



Helsinki Committee for
Human Rights in Serbia

STUDENT AND CIVIC REVOLT:

FEAR SWITCHED SIDES

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Serbia 2025 – Student and civic revolt:

FEAR SWITCHED SIDES

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NOTE

This report does not aim to cover the entire situation in Serbia, but rather to point to the depth of the crisis that has been ongoing for almost a year, with no indication of a solution that could return social tensions to the political sphere and enable dialogue. The student protests have mobilized society as a whole and, for the first time in several decades, represent an authentic reaction to internal problems – above all corruption, crime, authoritarianism, intolerance, and the dysfunction of institutions.

President Aleksandar Vučić's attempts to shift public attention to other hotspots – in Republika Srpska, Montenegro, and Kosovo – have not succeeded.

The report highlights in particular the key areas in which a toxic atmosphere of impunity has been systematically created: the judiciary, the police, education and culture, as well as the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the media.

Even if a change of government were to occur, it would only mark the beginning of a long-term process which, realistically speaking, will last more than a decade. Change will have an effect only if new democratic standards are established in the five areas mentioned. That is the only guarantee that future generations, raised within a new system of values, will build a European vision of Serbia – generations that will respect internationally recognized borders, accept Serbia's responsibility for the wars of the 1990s, and thereby lay the foundations for genuine normalization and reconciliation in the region.

I – VUČIĆ'S REGIME: BETWEEN PRO-EUROPEAN RHETORIC AND ANTI-WESTERN PRACTICE

When it came to power in 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) presented itself as a pro-European party and for that reason received significant Western support, especially after the signing of the Brussels Agreement in 2013. However, it soon became clear that this was a strategic tactic based almost exclusively on pro-European rhetoric.

Aleksandar Vučić quickly established himself not only as the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) but also as the dominant political figure in Serbia, enjoying broad support both domestically and internationally. By consolidating complete control over the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power, as well as securing a monopoly over the media, his regime managed to systematically pursue an anti-Western campaign.

At the same time, Russia and China were promoted as Serbia's closest friends, primarily due to their support for Serbia's territorial integrity in the United Nations Security Council. This opened the door to strong Russian influence in almost all spheres – from the media, culture, and security services, to academia and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The rhetoric of European integration, the signing of the Brussels Agreement, and the declared willingness to engage

in dialogue with Priština were presented as proof of a pro-European orientation. Yet, as time passes, it is becoming increasingly clear that this orientation was purely tactical, while in practice an authoritarian system rooted in anti-Western ideology was being built.

THE RUSSIAN NARRATIVE AS A PILLAR OF THE REGIME

The ideological closeness with Russia is not merely symbolic or cultural – it has deep political and strategic roots. The common denominator of this relationship is resistance to Western values: the rule of law, pluralism, transparency, and institutional accountability. Instead, “traditional” and “family values” are promoted as a superior alternative, with the strong involvement of the Serbian Orthodox Church and nationalist narratives.

This discourse has served as a cover for the deep criminalization of the political and economic system, under the virtually unlimited power of President Aleksandar Vučić. Corruption in Serbia ranks among the highest in Europe, while institutions, independent media, and civil society have been systematically suppressed or co-opted.

THE "SERBIAN WORLD" – RETURN TO UNFINISHED PROJECTS

Russia has skillfully exploited the frustrations of the Serbian elite stemming from the defeats of the 1990s and the loss of Kosovo. In this context, Belgrade revived the concept of a "state project" – now called the "Serbian World" – which essentially represents a revision of the past through soft-power mechanisms: control of the media, education, cultural institutions, and spiritual ties with Serbs in the region.

This project would not have been possible without the West's tolerance. Hoping to pull Serbia closer to its side, Western powers often turned a blind eye to Belgrade's destructive role in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Such a policy of appeasement further strengthened the regime, granting it international legitimacy without meaningful reforms.

TURNING POINT: THE WAR IN UKRAINE

The war in Ukraine in 2022 was a turning point. Until then, Vučić had skillfully balanced among the four pillars of Serbia's foreign policy – Russia, China, the EU, and the U.S. – but the Russian invasion clearly defined the blocs and options. Serbia remained the only EU candidate country that did not align with European foreign policy, including sanctions against Russia.

Vučić's room for maneuver has thus narrowed. On the one hand, he faces pressure from the West to take a clear stance; on the other, he depends on the support of authoritarian

partners and his domestic nationalist base. The internal model, built on foreign investment and subsidies, is increasingly struggling to maintain economic and social stability, especially amid growing discontent among young, educated layers of society and the increasingly visible protests.

SOCIETY VS. THE REGIME

Serbia is now facing the consequences of decade of opportunistic balancing. A system built on authoritarian power, corruption, and external neutrality is colliding with its limits – both due to geopolitical shifts and domestic pressures. In this context, the country must choose: either clearly commit to the values of liberal democracy and institutional reform, or slide toward the model of an isolated, unstable, and authoritarian state.

Responsibility also lies with the West for its policy of indulging the regime in Belgrade, which has proven unsuccessful. This has also had another consequence: a lack of support for those who genuinely strive for European values. Still, the key struggle will be fought within Serbia itself – between a regime that feeds on the past and a society that seeks to free itself from its legacy.

STUDENT REVOLT SHAKES SERBIA

The student protests in Serbia spread over months, gaining increasing public support and evolving into a general uprising. Students were joined by professors and educators, leading to the blockade of the entire education system for

months. Their resistance was further reinforced by other professional groups, giving the protests a broad and profound character.

The mass rebellion, lasting for almost a year, has laid bare the country's deep political, institutional, social, and moral crisis. The students' resistance has become a direct response to this situation and a key driver of change, particularly due to the growing support of the wider population.

A NEW GENERATION OF STUDENTS: THE VOICE OF REASON AND CONSTITUTIONAL PATRIOTISM

After months of student protests, the public raised numerous questions about what students actually think, what values they stand for, and what their political orientation is. Especially after June 28, when nationalist speeches dominated the Belgrade rally, doubts and speculation emerged about the direction in which the movement was developing.

However, the first in-depth research among students of the University of Belgrade and the University of Arts – participants in student plenums – provides extremely important insights and dispels many prejudices. The research was conducted by Slobodan Marković, professor of political anthropology at the Faculty of Political Sciences and the Institute for European Studies, and Miloš Bešić, professor of methodology at the same faculty. The survey covered the period from January 23 to May 20. The authors note that the results would

have been different if all students of Serbian universities had been included.¹

Given that the Vidovdan rally provoked many negative comments not only in Serbia but also abroad, this research makes it clear that the student movement is heterogeneous, and that nationalists had in fact taken over the Vidovdan rally. The daily *Politika* commented on it as follows: "Instead of compassion, we got a myth. Instead of a plan for safety and accountability – a call for national rebirth." The article further noted that "Milo Lompar, professor of literature, offered a spiritual architecture that had once already destroyed the former Yugoslavia."²

DIVERSITY OF VIEWS, BUT A COMMON FOCUS

The research findings show that students represent a politically diverse group: among them are both liberal and conservative voices, as well as those who support European integration and those who are skeptical. Yet what unites them is strong opposition to violence, repression, and corruption, as well as a commitment to justice, institutions, and the rule of law.

Interestingly, support for Serbia's accession to the European Union is higher among students than in the general population. They are also, in majority, against the concentration of power in the hands of the president, which further confirms that the movement is not just an expression of temporary

1 "Šta sve nismo znali o njima," *Vreme*, July 17, 2025.

2 Dragan Novak: "Preobražaj studentskih protesta," *Politika*, July 15, 2025.

discontent, but of a profound need to change the political culture.³

CONSTITUTIONAL PATRIOTISM AS A FOUNDATION

While speeches at the Belgrade protest on June 28 were contradictory, protests in Kragujevac and Niš clearly reflected the liberal character of the student movement. Those speeches testified to a new form of patriotism – constitutional patriotism – not based on ethnic or religious exclusivity, but on respect for the Constitution, human rights, and equality of all citizens.

One of the most striking moments was a symbolic gesture of solidarity with students from Sandžak, which broke the entrenched narrative about the impossibility of joint action between Serbs and Bosniaks. These protests showed that the new generation does not accept political divisions along ethnic lines but advocates for a shared civic framework.⁴

The Vidovdan protest (June 28) was also surprising because the narrative tied to that date has been in circulation for the past four decades. The Vidovdan myth is linked to the war ideology that destroyed Yugoslavia. Some argue that this also showed the far right turning away from Vučić, such as Professor Milo Lompar. From the stage, Lompar declared that “celebrating the Kosovo choice is not a memory of defeat, but a call to endeavor”; he went on to speak about “Serbian integralism,” which includes “defending the sovereignty” of the

Bosnian entity Republika Srpska, where Serbs form the majority, as well as protecting the rights of Serbian populations in Montenegro, Croatia, and North Macedonia.

Although support for the students in the region and in Europe was not questioned, regional and global media paid particular attention to the messages conveyed at the Vidovdan protest. It is important, however, to keep in mind that veterans and biker groups had also provided support to the students, and that it was precisely they who, on March 15, prevented a bloody scenario that the government had planned. This was a very heterogeneous group, but it became evident that with these actions, the regime had crossed a red line.

Even one of the veterans, Goran Samardžić, who in the early 1990s, as a twenty-year-old, had believed the war-mongering propaganda against Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, addressed the students at the protests in front of RTS. In his speech, he accused the public broadcaster of propaganda, calling it a “kitchen for spreading lies and hatred.” He added that his generation had believed “we were doing the right thing, that we were the good ones, and that the others were evil. And the others thought the same of themselves. And then the wheel of evil began to turn, and it hasn’t stopped to this day for many.” He concluded with a message to the parents of children from Novi Pazar not to worry, because “there are no longer our children and your children – they are all our children.”⁵

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Radio Free Europe: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ratni-veteran-govor-rts-beograd-studenti/33392776.html>

That cathartic speech was important as a sincere message to young people, who know almost nothing about that period, since the narrative they are fed through the education system and public discourse is a deliberate falsification of those events – especially of Serbia's role in them.

