that the lack of normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina seriously slows the European path of both sides, and that all agreements reached with EU mediation must be fully implemented. In this way, Belgrade received an unequivocal political message that a policy of delay and selective interpretation of obligations will no longer be tolerated.

Serbia’s decision to boycott the summit indicates that President Vučić was aware of the criticism he would face in Brussels. His justification that by doing so he was “protecting the Republic of Serbia and its interests” appears more like an attempt to evade political responsibility than a well-considered state strategy. Particularly indicative is Vučić’s statement that Serbia will “continue on the European path while he is president,” but that this “will not last long,” thereby preemptively shifting responsibility for the country’s future course onto the next government. Such a message further relativizes the declared commitment to European integration and reinforces the impression that Serbia’s EU path is increasingly being used as a tactical instrument of domestic politics rather than as a strategic state objective.



## THE “SAFARI AFFAIR”

The so-called “Safari Affair” has brought back into focus horrifying scenes from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s. It concerns so-called tourist visits by wealthy foreigners to whom Serbian forces, for enormous sums of money, allegedly allowed the use of sniper rifles to shoot at civilians—including children—in besieged Sarajevo (from positions such as the Jewish Cemetery on the hill above the city). Among the photographs that have recently resurfaced is one showing Aleksandar Vučić; he, however, claims that he was there in the capacity of a journalist. Although these photographs had circulated earlier, they never had anything close to the resonance they have now.

After years of investigation, Italian journalist Ezio Gavazzeni submitted documents and testimonies to the Milan prosecutor’s office, while Croatian investigative journalist Domagoj Margetić filed a complaint against the Serbian president, claiming Vučić’s presence at one of the most sought-after sniper positions above the city. Numerous international media outlets reported on the matter, which—regardless of whether a court ultimately confirms these allegations—has further contributed to the erosion of President Vučić’s international image.

The affair has revealed not only the moral decline of the president of the republic, but also that of a society which, for the second time—after Milošević—has chosen the same option and the same chauvinistic ideology. The West has finally been forced to return to the essence of the problem: the fact that the Greater Serbia project of Slobodan Milošević, once supported by a plebiscite, was never fundamentally defeated.

## VUČIĆ’S DOMINANT INFLUENCE IN THE REGION HAS SIGNIFICANTLY DECLINED

The fact that Milorad Dodik, without the knowledge of Aleksandar Vučić, managed—through his lobbyists—to secure the lifting of sanctions against himself, his family members, and his closest associates clearly caught the Serbian president off guard. Admittedly, Dodik was compelled to make certain concessions in return—among them acknowledging the jurisdiction of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s judiciary, abandoning the idea of a referendum, and partially withdrawing from the political scene. It became evident that Dodik is a far more skillful political operator than was expected in Belgrade, and that this “foreign policy turn” on his part triggered noticeable dissatisfaction in Serbia.

As Dodik—previously omnipresent—has not been seen frequently in Belgrade lately, parts of the media concluded that “a serious rift has emerged in the fraternal alliance between Banja Luka and Belgrade.” Meanwhile, relations between Banja Luka and Washington have improved, while ties with Belgrade have significantly cooled.

Vučić commented on this by saying that he was “sorry that Banja Luka feels threatened by Belgrade,” adding that, as he put it, “they did everything they could to remain silent, listen, and help, and that they never interfered in anything in any way.” At the same time, he noted that messages from Banja Luka say that “no one from Belgrade will give orders to Republika Srpska,” indirectly confirming the depth of the newly emerged political tensions.<sup>1</sup>

1 <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/reakcija-vucica-zao-mi-je-ako-se-banjaluka-osjeca-ugrozeno-od-beograda/>



Regardless of the strained relations between Belgrade and Banja Luka, the influence of Belgrade – and of Russia – in Republika Srpska should not be underestimated. The further development of the situation will largely depend on the policy of the United States toward the Western Balkans, which has yet to be clearly defined.

However, Belgrade's influence in Montenegro remains extremely strong, despite the European Union's efforts to bind that country more firmly to the European path. Vučić possesses significant levers of power within Montenegrin institutions, and his strategic goal is to slow down, or even prevent, Montenegro's accession to the European Union. In addition to institutional influence, Vučić has a strong foothold in Montenegro's media space, while his most powerful lever remains the Serbian Orthodox Church, through which systematic historical revisionism is carried out with the aim of relativizing – or even negating – Montenegrin identity. Belgrade has traditionally viewed Montenegro as a territory that essentially belongs to the concept of the "Serbian world," which is why it is politically almost inconceivable for Belgrade that Montenegro could advance toward EU membership faster than Serbia.