A GENERATION THAT REJECTS MANIPULATION

As Professor Slobodan Marković points out, the research indicates that there is now a generation that can no longer be manipulated by identity-based narratives. Although students do not reject the question of identity, it is not their central political determinant. For them, identity is a part of personal integrity, but not an excuse for undermining the constitutional order. “For this generation, identity is a step toward the Constitution – not a way of bypassing it,” Marković concludes. This is, without doubt, one of the most important novelties brought by the contemporary student movement.

SOCIETY'S RESPONSE

The student protests, which have grown into a broader civic movement, represent a response to a state of affairs that demands a fundamental change of the system. The students' demands – justice, accountability, functional institutions – clearly express a vision of the future that stands in stark contrast to the existing model of corruption and the criminalization of the state.

Pressure in the country is mounting from all sides. On the one hand, society is increasingly vocal in demanding reforms,

while the authorities resist and respond with ever more open violence – which only further fuels rebellion and resistance. This conflict clearly exposes the deep rift between an authoritarian order and the democratic potential awakening from within.

Student and civic protests have mobilized a society that for decades had been apathetic and averse to resistance. Although still without a clearly articulated alternative to the regime, the student uprising has become a trigger for a broader social revolt. It marks the beginning of a long and difficult process of establishing a system of values and political responsibility.

Without a new social and political paradigm, without a new reference system of values, it is difficult to imagine the defeat of Vučić's regime under the existing circumstances. As shown by the recent local elections in Kosjerić and Zaječar, the regime is prepared for systematic abuses – from the usurpation of electoral mechanisms to the instrumentalization of institutions.

In the public sphere, the aesthetic-ethical code of the “SNS entertainment scene” still dominates, one that has hollowed out culture, education, and critical thinking. The opposition has been delegitimized by the repeated phrase that it “wants power at all costs” – a label now also used against the student protests.

Regime commentators seek to trivialize student blockades, portraying them as whims rather than political convictions. The blockades, which continued even after the

Vidovdan gathering (June 28), when early elections were demanded, were described as a “caprice,” compared to a child locking the door and shouting out of spite. Yet such reactions reveal precisely the fear of the authentic energy emerging from the streets – an energy that could spark genuine change⁶. As further noted: “The fact that the blockades are failing is not a sign of the people’s disinterest but of their wisdom and political intuition.”⁷

However, contrary to such dismissive evaluations by regime commentators, public opinion surveys show a different picture. According to the results of a poll conducted by the Sprint Insight agency in late June and early July, the student list would win a convincing victory if elections were held now – with 54.8 percent support compared to 42.1 percent for Vučić’s regime.⁸

The same research shows that Serbian citizens place the greatest trust in the church and the army. Students are in third place, followed immediately by university professors – a sign of the restored legitimacy of the academic community in the public eye.⁹

It is also telling that Novak Đoković, the world-renowned tennis player, ranks first as the personality who could lead the student list. This, among other things, explains the

6 . [Zoran Đorđević, “The Beacon of Failure of an Improvised Uprising,” *Politika*, July 3, 2025]

7 . Ibid.

8 If elections were held tomorrow, students would ‘sweep’ Vučić, *Danas*, July 18, 2025

9 Ibid.

increasingly frequent tabloid attacks on him – by the very same media that for years portrayed him as Serbia’s most important global icon.¹⁰

Vučić’s hesitation to call early parliamentary elections clearly leads to the conclusion that the numbers are not in his favor. Journalist Andrej Ivanji, who published the Sprint Insight research, believes that over the past decade Vučić has only participated in rigged elections, that he avoids political risk, plays it safe whenever possible, and deliberately manufactures crises in order to resolve them – using this as political marketing. Considering the results of the poll, Ivanji concludes that Vučić will not call elections and will do everything to postpone them for as long as he can.¹¹

However, there is speculation that elections could be held by the end of the year. The regime clearly counted on the summer to extinguish the rebellion, but on the other hand, predictions of a “hot autumn” of protests are becoming more frequent. From the moment students in blockade officially demanded early parliamentary elections, public discussion increasingly turned to the idea of the broadest possible front with one common goal – the struggle against the Serbian Progressive Party regime led by Aleksandar Vučić.¹²

In post-conflict and transitional societies such as Serbia, politics is often not conducted as an institutional process but as a struggle for personal legitimacy, prestige, and power. The

10 Ibid.

11 . “The Numbers Are Not in Vučić’s Favor,” *Danas*, July 21, 2025

12 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/diplomatskim-krugovima-kola-ova-prica-izborima-evo-sta-je-potrebno-da-bi-se/jk4yrlh>

key problem lies in a political culture that does not recognize institutions as spaces of cooperation, but rather as arenas for struggle and domination. This is especially evident in the case of President Vučić, who sees himself as the “true leader” of Serbia.

Furthermore, the current regime also functions as an interest group that has significantly enriched itself in recent years and now seeks to preserve its privileges. It is worth noting that EXPO 2027 is only the latest in a series of major projects linked to non-transparent deals and potentially high levels of corruption.

STUDENTS LIBERATED SERBIA FROM FEAR

Despite attempts to belittle not only the student protests but also a growing part of society, Aleksandar Vučić's regime has systematically tried to suppress resistance through violence, blackmail, dismissals, withholding of salaries – especially from teachers and university professors – as well as corrupt practices such as vote-buying, seen in Kosjerić and Zaječar. Yet, it has not succeeded.

Vučić's regime fails to respond to the crisis because it does not understand the new generation of youth and does not know how to confront it. Although this generation grew up in a toxic atmosphere, in which liberal values were systematically denied, Serbia's responsibility for the wars of the 1990s was minimized, and relations with neighbors were undermined, it nevertheless matured into a strong community – both conservative and liberal, but also digitally literate and

hard to penetrate. Their readiness to sacrifice, perseverance, and determination to fight for a better Serbia represent a profound challenge to the existing regime.

Above all, students have played one key role – they have liberated society from fear. Assemblies and plenums organized across Serbia represent a process of reconstituting the torn social fabric. This may be their greatest success: the student movement has delegitimized President Vučić, who for years seemed omnipresent and politically invincible.

Unable to translate the crisis into the political sphere and initiate dialogue on a transition of power, Aleksandar Vučić has resorted once again to violence and aggression – the very methods with which he began his political career in the 1990s. He declared the protests to be a “color revolution” financed, according to his claims, by the West, while at the same time attempting to maintain a balance in relations with external actors, including the European Union.

Amid the student protests that marked Serbia's political scene throughout 2024 and 2025, an unusual fenced-off area appeared in front of the Presidency building, in Pioneers' Park – with benches, books, and messages about “peace and learning.” The authorities presented it as a refuge for students who, unlike the protesters, “want to study, not rebel.”¹³

13 [However, the public – and especially the students themselves – quickly and ironically dubbed the space *Ćacilend*. Although conceived as a place for studying, it remains almost empty, apart from a few individuals, some of whom, according to testimonies, have criminal backgrounds.]

Even though universities have continued with regular classes, Ćacilend still stands, and it remains unknown when it will be removed from this central public space.¹⁴

Political analyst Dragomir Anđelković, a former SNS member, points out that President Vučić fears a potential breakdown of the police chain of command in moments of crisis. According to him, Ćacilend serves as a cover that would allow the regime, if necessary, to deploy paramilitary formations composed of criminal mercenaries into central Belgrade. Such a Ćacilend, Anđelković stresses, has nothing to do with the student blockades, but is rather a product of Aleksandar Vučić's growing awareness that the majority of Serbia no longer supports him.¹⁵

THE REGIME'S RESPONSE

After the largest protest, with at least 300,000 participants on March 15 in Belgrade, the regime demonstrated just how far it was willing to go in its confrontation with students and citizens. According to available data from the Report on the State and Endangerment of Human Security, Human Rights, and Freedoms in the Republic of Serbia (January 15 – March 31, 2025)¹⁶, it is clear that there was a pre-prepared scenario that anticipated clashes. This is also confirmed by the use of sonic weapons, the so-called “sound cannon,” at the moment

when the crowd was paying tribute to the victims of the Novi Sad tragedy.

During the protests, and especially after March 15, pro-regime media promoted the narrative that the opposition, students, and NGOs allegedly sought to provoke chaos, bloodshed, and the disintegration of the state. This was accompanied by claims that the West was organizing and financing a “color revolution.” Such rhetoric serves a dual purpose: to consolidate support for the ruling party and to intimidate politically undecided citizens.

For that purpose, the ethno-nationalist matrix of the 1990s was reactivated, focusing on “Ustaše,” “traitors,” “separatists,” “internal enemies,” and “foreign agents,” as well as on the narrative of a conspiracy by neighbors and the West against Serbia. These messages are broadcast daily on government-controlled TV channels – Pink, Happy, Prva, RTS, and others.

However, the attempt to delegitimize the protests as a threat to the survival of the state has not succeeded. The government is increasingly less perceived as the sole guarantor of stability and peace.

¹⁴ “Ćacičend bez svrhe, Pionirski park i dalje pod opsadom”, *Danas*, 22. jul 2025.

¹⁵ [“Ćacilend Without Purpose, Pioneers' Park Still Under Siege,” *Danas*, July 22, 2025

¹⁶ <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/AD%20HOC%20-%20PRVI%20IZVESTAJ.pdf>

II. ABUSE OF INSTITUTIONS

A special role in the vengeful campaign against all dissenters and critics of the government – not only those who supported the students or participated in blockades, but more broadly, as has been the pattern throughout Aleksandar Vučić's 13 years in power – has been played by the police, the prosecution, pro-regime media, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and educational and cultural policies.

Physical violence against protesters intensified over the summer. In addition to regular police, many criminals were dressed in police uniforms and acted with particular brutality, alongside the gendarmerie and especially the Unit for the Protection of Persons and Facilities. During his 13 years in power, Vučić carried out a kind of “engineering” within the police – through dismissals, forced retirements, restructuring, and selective promotions.

Trust in judicial institutions has been seriously undermined. The judiciary's untimely and selective actions clearly point to the systemic abuse of law and violation of constitutional principles. Particularly alarming is the use of repressive measures, which increased during student and civic protests.