Despite Belgrade's dissatisfaction – especially after President Vučić proposed in Brussels that the entire Western Balkans should enter the EU simultaneously, a proposal that was rejected – EU Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos assessed, following the Intergovernmental Conference between Montenegro and the EU, that Montenegro is the frontrunner in the EU integration process and the candidate with the best results, having closed a total of 12 chapters.<sup>2</sup>

2 <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/kos-crna-gora-nikad-blize-eu-sada-je-potrebno-nacionalno-jedinstvo>

As Markus Kaiser of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in Belgrade points out, the accession of Montenegro and Albania to the European Union would exert strong pressure on Serbia. As he notes, if it were to happen "that Serbs in Montenegro, thanks to EU membership, enjoy more rights and benefits than Serbs in Serbia, this could prompt a serious re-examination of their political views."<sup>3</sup>

Additional tension in the region was caused by a recent incident in Podgorica involving individuals initially claimed to be Turkish citizens, but later identified as citizens of Azerbaijan. A street brawl in Podgorica quickly escalated into a "campaign" against Turkish citizens living and working in Montenegro (their shops, workshops, etc.), and the government urgently abolished the visa-free regime with Turkey. According to some analysts, Serbia was responsible for the violence against Turkish citizens in Montenegro. Namely, several days before the incident, Turkey agreed to sell "Bayraktar" drones to Kosovo, which infuriated Aleksandar Vučić; the drones had previously been offered to Belgrade, but Serbia declined them. The president of Montenegro's Social Democratic Party, Ivan Vujović, assessed on social media that "Vučić is settling accounts with Turkey through Montenegro, because Ankara delivered drones to Kosovo."<sup>4</sup>

Writer Andrej Nikolaidis stated that these "are not protests against foreigners, but an expression of clear hostility toward Turks, and that behind everything stand Aleksandar Vučić and the BIA."<sup>5</sup>

3 <https://www.dw.com/bs/brz-prijem-crne-gore-u-eu-ja%C4%8Da-pritisak-na-srbiju/a-74949036>

4 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/rastu-tenzije-izmedju-srbije-i-crne-gore-iz-podgorice-optuzuju-vucica-umesani-i-k9srgvz>

5 Ibid.



The hasty introduction of visas provoked a sharp reaction from Turkey's ambassador to Montenegro, Barış Kalkavan. He described the decision as rash and warned that, if it were not withdrawn, Turkey would not remain without a response. He cautioned about possible consequences for economic and tourism relations between the two countries, as well as for the lives of citizens who live, work, or travel between Montenegro and Turkey.<sup>6</sup>

As for Kosovo, after the signing of the Brussels Agreement in 2013, Vučić received strong support from the West. In the initial phase, the implementation of the Agreement functioned, but after 2015 Vučić and Hashim Thaçi began talks on the partition of Kosovo, which German Chancellor Angela Merkel decisively halted in 2019. From that moment on, the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina has increasingly resembled a simulation of a process, and less and less a genuine attempt to normalize relations.

The “Banjska” case (the armed incursion of a paramilitary group led by Milan Radoičić into northern Kosovo) further intensified security scrutiny over Serbia, while in the meantime the German-French plan for normalization of relations—known as the Ohrid Agreement and the so-called Brussels 2—was adopted. Nevertheless, their substantive implementation has not occurred. The instrumentalization of Kosovo Serbs, a constant practice of Belgrade, has further worsened their position and, consequently, led to their increased departure from Kosovo.

Vučić reactivated the Kosovo issue after the outbreak of mass protests in Serbia, with the evident intention of redirecting the internal political crisis toward the Kosovo question, but this time he failed.

The abrupt collapse of Vučić's standing in the West, combined with the European Union's increasingly active approach toward the Western Balkans, led to a significant shift in the EU's stance toward Kurti's government (currently a caretaker government). The European Commission expressed readiness to release half of the financial assistance intended for Kosovo, which had been blocked due to sanctions imposed in 2023. The main reason cited was the peaceful and orderly transfer of power in the north of the country following local elections. The total amount of released funds—50 percent of the assistance—exceeds €200 million.

Besnik Bislimi confirmed that he received a letter from the Directorate-General for Enlargement stating that part of the measures, amounting to €34.6 million, had been lifted. This sum enables the implementation of four projects, while the remaining €181 million constitutes part of the implementation of the remaining funds from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance program intended for Kosovo.

This EU decision clearly demonstrates that the West rewards concrete, transparent, and lawful political steps, while Belgrade—due to its own authoritarian and opportunistic policies—finds itself increasingly isolated and losing credibility. At the same time, the release of funds for Kosovo signals that the EU is ready to use economic assistance as an instrument to support states that demonstrate responsibility and reformist will, thereby further underscoring the difference in international treatment between Pristina and Belgrade.