POLITICAL PRESSURE ON THE JUDICIARY

The judiciary has long been under strong political pressure and corrupt influence, which has led to the complete collapse of its function to effectively sanction crime. Criminals from various spheres of society, including corruption networks and political elites, not only remain unpunished

but are often institutionally protected, placed in important positions, and involved in illegal business arrangements.

The prosecution's long-standing silence in response to brutal public threats and calls for violence directed at minorities, the LGBT population, migrants, political opponents, and protesters has become the norm. This practice enables systemic repression at all levels of government.

Investigations that run counter to the regime's interests are blocked or discredited, while responsibility and blame are shifted onto prosecutors.

Civil liberties in Serbia are being systematically undermined. Dissenters, especially protesters, are publicly branded as “terrorists,” “anti-Serbs,” “Ustaše,” and “enemies of the state.” Their personal data are frequently made public, exposing them to threats and physical attacks. In these organized propaganda campaigns, regime-controlled media play a central role, acting as an extension of the government.

The passivity of judicial authorities is the result of deeply entrenched corruption and appointments based on political loyalty. Judges, prosecutors, and even lawyers are often selected according to party criteria, which has led to the judiciary being treated as an extension of the executive branch and its institutionalized corruption.

SECURITY SERVICES IN DEFENSE OF VUČIĆ'S REGIME

In the government's response, there has been a sudden shift in the perception of security issues. Instead of dialogue, repressive and unlawful methods were used: surveillance of citizens through biometric cameras, deployment of unregistered means of coercion (sound cannon), engagement of paramilitary and para-police groups, and abuse of the police and the Security Information Agency (BIA). At the same time, an information war was waged, using the narrative of a "color revolution" and foreign agents – imported from Moscow – to delegitimize citizens' demands domestically.

Of particular significance was the regime's entanglement with organized crime structures and Russian intelligence services, which further distanced Serbia from European standards, eroded democratic control over institutions, and normalized political violence.

These processes point to a serious erosion of civil liberties, growing authoritarianism, and risks for the stability of the entire Western Balkans region.

MEDIA CRISIS IN SERBIA: BETWEEN SHUTDOWNS, PROPAGANDA, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR PLURALISM

The media landscape in Serbia is in deep crisis, marked by newsroom closures, financial collapse, political pressures, and growing foreign influence. Independent outlets face mounting debts, the withdrawal of key donors (USAID, IREX), and blocked access to state funding, while pro-government

media enjoy generous budgetary and advertising support. European donors impose strict conditions without providing institutional backing, whereas Moscow-funded outlets freely spread pro-Russian narratives and conspiracy theories, further shrinking the space for pluralism.

The allocation of broadcasting frequencies secures dominance for pro-government broadcasters, while channels such as N1 and Nova are available only through cable systems. Public trust in the media has eroded due to polarization, the government's refusal to communicate with independent journalists, and orchestrated tabloid smear campaigns, leading to a record number of attacks on reporters. At the same time, social media platforms have become the primary source of information, but also fertile ground for disinformation, hate speech, and targeting.

This situation threatens democracy and Serbia's European integration, while the EU largely remains passive. Recommendations include easing donor funding criteria, establishing stable and independent media institutions, and highlighting these issues more strongly in EU reports. Investigative portals continue to operate successfully, but without dissemination in mainstream outlets their impact remains limited. Unless the crisis is resolved soon, there is a real danger that Serbia could be left without independent media and without journalists.

EDUCATION AND CULTURE: THE GAP BETWEEN STRATEGIC GOALS AND PRACTICE

Amid political crisis, post-election tensions, and social traumas, education and culture have been instrumentalized to impose a conservative, ethno-national identity based on so-called “traditional values.” Key documents and measures – from the Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space to the Manual on Fostering National Identity – exclusively promote the Serbian cultural framework, ignoring the society’s multiethnic reality. With drastically low investment in contemporary cultural production, opaque grant competitions, and centralized decision-making, the government marginalizes independent actors, stifles institutional autonomy, and rewards political loyalty.

Numerous conflicts marked 2024 and 2025 – from politically motivated incursions into the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, and later the student campus, to protests by cultural workers, as well as mass student and high school blockades following the tragedy at the Novi Sad railway station. The regime’s response, based on authoritarian control and rhetoric that the state “owns” society, further deepened the divide between the authorities and the education-cultural sector, confirming its perception as both a source of crisis and potential resistance.

President Vučić has been particularly hostile toward culture. The dire state of cultural policy drew the reaction of more than 40 European artists and intellectuals, whose appeal was published in *Le Monde*. The appeal highlighted the

abolition of leading artistic positions, replaced by boards of directors appointed by municipal assemblies (i.e., controlled by the ruling SNS). In this way, authorities gained the ability to cancel and control numerous cultural programs. In Belgrade, the summer festival BELEF, the October Salon, BITEF, and the International Film Festival FEST were all canceled. In Novi Sad, measures were taken against artists and cultural workers, subsidies for major festivals were cut, and all projects of the university’s drama department – including the Ecological Theatre Festival for Children and Youth – were canceled. In Zrenjanin, declared Serbia’s Cultural Capital for 2025, public competitions were withdrawn without explanation. In Šabac, the theatre director dismissed all staff who supported the protests. Across Serbia, local authorities demanded that directors provide lists of employees participating in blockades and protests, so that their contracts would not be renewed. [“In Serbia, freedom of thought, expression, and artistic creation no longer exists,” Danas, July 21, 2025.] Meanwhile, artists supportive of the Serbian Progressive Party have been awarded prizes and positions regardless of the artistic quality of their work. [Ibid.]

THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DIVISIONS

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) is one of the institutions that traditionally enjoys the highest levels of trust among Serbian citizens. It has played a significant role in shaping values, particularly so-called “family values” and in

fostering anti-Western, anti-liberal orientations. It has had a special role, especially under Patriarch Porfirije, in the context of social and political divisions in Serbia that escalated during the months-long student and civic protests.

The Patriarch has publicly emphasized the need for dialogue and avoiding taking sides, while also responding to incidents of violence against students. However, the absence of a clear and decisive stance from the SOC on the protests provoked criticism from parts of the public and intellectual community, as well as internal debate within the Church. A series of controversial public statements by certain church officials – including texts depicting students as “Serbian Ustaše” or as agents of “color revolutions” – triggered condemnation from six bishops and part of the clergy, who publicly distanced themselves from such rhetoric and expressed support for the students.

These events highlight the Church’s deep internal divisions between a universalist approach based on Gospel values and a particularist, politically charged discourse, further reflecting the broader societal tensions in Serbia.

III. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND THE CRISIS IN SERBIA

Serbia’s international standing and reputation have changed dramatically in recent months, even though Aleksandar Vučić’s political “star” has been in decline since the beginning of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. The policy of the Western international community, especially the European Union, over the past decade has largely focused on supporting a stabilocracy without addressing the country’s and the region’s deeper problems. This approach has allowed Vučić to present himself, in a still-fragile and unconsolidated Western Balkans, as a factor of stability to world leaders.

However, this tolerance of his behavior has enabled him to become a creator of chaos, particularly when facing domestic political challenges such as student and civic protests. Serbia’s growing isolation is also evidenced by the drastically reduced frequency of communication with both regional countries and major world capitals.

As a way to counter his deteriorating position, Vučić has tried to secure a special role between Washington and Moscow. At one point, he even offered Belgrade as a host for a meeting between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump.¹⁷

However, his attempt to access the Republican Party donor conference in Florida failed, as did the offer for Belgrade to host a summit meeting, which would have allowed

¹⁷ <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/5624917/vucic-srbija-ce-zvanicno-ponuditi-da-bude-domacin-susreta-trampa-i-putina.html>

informal discussions of state matters at a party convention and dinner organized by President Trump.

Meanwhile, Vučić's reception in Moscow on May 9, during the Victory Day parade (criticized by Western capitals), was extremely cold and protocol-minimal.¹⁸ This seriously damaged the image he had cultivated for years as a politician accepted as an equal interlocutor both in the East and the West. Nevertheless, Vučić later met with Putin again in Beijing, where he attended the controversial Chinese military parade in early September.

Although the European Union increasingly views him with distrust, it remains the only institution providing him with formal support, despite the deepening internal crisis and growing potential for violence. Vučić's attempts to maintain the image of a leader with strong international standing are slowly eroding.

Despite "strong warnings" from the EU regarding his trip to Moscow, no sanctions followed. On the contrary, immediately after that visit, the EU disbursed the first tranche of the Regional Growth Plan worth €51.7 million.¹⁹ Additionally, under the agreement on financing the multiannual operational program for environmental and energy sectors, Serbia received €240 million in EU grant funds.²⁰

¹⁸ [<https://direktno.rs/vesti/drustvo-i-ekonomija/606795/vucic-moskva-docek.html>]

¹⁹ <https://n1info.rs/biznis/evropska-komisija-uplatila-517-milion-evra-povoljnih-zajmova-u-drzavni-budzet-srbije/>

²⁰ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/eu-odobrili-srbiji-240-miliona-evra-besporatno/>

EU statements have been carefully worded but have not been matched by adequate actions. Commissioner Kaja Kallas, during her visit to Belgrade, urged Serbia to strategically align with the EU, yet this had little impact. The visit of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, together with European Council President Charles Michel, also conveyed a certain public indifference, urging Serbia to make "real progress" in EU-related reforms. The EU Rule of Law Report for Serbia, published in July, notes ongoing strong political pressure on the judiciary and civil society actors, and growing concern for the safety of journalists.²¹

German commentator Markus Schönherr observes that if "UN and EU representatives warned Vučić not to escalate further, it is increasingly clear that the West lacks the means to exert pressure. The aimless policy toward the Balkans and Serbia's increasingly hopeless EU accession prospects have contributed to this. This is dangerous – not only because Serbia still wields enormous regional influence and could spark new conflicts at the EU's doorstep at any time, but also because Vučić's government constantly flirts with Russia."²²

Neither then nor later was there a strong reaction to the growing autocracy, which contradicts the declared values of the EU that Vučić ostensibly seeks. Neither the EU nor Russia sees a clear alternative to Vučić, whose political authority in the country has not been seriously challenged by any

²¹ <https://n1info.hr/regija/zasto-evropska-unija-gleda-kroz-prste-vucicu-srbija-je-vjesto-iskoristila-svoje-odnose-s-rusijom/>

²² <https://www.rnd.de/politik/kommentar-wohin-fuehrt-vucics-weg-serbien-zwischen-autokratie-und-demokratie-WWKRM3W4VFDDEEQK2ZW44F6NQ.html>

opposition figure. This is the result of decades of criminalization of the opposition and discrediting of all critical voices. This atmosphere has led even students to distance themselves from both the opposition and the civil sector.