6 <https://www.vijesti.me/tv/emisije/781457/kalkavan-ukoliko-odluka-o-uvodjenju-viza-turskim-drzavljanima-ne-bude-povucena-turska-ce-preduzeti-reciprocne-mjere>



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Vučić's regime is clearly approaching its end, but it is still uncertain when and how this will unfold. The problem is further deepened by the fact that Vučić, through his daily statements and actions, systematically raises tensions in society, creating an atmosphere of potential conflict (which has in fact been simmering constantly), representing a very real threat. It is increasingly evident that he is relying on so-called loyalists, who, according to his own claims, number around 18,000. A kind of paramilitary camp has even been set up in the park between the Presidency and the National Assembly, the so-called "Ćacilend," from which a daily message is being "broadcast" indicating what the authorities' reaction might be in the event of further escalation.

Although it was expected that the protests would subside, this has not happened – they continue to spread on a daily basis. At the same time, almost all institutions are undergoing a process of profound disintegration. As historian Dubravka Stojanović points out, the state Serbia finds itself in can be described as a process of decay, in which even the very foundation from which change should begin is rotting. In such an environment of social powerlessness, she adds, violence begins to appear to many as the only possible solution. And violence is never a solution – it only generates a new spiral of revenge and once again, who knows for how many times, brings us back to the very beginning.<sup>7</sup>

7 <https://radar.nova.rs/politika/dubravka-stojanovic-intervju-antifasizam/>(<https://radar.nova.rs/politika/dubravka-stojanovic-intervju-antifasizam/>)

Corruption in Serbia (as in the region more broadly) enables politicians to use public resources for their own benefit, while a segment of society has an interest in the system remaining unchanged. This indicates that citizens are, to a large extent, prepared to tolerate corruption. However, the tragedy in Novi Sad was a trigger showing that corruption has reached a level that can no longer be tolerated.

Protests lasting more than a year have laid bare the state of society. Serbian society, in addition to being confused, is fragmented and divided. In the meantime, no figure has emerged capable of politically articulating the dissatisfaction and energy rolling through the streets. There is a sense that citizens have rather easily left it to students to "do the job," even though they have already done the maximum possible. For a further step forward, they lack both experience and knowledge. A student electoral list is still unknown, and it is possible that Vučić may agree to elections during the coming year. He is clearly waiting for the situation to calm down: he still possesses all the levers of power, as well as the financial resources necessary to manipulate elections.

The collapse of Serbia's international position and reputation, as well as the personal standing of the President of the Republic, has called into question the official strategic goal – Serbia's membership in the European Union. In its annual reports, as well as through numerous official warnings from Brussels, the EU has clearly stated that progress toward membership is not possible without key reforms, primarily in the judiciary and the media. The tightening of EU oversight over Serbia



is also confirmed by the announced visit of a European Parliament mission in January.

The loss of international support has seriously undermined President Vučić's domestic position, which he is attempting to conceal through an announced visit to China and a servile attitude toward Russia.

The situation Serbia finds itself in – resulting from years of ill-conceived policies – requires an urgent reset of foreign policy. However, there is neither political will nor diplomatic capacity for such a move. The only solution to prevent further regression, both domestically and in foreign policy, is free elections that would open the path to the renewal of democracy, the rule of law, tolerance, and freedom.

Given the extremely unfavorable international context, Serbia needs assistance similar to that of the year 2000, in order to halt the process of societal disintegration before it reaches a level at which assistance will no longer be possible. Such a Serbia would permanently remain a factor of instability in the region.

The EU must pursue a principled and consistent policy that does not pander to Serbia, while at the same time offering a long-term, realistic, and credible perspective of integration – similar to what was done in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania – provided that Belgrade first demonstrates genuine political and institutional readiness.

For Serbia, a rational EU policy would entail:

- **Clear differentiation between rhetoric and real reforms** – the European perspective must not be used as a tool for domestic political manipulation or for balancing between the West and Russia.
- **A combination of incentives and consequences** – concrete financial and political support must be directly linked to the implementation of reforms; democratic backsliding and the blocking of normalization of relations with Pristina must have clear consequences.
- **Support for civil society and reform-oriented forces** – the EU should strengthen independent media, the NGO sector, parties (a newly formed bloc of five pro-European parties) and the academic community, which can exert internal pressure on the authorities and promote the rule of law.
- **Strategic communication** – it must be clear to Serbia that the European perspective is neither free nor automatic, but available exclusively through real, measurable reforms and responsible behavior in the region.
- **Countering Russian influence** – this is of crucial importance, as it systematically shapes anti-Western attitudes among citizens. The European Union should more actively engage not only its delegation in Belgrade, but also the pro-European civil sector and independent media, in order to conduct a coordinated campaign promoting European values and to effectively identify and expose Russian disinformation.