While Serbia's arms sales to Ukraine were known to Russia from the start, a sharp response came only recently, given Serbia's role as a key partner in the region. These warnings can be interpreted as pressure on Vučić to confirm and justify that position. Moscow is aware of his "sitting on multiple chairs" policy but has so far tolerated this strategy. However, Russian ideologue Alexander Dugin's statement that "Vučić has lost legitimacy and that dissatisfaction with him in Serbia is widespread" sends a serious signal.²³

Both Vučić and Milorad Dodik have high expectations from the new U.S. administration, but so far there has been no shift in American policy toward the Western Balkans. The latest U.S. State Department report on Serbia highlights a range of systemic problems in 2024, including restricted media freedom, threats and physical attacks on journalists, and an inefficient judiciary, necessitating urgent reforms.²⁴

The report on Bosnia and Herzegovina notes that escalating verbal and legal attacks by RS President Milorad Dodik undermine the country's constitutional order, while provocative rhetoric by RS officials has increased political and ethnic tensions nationwide.²⁵

²³ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/aleksandar-dugin-putinov-filozof-vucicu-je-dosao-kraj-njegov-legitimitet-je-nestao/>

²⁴ <https://fonet.rs/politika/Srbija/36702001/sistemski-problemi-u-srbiji.html>

²⁵ <https://direktno.rs/vesti/region/628164/stejt-department-dodik.html>

GROWING EU CRITICISM OVER ESCALATING VIOLENCE

As violence, arrests, beatings, and intimidation of citizens escalated, Western media increasingly reported on regime repression in cities across Serbia. Coverage has criticized Western policies and called for a more realistic approach by EU governments and the Commission. Major global outlets such as The New York Times, Financial Times, The Guardian, Le Monde, Le Figaro, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, and DW report more critically on the situation in Serbia.

The Guardian, for instance, emphasizes that "protesters deserve greater support and solidarity from the European Union than they currently receive. Autocratic and cynical, Mr. Vučić is maliciously active in Western Balkan politics. Beyond Serbia's borders, he has long pursued a subversive and destabilizing ethno-nationalist agenda regarding Kosovo and Republika Srpska – the Bosnian Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within the country, he poses an increasing threat to democracy."²⁶

Seven UN special rapporteurs signed a report calling on Serbian authorities to halt crackdowns on students, professors, civil society, and citizens, and to respect human rights and freedom of assembly. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education Farida Shahid noted that "all are very concerned, as information received from various sources over the past few months and earlier indicates a systematic attempt to silence

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/25/the-guardian-view-on-protests-in-serbia-a-battle-for-democracy-that-the-eu-must-not-ignore>

critical voices and dismantle the independence of academic institutions.”²⁷[

Following extensive media coverage, the German government officially responded to the protests for the first time, telling authorities that “Serbia must explain attacks on demonstrators” and “warn[ing] the Serbian government to respect the rule of law and guarantee freedom of assembly.”²⁸

Western restraint does not mean that Serbia and the region are not under constant observation. Distrust of President Vučić and the situation in Serbia has intensified security monitoring across the country and the region. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized that the Alliance is “doing everything to stabilize the region” and is closely monitoring developments, particularly in Serbia.²⁹

The surprise three-hour visit of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni³⁰ and the mid-summer visit of Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer³¹ indicate messages related to regional stability, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as Belgrade is perceived as a major factor of instability.

27 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/izvestiteljka-un-niz-obaveza-koje-srbija-trenutno-krsi-zemlja-se-krece-ka-potpunoj-samovolji-vlasti/>

28 <https://nova.rs/vesti/svet/nemacka-vlada-srbija-mora-da-objasni-napadena-demonstrante/>

29 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/mark-rute-za-blic-nato-ce-uciniti-sve-za-stabilizaciju-u-regionu/g9wzb4e>

30 <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/107017/citanje-poruka-koje-je-dorda-meloni-poslala-u-beogradu-investicija-u-buduce-odnose-i-kontinuitet-po-pitanju-kosova/vest>

31 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/austrijski-kancelar-u-sutra-u-beogradu>

Western caution, as in previous years, reflects Brussels' concern that a firmer approach could push Belgrade closer to Moscow and Beijing, as well as jeopardize access to Serbian raw materials amid increasing global competition.

However, many media, experts, MEPs, and politicians argue that it is time for a much firmer stance toward Vučić's administration and to hold his loyalists in government, parliament, and judiciary accountable for authoritarian policies.³²

As a first step, the EU should consider suspending financial aid and preferential market access while increasing support for civil society and independent media.³³ Failure to adjust its approach risks losing a potential ally in Europe, as the country becomes increasingly divided between Kremlin-aligned states and democratic, anti-authoritarian forces.³⁴

Encouragingly, recent circumstances have prompted the EU to mobilize all its potential to safeguard the European project, under pressure from both Russia and the U.S. On July 16, the European Commission presented the draft of the new Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034, allocating nearly €2,000 billion for security and defense (Protect EU). In this context, EU enlargement has become a strategic and geopolitical imperative. The allocated budget will be accessible only with verified reforms and adherence to European standards.³⁵

32 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/andrij-vdovicenko-srbija-vucic/>

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 <https://radar.nova.rs/politika/plan-eu-za-zapadni-balkan/>

Intense criticism of Vučić's regime and growing repression in Serbia led the European Parliament to hold a debate entitled "Wave of Violence and Continuous Use of Force Against Protesters in Serbia."³⁶ Sharp tones came especially from the Greens, Socialists, and Social Democrats.

Manfred Weber, chairman of the European People's Party (EPP) parliamentary group, stated that the future of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) within the EPP would be subject to internal discussion. He emphasized that the EPP is closely following events in Serbia and is "not blind" to recent images of violence, raising the question of SNS's status within the political family.³⁷

Vučić, however, claims he does not expect any change in SNS's status within the EPP or in relations with Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the party of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.³⁸

³⁶ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/evropski-parlament-srbija-rasprava-protesti/33526020.html>

³⁷ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/manfred-weber-evropska-narodna-partija-raspravljace-o-clanstvu-sns/>

³⁸ <https://www.vijesti.me/svijet/balkan/774456/vucic-ne-ocekujem-promjenu-statusa-sns-a-u-evropskoj-narodnoj-partiji>

GERMAN SUPPORT IS KEY

For more than a decade – particularly during Chancellor Angela Merkel's tenure – Germany has played a central role in shaping the EU's policy toward the Western Balkans. Berlin has consistently viewed Aleksandar Vučić as a "stable partner" who, despite his authoritarian style of governance, can guarantee peace in the region and create space for resolving the Kosovo issue. Vučić, in turn, skillfully exploited this perception: he adopted pro-European rhetoric while simultaneously deepening ties with Russia, China, and other authoritarian regimes.

Germany's policy was largely driven by the logic of stabilitocracy – prioritizing short-term stability over democratic transformation. This approach allowed Vučić to present himself internationally as a guarantor of order in the fragile and unconsolidated Western Balkans.

The Brussels Agreement initially provided justification for this stance, but its relevance faded after the first three years. By 2016, attempts to partition Kosovo (led by Rama, Thaçi, and Vučić) had emerged, culminating in an open debate at a conference in Austria in 2019. Chancellor Merkel blocked that proposal, while Thaçi was later indicted for war crimes and transferred to The Hague. Since then, the dialogue has been effectively stalled, and relations between Kosovo and Serbia have been completely blocked. On the contrary, Serbia has once again sought to destabilize the situation – most notably through the violent incident in Banjska (2023). Meanwhile,

Vučić continues to maintain a toxic anti-Kosovo narrative, undermining any possibility of normalization.

Germany is Serbia's largest trading partner. Thousands of jobs in Serbia depend on German investments. Berlin's logic was that economic ties would "bind" Serbia to the EU – based on the assumption that economic dependence would gradually draw the country toward European norms.

By late summer, German media began reporting more objectively on the crisis in Serbia, likely signaling a shift in the official stance. Indeed, all reports concluded that a change in approach toward Serbia is necessary.

Reliance on Vučić as a guarantor of stability persists, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. The question is how long the EU can sustain this illusion as Serbia sinks deeper into authoritarianism and geopolitical balancing at the EU's expense (illustrated by Vučić's visits to Moscow and Beijing despite Brussels' discontent). Some argue that uncertainty over who could replace Vučić only deepens doubts about the EU's credibility and its commitment to its own values. Many protesters in Serbia firmly believe that Berlin and Brussels still stand behind Vučić.

The protests will not stop, and regime violence will likely intensify. This makes a systemic shift in the EU's – especially Germany's – approach to Serbia imperative. It is crucial to break the widespread perception that the EU is weak in the face of Vučić's authoritarianism. Although the EU has condemned state violence, it has so far avoided directly pointing to Vučić's responsibility, as well as the responsibility of his

government and police. The time has come for Germany and the EU to adopt a firmer stance toward Serbia. They have all the necessary tools at their disposal – what has been lacking is the political will to use them.

MOSCOW: THOUGH UNRELIABLE, VUČIĆ STILL IN THE GAME

Although Vučić does not enjoy Moscow's full trust because of his balancing policy, Russia issued a statement following the escalation of violence, emphasizing that "the shift from peaceful protests to a violent scenario is taking place despite the fact that the country's leadership is taking the current situation and existing problems seriously." The statement added: "Russia cannot remain indifferent to what is happening in fraternal Serbia, which, under difficult conditions, finds the strength to preserve its independence and defend its sovereignty." Moscow expressed confidence that "Serbia will withstand attempts to undermine the internal unity of the Serbian people, which is essential at this historical moment."³⁹

Moscow has also characterized the protests in Serbia as a "color revolution," something the Serbian President has repeatedly thanked Russia for – particularly for its help in fighting what he consistently claims is a Western-backed "color revolution."

In addition to official support for the regime, some Russian media emphasize that Serbian citizens are protesting against the arrogance of the elite surrounding Vučić, which

³⁹ Statement of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 15, 2025

enriches itself at the expense of the state treasury. They stress that the protests are also aimed against the subordination of the country to the interests of transnational corporations, U.S. and EU political control, and the handover of national resources to Western companies.

A particular point of criticism is that Vučić is not genuinely committed to the Serbo-Russian “brotherhood,” but uses friendship with Russia solely for personal gain: “He is not our son of a bitch.” These commentaries conclude that Russia must clearly determine what in Serbia is constant and what is variable: the “constant” is the majority pro-Russian, Orthodox population, while the “variable” is Vučić and his entourage. “If Moscow sacrifices the constant for the sake of the variable, it will lose Serbia.”⁴⁰

Vučić recently attended the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II celebrations in Beijing, where he met with Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. However, as retired ambassador Srećko Đukić observed, apart from “massive publicity in

Serbia – where Vučić will again boast of meeting leaders representing half the world’s population in a single day – I don’t see any tangible results from this trip.”⁴¹

Russia has always had a strong base in Serbia, but the current regime has enabled its deeper infiltration into the security services. A large part of the academic community, as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church, is pro-Russian. Through its channels, Moscow also exerts influence on parts of the student movement.

Vučić enjoyed Moscow’s support as long as he dominated the political scene in Serbia, but it is evident that this support has weakened. This is particularly clear in the case of NIS, which threatens to plunge Serbia into a deep economic crisis because President Vučić failed to resolve the issue of U.S. sanctions in time.

⁴⁰ https://zvezdaweekly.ru/news/20258181841-JMnih.html?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fdzen.ru%2Fnews%2Fstory%2F3c527471-97f3-5377-aefe-69180873a23f

⁴¹ <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-danas-u-kini-s-putinom-djinpingsom-erdoganom-i-kim-dzong-unom-predsednik-u-prirodnom-okruzenju-diktatora-srbiji-ponovo-nanosistetu/>

IV. COUNTDOWN TO THE COLLAPSE OF THE SYSTEM

The ongoing protests, with no end in sight, have seriously eroded Vučić's power – something he clearly recognizes, given the daily escalation of repression. His attempts to shift the domestic crisis onto the so-called “Greater Serbian question” have failed both at home and in the region. First, he tried to present Vojvodina as a “secessionist threat,” then to portray students from Sandžak as “jihadists,” and finally to rally nationalist support by allegedly “saving” Milorad Dodik from a court ruling that bans him from political activity for the next six years.

Serbia is also experiencing economic stagnation and the withdrawal of foreign investors. A quarterly report by the European Commission on the economies of EU candidate and potential candidate countries shows that Western Balkan countries recorded lower growth than in the previous three months. Serbia – the largest economy in the region – experienced the sharpest slowdown, from 3.3% to 2%.

Although the regime has been violent from the beginning, the protests were mostly peaceful and without major incidents on the side of the demonstrators. However, the situation escalated in mid-August when groups of government supporters – often masked criminal groups – attacked the demonstrators. Contrary to Aleksandar Vučić's expectations that the protests would lose momentum over the summer, civil disobedience turned into massive uprisings across Serbia.

The government's response is becoming increasingly violent: the police are joined by criminal groups, the so-called “loyalists.” Instead of protecting citizens, the police shield Vučić's supporters, who throw objects at demonstrators – including firecrackers and tear gas. There are more and more threats involving firearms; some police officers have been seen pulling out their pistols, and a few have even fired shots into the air.

The police are struggling to maintain order, and the number of injured is rising on both sides. The President of Serbia is deliberately deepening the crisis and raising tensions in society. Pro-government football hooligans are appearing at protest sites and clashing with demonstrators, with the clear aim of provoking civil conflict.

President Vučić is visibly losing control of the situation, repeatedly threatening that the state will “restore order within a few days.” This explains the surge in repression against all actors – from independent media and students to ordinary citizens. Because of international attention, Vučić is avoiding declaring a formal state of emergency, although what happens at night on the streets of Serbian cities is essentially an undeclared state of emergency. One of the main reasons for not imposing it is the upcoming EXPO 2027, as it would likely deter many prospective participants.

Under pressure, Vučić tried to take the initiative by offering, in a televised address at the end of August, to debate with

protest representatives “on all our television channels, on all portals.” The offer was rejected as having come too late. The response from the protest movement was clear: early elections must be called immediately.

For now, Vučić’s strategy relies on time and on neutral reactions – especially from the EU. He hopes that prolonged protests will eventually lose momentum, allowing him to complete his presidential mandate through 2027. That would secure his grip on power until conditions are ripe for a more orderly exit.

By all indications, Vučić has opted for an Eastern-style despotism. This was particularly evident at the protest in Novi Sad – “Serbia, Can You Hear Us?” Novi Sad and Vojvodina are

under special pressure from the regime, as the uprising there is the most intense and complex. (The humiliation of Vojvodina began with the Anti-Bureaucratic Revolution of 1989, when its autonomy was abolished, followed by plunder, ethnic cleansing of minorities, and the resettlement of Serbian refugees from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo.)

Through his intransigence and determination to cling to power at any cost, Aleksandar Vučić is deepening a crisis that could end in even greater violence and the collapse of the regime, reminiscent of Albania in 1997. If the EU fails to respond to the violence seen in Novi Sad, then democracy and its values are on their last breath.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Serbia is officially committed to EU membership, yet the current government has made no real progress in that direction – particularly regarding Chapters 23 and 24. Given the changed geopolitical circumstances, and the fact that public support for EU membership has fallen below 40% compared to around 60% in the early 2000s, the EU's policy of appeasement toward Belgrade has proven unsuccessful. The student and civic protests have exposed the depth of Serbia's internal crisis – with an uncertain outcome.

The student movement has revealed the dysfunctionality of state institutions, the lack of professionalism, and systemic corruption, but it has also made visible the profound public discontent that culminated in the Novi Sad tragedy. Although the student movement has inspired a wider civic uprising, it has not yet transformed itself into a political actor, despite mass gatherings in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Niš.

Serbia is among the least safe countries in Europe. The militarization of society over the past decade, combined with organized crime, has deeply criminalized the entire system, leading to an increase in mass killings and everyday violence in various forms.

After 13 years of SNS and Vučić's rule, society has been fragmented and politically powerless. The protests have awakened society and initiated its reconfiguration, already visible in the emergence of new forums and assemblies. This process will

take time, but it will also lead to the articulation of new political options.

The process of confronting the recent past has not even begun. After the changes in 2000, a framework was established, and civil society was the main driver of these efforts. However, with SNS coming to power, not only was this process halted, but state policies in key areas – judiciary, media, culture, and education – have been redirected toward denial, relativization, and falsification of the past.

Although the Balkans are not currently a top priority for major powers, ignoring the crisis in Serbia could again turn the region into a hotspot of serious tension and conflict. The crisis cannot be resolved overnight, as it stems from decades of frustration, anger, and humiliation. Furthermore, the absence of a clear political orientation within society complicates the EU's leverage – despite the fact that it has all the necessary tools, which it has not yet fully utilized.

A systemic change in the EU's approach to Serbia is therefore essential, particularly to dispel the widespread perception of the EU's weakness toward Vučić. While the EU has condemned the violence, it has so far failed to clearly identify Vučić's role or the responsibility of the government and police.

To be effective and credible, the EU must redefine its policy toward Serbia by actively engaging in resolving the crisis, which has reached a point of unpredictability and risk of a violent scenario, given the behavior of the regime and President Vučić.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The continuation of the current regime only prolongs the agony and risks losing a potential ally on a continent increasingly divided between Kremlin-friendly states and democratic, anti-authoritarian forces.

Maintaining Vučić's regime in power under current conditions further enables Russia and China to strengthen their foothold in the Western Balkans.

The EU should respond decisively to the erosion of democracy in Serbia to prevent a destabilization scenario similar to Albania in 1997.

Offer a framework for a peaceful transfer of power and the institutionalization of the protest movement.

Demand clear accountability from state actors, particularly officials and police commanders who ordered or tolerated violence.

Apply financial pressure by suspending IPA pre-accession funds until measurable progress is made in fighting corruption, judicial reform, and media freedom.

Direct greater support to civil society as a key watchdog and partner in rebuilding public trust in democratic processes.

Clearly condition EU membership on full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, especially regarding Russia.

Recognize the importance of the student and civic movements in Serbia – particularly their role across all educational institutions. Reforming and supporting the education system is vital to transforming the country's value system. Safeguarding the autonomy of universities, currently under attack, is crucial, as higher education will be a key source of a new political elite.

Given the devastating impact of decades of nationalist policies, Serbia's democratic transition will likely take more than a decade. The EU should prepare and support long-term policies promoting democratic and liberal values to equip new generations to imagine and shape a European future for Serbia.

II – RULE OF LAW – THE FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRACY

One of the key indicators of a state's democratic character is the consistent rule of law – from the highest institutions to local self-governments. Its core lies in the equality of all before the law, which ensures the fairness of the judiciary, especially the prosecution offices as guarantors of human rights, legality, and the democratic order. In Serbia, public trust in institutions has been seriously eroded. The selective application of laws and the violation of constitutional principles have become the norm. During the student and citizen protests that began in November 2024, repressive measures – politically motivated prosecutions, violence, and demonization – were further intensified. Aleksandar Vučić's regime criminalizes students engaged in blockades, their professors, universities, and ordinary citizens. The students' demands for the prosecution and courts to act in accordance with the law and the Constitution are not accidental: the judiciary has for years been under political pressure and corroded by corruption, which has destroyed its basic function – the prevention and sanctioning of crime. Because of the chronic passivity of the prosecution, criminals – from corruption bosses to politically connected actors – not only remain free but are institutionally protected, rewarded with high offices, allowed to buy bankrupt companies, usurp property, and even take part in

diplomatic structures. Inaction by competent authorities is evident even in the gravest criminal cases. The long-standing disregard for brutal public calls to violence – against minorities, LGBT persons, migrants, political opponents, and protest participants – has led to the normalization of repression.

Abuse of Institutions and the Erosion of Civil Liberties
Civil liberties are being systematically undermined. Dissenters, especially protest participants, are labeled as “terrorists,” “anti-Serbs,” “Ustaše,” “enemies of the state,” and “traitors.” Their personal data – home addresses, workplaces, even university offices – are publicly disclosed, making them targets for attacks and public shaming. Pro-government media, including national television networks and tabloids, play a key role in this organized lynching. The passivity of the prosecution in cases of organized crime, questionable investments, privatizations, and the plundering of public resources is a consequence of systemic corruption. Politically loyal individuals have been appointed to leading positions in the judiciary and bar associations, turning the judiciary into an extension of the executive branch. Since the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power, corruption has become part of the institutional framework, especially in the sphere of influence-peddling.

THE TRIGGER: STUDENT REVOLT

The tragedy in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024 – when 15 people were killed under the collapsed canopy of the railway station (one severely injured person later died) – sparked mass student protests and blockades across the country. The “initial spark” was the attack on students and professors of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) in Belgrade on November 22, 2024. The students had symbolically blocked traffic on Boulevard of the Arts for one minute of silence at 11:52 a.m. – the moment the Novi Sad canopy collapsed – to honor the victims. The gathering was then met with verbal and physical attacks; among the assailants were local SNS officials, and several female attackers were recorded striking students with umbrellas. The incident triggered a mass student uprising that soon spread to almost all universities in the country. Four months later, Milena Aleksić, one of the attackers on the FDU students, signed a plea agreement, while among the accused were also Milija Koldžić, then a member of the Novi Beograd Municipal Council, and Ivan Stanišić.⁴²

FEAR OF EXPOSURE

As student demands grew louder and protests became larger, more persistent, and more creative, the government’s response became increasingly rigid, insidious, and aggressive. This is not merely about defending political power, but

⁴² “Incidents at Protests in Serbia: Plea Deal of the Attacker on FDU Students,” BBC Serbian, 25, 20 March 25

also about a deep fear of exposing criminal activities across almost every sector of society – revelations that could lead to long prison sentences for certain holders of power.

“Our demands are primarily focused on criminal accountability and the functioning of judicial institutions, which do not fall under the President’s jurisdiction. Responsibility for fulfilling our first demand – the publication of all documentation on the reconstruction of the Railway Station and establishing accountability for the deaths of 16 people – lies with the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office, the Chief Public Prosecutor Zagorka Dolovac, and the Office for Organized Crime,” said Tatjana Rašić, a 22-year-old student at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, in an interview with BBC Serbian.⁴³

Students and university professors refused to engage in dialogue with government representatives, insisting that their only point of reference was the law itself. They repeatedly protested in front of the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office, submitting hundreds of letters to the Chief Prosecutor demanding accountability.

The prosecution offices, and with them the entire judiciary, have become the focus of public criticism, having long symbolized the dysfunctionality of the rule of law. Amid an escalating social crisis, citizens increasingly see them as pillars of power subordinated to the executive branch, dominated by one man – President Aleksandar Vučić.

⁴³ “Student Blockades and Institutions: Who Is Responsible for Meeting the Demands,” BBC Serbian, March 25, 2025

Nearly five years ago, the portal Istinomer conducted a poll titled “Which Institutions Are Breaking Down the Most?”, in which citizens rated the public prosecution service as the most inefficient institution, with 24.35 percent of the votes. A new poll is hardly necessary: during the “Fight Back” protests, students occupying the University of Novi Sad voted the judiciary as the most discredited institution in the country.⁴⁴

Public distrust in the prosecution stems from the long-standing servility of its leadership toward those in power. Numerous corruption scandals involving ministers and other high-ranking officials have never reached a judicial conclusion – in most cases, proceedings were never even initiated. The prosecution has become a symbol of double standards: “We behead the small thieves, but tip our hats to the big ones.” In this vacuum of accountability, investigative journalism has taken over the role of law enforcement.⁴⁵

“Although many judges and prosecutors have watched the collapse of the judiciary with concern, few have been willing to speak out publicly. Most relied on institutions such as the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council, forgetting that personal responsibility begins the moment institutions fall silent. Open resistance was risky – due to numerous mechanisms for ‘disciplining’ the disobedient, including the possibility of losing one’s job.”⁴⁶

44 “We Behead the Small Thieves, but Tip Our Hats to the Big Ones,” Radar, April 18, 2025.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

‘RED LINES CROSSED’: JUDGES AND PROSECUTORS UNDER GOVERNMENT PRESSURE

Attacks and pressure from members of the legislative and executive branches on the judiciary have seriously undermined the entire legal order. Administrative Court Judge Vesna Danilović warned that the “red lines have been crossed” and that it is the responsibility of all judicial actors not to remain silent in the face of the judiciary’s collapse.⁴⁷ ⁴⁸Danilović emphasized that “the legal order is based on the separation of powers” and that, under the Constitution, the judiciary is independent and autonomous. She warned that in recent months a dangerous “symbiosis of the legislative and executive branches” has emerged, while the judiciary has become increasingly exposed to brutal pressures and inappropriate public remarks, especially from MPs and the President himself.⁴⁹

As a particularly alarming example, she cited the rally “We Won’t Give Up Serbia” held in Belgrade in April, during which President Vučić’s statements, she said, contained elements of criminal offenses – including obstruction of justice and abuse of office. Although, as she noted, she cannot make

47 “Judge Danilović: Attacks and Pressure on the Judiciary Have Crossed Red Lines,” Danas, April 24, 2025.

48

49 Ibid.

definitive claims, there are serious indications that this constituted improper influence on the judiciary.⁵⁰

Commenting on Vučić's announcement that he would file a criminal complaint against the prosecutor who refused to arrest "journalists from blockade-supporting media," Danilović stressed that anyone – including the President – has the right to file a complaint. However, she found the manner in which it was done highly problematic. "If the President believes someone has committed a crime, he can file a complaint – but quietly. When he does it publicly, at a moment when the prosecutor has only just ordered investigative actions, the message is dangerous: 'If you don't act as I expect, you will be prosecuted.' That is a threat – to both judges and prosecutors," warned Danilović.⁵¹

A CALL TO DEFEND THE PROFESSION: REACTION OF JUDGES AND PROSECUTORS

In April, a group of around 620 judges and public prosecutors issued a public appeal to their colleagues to stand up in defense of the profession, responding to statements by the President of the Republic which, in their view, crossed the limits of acceptability and entered the sphere of criminal liability.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid-

The statement reads: "In recent days, we have watched with deep concern the statements made by the President of the Republic of Serbia. These statements go beyond previous intrusions into the jurisdiction of judicial authorities, the tasteless commentary on ongoing proceedings, and now take on the characteristics of criminal acts.

Presidential immunity protects the President for votes cast and opinions expressed in the exercise of his office; however, direct interference in criminal proceedings falls outside presidential prerogatives.

By declaring that he would personally file a complaint against a public prosecutor who acted lawfully in a pre-investigative procedure – in a case where the President believes there are no grounds for prosecution – the President committed a blatant act of obstruction of justice. We believe this constitutes a criminal offense under Article 336b, Paragraph 2 of the Criminal Code ('Obstruction of Justice').

By dividing prosecutors and judges into 'loyal' and 'disloyal,' and using offensive language, the President continuously undermines the integrity and reputation of the judiciary and prosecution service.

Therefore, we call upon all our colleagues to stand in defense of our profession, of constitutionality and legality, remembering the oath we proudly took.

To everyone else we say: we will oppose any threat, insult, humiliation, or retaliation against any colleague who acts conscientiously and in accordance with the law.

In difficult times, the rule of law is the first to be tested – and we are its guardians. It is the final moment for everyone worthy of a judicial or prosecutorial office to rise in its defense.”⁵²

The tragedy in Novi Sad raised numerous questions about accountability, systemic failures, and institutional negligence. Society was shaken, demanding truth and justice. On the profile of the students occupying the Faculty of Electrical Engineering (@etfblokada), a message was posted in late July 2025: “270 days since the killings in Novi Sad. Zero accountable.”

CASE TRANSFERS AND FINGER-POINTING

After nearly nine months, the judicial record is dismal: three investigations opened, no verdicts, and no confirmed indictments. In other words, the judiciary has still not managed to identify all suspects responsible for the crimes that led to the deaths of 16 citizens.

The most progress has been made in the corruption-related case. On March 4, the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade filed an indictment against Slobodanka Katanić, Investment Development Manager at Infrastructure of Serbian Railways JSC; Milutin Savović, head of the technical inspection commission for the station; and Biljana Krstić, a member of the same commission. Katanić is charged with abuse of office and serious endangerment of public safety, while Savović

⁵² Statement of Judges and Public Prosecutors: “President’s Statements Take on Characteristics of Criminal Acts,” April 11, 2025

and Krstić are charged with professional negligence and the same grave offense.

Shortly afterward, the Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Office transferred the case to the Office for Organized Crime. Although the Higher Court in Belgrade confirmed the indictment, the appeal period has blocked the start of the trial. No decision has yet been made on the appeal – the Belgrade Court of Appeal confirmed that no hearing has been held in this case.

Meanwhile, the situation is even worse in the case directly concerning the deaths of the 16 victims. In late February, the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Novi Sad filed an indictment against 13 individuals, including several prominent figures: Goran Vesić, former Minister of Construction; Jelena Tanasković, acting director of Infrastructure of Serbian Railways at the time of the accident; her predecessor Nebojša Šurlan; and Anita Dimoski, former Assistant Minister.⁵³

Confirmation of this indictment is still pending, while the court and the prosecution continue to “trade accusations” – both through public statements and formal decisions. Retired Appellate Court Judge Savo Đurđić commented that “the court and the prosecution are accusing and obstructing each other in this case, instead of offering citizens answers, accountability, and justice.”⁵⁴

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⁵⁴ Slučaj nadstrešnica: “Loš primer selektivne pravde”, Radio 021, 21, 06 2025.

SELECTIVE JUSTICE AND INSTITUTIONAL OBSTRUCTION

Even at the investigation stage, a non-trial panel of the Higher Court in Novi Sad revoked the detention of Goran Vesić, even though it had been ordered earlier by the pre-trial judge. The court stated that the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office had not provided sufficient evidence to support a reasonable suspicion – a precedent in practice, especially in cases of this gravity and public visibility.

The same scenario repeated itself after the indictment was filed: detention for Vesić was again not ordered, even though the circumstances, the evidentiary material, and the description of the alleged acts are almost identical to those attributed to Anita Dimoski.

Retired Appellate Court Judge in Novi Sad Savo Đurđić believes that the Serbian judiciary cannot operate independently in cases where the executive exerts open pressure: “Unfortunately, although this is a case that provoked enormous public upheaval and represents the first demand of the student protests, the proceedings related to the canopy collapse remain a paradigmatic example of selective justice and unprofessional conduct by the judiciary. The prosecution has been attacked both from outside and from within – from the political top externally, and internally by politically compliant leaders.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Slučaj nadstrešnica: “Loš primer selektivne pravde”, Radio 021, 21, 06 2025.

Additional doubts about obstruction of the proceedings were raised by yet another postponement of hearings for experts and witnesses, after Goran Vesić's lawyer, Nemanja Aleksić, requested the disqualification of all prosecutors – from the acting prosecutor to the Supreme Prosecutor. This halted the entire case at the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad indefinitely. The postponement occurred just half an hour before the scheduled hearing of an expert and two witnesses proposed by the defence.⁵⁶

Aleksić also requested supplementary expert analysis and the involvement of the U.S. FBI to investigate the possibility of a terrorist attack – a move many saw as an attempt to further delay the process and distract from the core issues.⁵⁷

A dramatic turn followed on 1 August 2025, when the Office for Organized Crime (TOK) announced that, within the corruption investigation connected to the modernization project of the Novi Sad–Subotica–state border railway, 11 people had been arrested.

Among them were high-ranking former state officials: Tomislav Momirović, former Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure; Goran Vesić; Anita Dimoski, former acting Assistant Minister; Nebojša Šurlan, former director of Infrastructure of Serbian Railways; and several people from companies involved in the project.

The arrested are charged with abuse of office, embezzlement, money laundering, and crimes against public safety.

⁵⁶ Radio 021, 24 July 2025.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

According to TOK’s statement, these are the results of the work of a Strike/Task Force for financial investigations.

The proceedings include Goran Rosić (company “TECO”), Nenad Ignjatović (company “Deko tim”, suspected of tax evasion and money laundering) and Slobodanka Katanić, former investment manager at Infrastructure of Serbian Railways and responsible for implementing the Belgrade–Budapest project.⁵⁸

THEY DAMAGED THE BUDGET BY \$115 MILLION

The Office for Organized Crime announced that, by concluding several annexes to the Commercial Contract, the suspects – Tomislav Momirović, Goran Vesić, Anita Dimoski, Miloš Šurlan and Vladan Katanić – enabled the Chinese company China Railway International – China Communications Construction Company (CRIC–CCCC) to invoice the investor/financier a total of 1,214,100,460.43 USD for works performed to date, and to carry out additional works worth 64,258,060.00 USD, whose payment will follow later.

In this way the contractor obtained an economic benefit of at least 18,759,287 USD, while the budget of the Republic of Serbia suffered damage of 115,558,520.43 USD – representing the difference between assumed financial obligations and the contractual price in the original contract.

⁵⁸ N1, 01.08.2025.

The Strike/Task Force of the Prosecutor’s Office continues to investigate financial flows connected to all phases of the project “Modernization and reconstruction of the Hungarian–Serbian railway” on the Novi Sad – Subotica – Kelebija route. Earlier, Supreme Public Prosecutor Zagorka Dolovac ended a months-long dispute over jurisdiction by deciding to transfer the case to TOK after analysing the collected evidence. The investigation covers all stages – from planning and design, through execution of works, to the commissioning of the Novi Sad railway station.⁵⁹

ZELENOVIĆ: “AT LEAST €40 MILLION OVERPAID”

Speaking about the financial flows related to the canopy collapse, former co-leader of the party Zajedno, Nebojša Zelenović, said “the matter is very simple.” According to him, the entire work on the building and tracks was paid at €65 million, while expert estimates of market value vary between €15 and €25 million.

“Publishing the documentation would show that the authorities overpaid for the works by at least €40 million – and that 16 people died because of that theft,” Zelenović said, adding that such a revelation would inevitably lead to the fall of the Government and seriously jeopardize the position of the President of the Republic. He believes that the Office for

⁵⁹ N1: “Who is on the arrest list alongside Momirović and Vesić”, 1 August 2025.

Organized Crime would then have to prosecute all politicians and businessmen involved in the deal.⁶⁰

REACTIONS OF LEGAL EXPERTS: FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION OR POLITICAL SHOWDOWN?

After the Organized Crime Prosecutor’s Office (TOK) arrested 11 former officials in early August – among them Goran Vesić and Tomislav Momirović – public debate erupted: is this a genuine fight against corruption or a staged performance by those in power? Lawyer Božidar Prelević believes the case is not fabricated, noting that if it were, the government’s reaction would have been more subdued:

“When a prosecutor has solid evidence, it’s hard to stop him. Vučić spoke about Dodik instead of Vesić because he knows where the investigation is heading.” Prelević warned that it is dangerous for the authorities to label criminal proceedings against their own officials as a ‘prosecutorial coup d’état’. He sees this as a serious attack on judicial independence and an attempt to delegitimize the justice system.⁶¹

Appellate Court Judge Miodrag Majić reminds that arrests, although media-attractive, often do not lead to justice:

“The road from arrest to a final verdict is long and uncertain. Indictments can collapse, and convictions may be

⁶⁰ Fonet, interview for “Simptom” – Zelenović: I believe we can remove this regime peacefully.

⁶¹ Source: N1, “Prelević: Vesić Should Be Isolated While in Hospital,” August 3, 2025

overturned.”⁶² Similarly, prosecutor Radovan Lazić from CE-PRIS notes that most judges and prosecutors have for years passively watched the erosion of the judiciary, while only a few have dared to speak publicly about it.

A PRECEDENT: THE JUDICIARY VS. THE PRESIDENT

The student protests awakened a broad demand for justice and the rule of law, prompting some prosecutors to apply the law strictly – a development analysts say the president did not welcome. Vučić responded by warning that “prosecutors who do not protect the order and the law will be replaced.” The statement provoked a strong backlash – over 600 judges and prosecutors publicly defended their profession, accusing the president of taking “another step toward enslaving the judiciary” and of attempting to influence the composition of the prosecution through personnel changes.⁶³

⁶² N1, “Behind the News,” guest: Appellate Court Judge Miodrag Majić, April 2025

⁶³ Radar, April 18, 2025

VUČIĆ: “SCANDALOUS ARRESTS” AND ACCUSATIONS AGAINST PROSECUTOR NENADIĆ

President Aleksandar Vučić sharply criticized the arrests of former ministers Tomislav Momirović and Goran Vesić, calling them “scandalous.” He announced criminal charges against those who organized the operation, claiming the investigation was selective – since one of the suspects was allegedly spared detention due to personal ties with “the main protest organizer.”

Vučić referred to photographs published in pro-government media showing Mladen Nenadić, chief prosecutor of the Organized Crime Office, in the company of people deemed “undesirable” by the regime – including former basketball player Dejan Bodiroga, University of Belgrade Rector Vladan Đokić, Vice-Rector Nebojša Bojović, and former “Serbian Railways Infrastructure” executive Milutin Milošević.⁶⁴ According to tabloid interpretations, Bojović was the “protected” suspect, since he served as chairman of the company’s board during the Novi Sad station project and resigned shortly after the canopy collapse. Based on these claims, criminal charges were filed against Nenadić.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Source: “Who Is Mladen Nenadić, the Prosecutor Who ‘Turned Against the State,’” *Vreme*, August 1, 2025

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

POLITICAL MESSAGES AND THE “STORM WARNING”

Commenting on a tweet by Marinika Tepić, vice president of the Freedom and Justice Party – who wrote that “this so far has been light rain, but the storm is coming” – Vučić said the remark shows that the Organized Crime Prosecutor’s Office has been “emboldened” to prosecute influential figures. At the same time, he warned that “accountability will reach everyone involved,” both for the arrests and for the alleged coup attempt.

“Many would be surprised if I revealed what I’ve heard and what really happened behind the investigation,” said Vučić, adding that “the time is coming” for everything to be exposed. He directly accused Nenadić of carrying out the arrests “in coordination with Europeans,” claiming there are witnesses who confirm that some of the detentions were requested by foreign partners. Vučić announced he would file multiple criminal complaints and demanded that the names of those “Europeans” be made public.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Source: *Danas Online*, “President Vučić Announces Criminal Charges...,” August 3, 2025

RAKIĆ VODINELIĆ: “THIS IS NOT A COUP, BUT THE LAW IN ACTION”

Contrary to the pro-government narrative, retired law professor and member of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on the Novi Sad station collapse Vesna Rakić Vodinelić rejected claims that the arrests were part of a coup attempt.

“In a country governed by the rule of law, the arrest of high officials would be expected – in Serbia, it’s an exception,” she said. According to her, the “key problem lies in the contract annexes,” which she identifies as the main source of corruption and a logical starting point for the investigation. She believes the investigation is serious and conducted with a degree of independence, noting that while Nenadić was likely appointed as an SNS and Vučić loyalist, “there is evidence that cannot be ignored.” Rakić Vodinelić suggested that Nenadić “may be contemplating a different future,” meaning that the investigation might indeed be genuine – though she cautioned that the situation should be closely monitored, particularly if the probe expands to others linked to the project, since it was financed by the state.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ N1, “Yesterday’s Arrests Were a Surprise, But Not a Coup,” August 2, 2025

THE ROLE OF EU CHIEF PROSECUTOR LAURA KÖVESI

The theory that Serbia cannot change its current regime without external support includes the possible involvement of Laura Kövesi, head of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO). EPPO is an independent EU body responsible for investigating and prosecuting crimes that harm the EU budget, such as corruption, money laundering, and cross-border tax fraud.

Although Kövesi has no direct authority in non-EU countries, her office can investigate individuals outside the Union if EU financial interests are affected. This is significant since Serbia receives substantial EU funding through loans, grants, and aid programs.

In February 2024, the European Parliament called for an audit of IPA funds allocated to Serbia, and in early 2025, Serbian Chief Prosecutor Zagorka Dolovac met with the head of the EU Delegation to discuss possible cooperation with Kövesi’s office.⁶⁸ Kövesi confirmed for RTS that the EPPO is investigating possible misuse of EU funds in the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station, financed by the European Investment Bank. The investigation was launched following a private complaint. She emphasized that EPPO’s mandate is limited to potential fraud and corruption involving EU money, not the tragic collapse that killed 16 people.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Source: “What Would Cooperation with the European Public Prosecutor’s Office Mean for Serbia?” preugovor.org, February 14, 2025

⁶⁹ Source: RTS, “Laura Kövesi for RTS: We Are Investigating EU Fund Spending,

COOPERATION BETWEEN JUDICIAL BODIES AND POLITICAL CONTROVERSIES IN SERBIA

International legal assistance and the exchange of information in investigations of serious crimes – particularly in combating organized crime and drug trafficking – are standard practice in democratic states. However, in Serbia, such cooperation is often perceived as a “foreign conspiracy,” especially when it involves high-ranking state officials and their possible connections to criminal activities.

Over a year ago, the KRIK network published decrypted communications from the Sky ECC app, used by drug cartel leader Darko Šarić and businessman Dragoljub Zbiljić, who is close to the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). These messages revealed links between politicians, tycoons, and the criminal underworld in Novi Sad, as well as the involvement of senior officials – including Prime Minister Miloš Vučević and the president’s brother, Andrej Vučić – in criminal networks and political appointments within state institutions.⁷⁰ Europol granted the Serbian police access to this communication a year ago, but the judiciary has not yet reacted. In March 2025, the correspondence was officially delivered to the Office of the Organized Crime Prosecutor in Belgrade. Chief Prosecutor Mladen Nenadić and Republic Prosecutor Zagorka Dolovac, who possess this compromising documentation, came

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Not the Novi Sad Tragedy,” August 2025

⁷⁰ Source: “What the Sky App Messages Reveal About the Links Between the Mafia and the SNS,” Al Jazeera Balkans, February 6, 2025.

under severe political and media pressure, as they could initiate investigations against top state officials.

According to analysts, the campaign against them – including efforts to shift the narrative around the Novi Sad railway canopy collapse – aims to prevent them from opening investigations that could expose the regime’s highest ranks. President Vučić has allegedly launched a preemptive attack on prosecutors to cover up his own and his inner circle’s potential involvement in this affair. In parallel, the Organized Crime Prosecutor’s Office is leading an investigation known as “General Staff,” concerning falsified documents used to remove the former General Staff building from the list of protected cultural heritage sites to enable its sale to a foreign investor.⁷¹

ATTACKS ON PROSECUTOR NENADIĆ OVER THE CANOPY INVESTIGATION

Recently, government and pro-regime media attacks on judges and prosecutors who have “escaped control” have intensified – particularly targeting Mladen Nenadić, Chief Prosecutor of the Organized Crime Office (TOK). In a statement to Danas, Nenadić said he would not comment on political statements and that “TOK acts and will continue to act in accordance with the Constitution and the laws of Serbia.” This came after President Aleksandar Vučić announced criminal charges against those who “organized the arrests” in the Novi

⁷¹ Source: Miroslav Parović, “Slobodarski narodni pokret,” YouTube/Instagram, August 2, 2025.

Sad canopy collapse case, which included former minister Tomislav Momirović and other officials.⁷²

WHAT HAPPENS INSIDE THE PROSECUTION AND HOW CORRUPTION IS HIDDEN

Prosecutors in Serbia have long operated under heavy political influence, and little has changed despite student and civil society demands for stronger institutions and respect for their mandates.

Former prosecutor Jasmina Paunović, previously with the Special Department for Anti-Corruption within the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office, recalls major corruption cases involving top officials and their associates. Both she and prosecutor Bojana Savović were removed and demoted after pursuing investigations into the Electric Power Company of Serbia (EPS). Despite public protests and arrests, none of these cases have reached final verdicts.⁷³ According to Paunović, the prosecution functions much like the state itself – those who are loyal and obedient receive the most important cases and control their outcomes. Chief Belgrade Prosecutor Nenad Stefanović and Republic Prosecutor Zagorka Dolovac have surrounded themselves with like-minded subordinates. The informal practice of assigning sensitive cases “out of order”

⁷² Source: “Prosecutor Nenadić on Vučić’s Accusations: TOK Acts in Accordance with the Constitution and the Laws of Serbia,” N1, August 4, 2025.

⁷³ Source: Interview with the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, March 2025.

has become routine, particularly in proceedings against students, citizens, and opposition activists.

Another concerning aspect is the control of defense representation in major cases: government-linked and compromised lawyers such as Vladimir Đukanović and Goran Petronijević are often appointed to “manage” defendants, preventing them from revealing inconvenient truths.

There are individuals whose cases remain “stuck in drawers” for years – only to be revived when the regime needs to showcase a fake “anti-corruption campaign.” This demonstrates a lack of genuine will to fight corruption. Prosecutors are often unaware of who handles which cases, allowing key investigations to be concealed from the public.

In the Novi Sad canopy case, for example, the arrest of Slobodanka Katanić, a manager at “Serbian Railways Infrastructure,” raised suspicions of political manipulation. Her case was initially dismissed by a Novi Sad prosecutor as unfounded, but later taken over by Belgrade Chief Prosecutor Nenad Stefanović – who ordered her arrest for falsifying public documents. Paunović called this a political act, noting that the same charges had been rejected earlier.

Opposition MP Miroslav Aleksić, head of the People’s Movement of Serbia, reminded the public of the “Jovanjica” case from 2019 – the largest marijuana plantation discovered in Europe – which has yet to reach a verdict. Its owner, Predrag Koluviija, spent two years in detention, was released,

and soon opened new companies, despite evidence of support from state structures including police and intelligence officers.⁷⁴

Paunović concludes that the prosecution mirrors the broader society: divided between loyalists, silent observers, and a few who resist within the boundaries of controlled cases. True reform, she says, is only possible if the corrupt government changes. “Corruption is like an octopus – cut off one arm, another grows. To move forward, we must cut off the head – the top of the regime.”

UN: STOP RETALIATION

UN human rights experts have expressed deep concern over increasing repression and retaliation by Serbian authorities against students, professors, human rights defenders, civil society activists, and ordinary citizens. This crackdown comes amid one of the largest and longest protest movements in Serbia’s recent history, raising serious international concern.

They warned that Serbia is witnessing a systematic attempt to silence dissenting voices and undermine the independence of academic and judicial institutions – threatening the foundations of democracy and freedom of expression. The protests, they noted, are not merely a student movement but a test of the state’s maturity and accountability in upholding human rights and the resilience of democratic institutions.

74 Source: KRIK, June 27, 2024.

Access to justice, effective legal remedies, and reparation, they emphasized, are fundamental human rights under international law. Victims must have unhindered access to justice, the right to compensation, and – crucially – protection from further retaliation and intimidation.

The “Students in Blockade” movement, launched in late 2024 to demand accountability, has evolved into a mass civic uprising seeking not only justice for the victims of the Novi Sad tragedy but also full government accountability, transparency, and greater investment in education.

UN experts called on the Serbian government to immediately end retaliation and intimidation against those advocating for justice and democratic reform, stressing that safeguarding human rights and independent institutions is vital for Serbia’s stability and development.⁷⁵

75 Source: “UN: Stop Retaliation,” N1/FoNet, August 4, 2025.

CONCLUSIONS

When prosecutors initiate proceedings or decisions that do not align with the ruling party's political interests, the president resorts to a combination of pressure, discreditation, and institutional suppression.

MAIN PATTERNS INCLUDE:

Media discreditation campaigns: undermining prosecutors' professional integrity, portraying them as politically biased or tied to "foreign interests."

Institutional pressure: use of internal disciplinary measures and personnel "rotations" to isolate or remove prosecutors handling sensitive cases.

Parallel proceedings: launching counter-cases to dilute the importance of ongoing investigations and distract public attention.

Judicial obstruction: through procedural tactics – returning indictments for revision, denying detention requests, or delaying trials.

Personalization of conflict: shifting focus from the merits of cases to personal disputes between political leaders and prosecutors, framing the issue as a vendetta rather than institutional accountability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Prevent reforms that would bring the judiciary and police under direct political control, in violation of the Serbian Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights.

The European Union should use accession mechanisms to block legislative actions that would endanger Serbia's path toward full EU membership.

Support professional associations and civil society groups defending judicial independence.

Strengthen awareness within the judiciary of its social role and responsibility, empowering judges and prosecutors to resist external pressure and defend their autonomy.

Professional associations have a crucial role in opening space for public debate about justice and institutional integrity – ensuring that judicial power remains an independent pillar of democracy rather than a tool of autocracy.

III – SECURITY CHALLENGES

POLICE AND HUMAN SECURITY

The collapse of a canopy at the renovated railway station in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, served as a pretext for escalating the already accumulated dissatisfaction in society. This dissatisfaction grew in parallel with the continuous electoral victories of the ruling party, with Aleksandar Vučić as its “face”. Each electoral victory was accompanied by increasingly intense public criticism of the election methodology, party protectionism, nepotism, corruption and crime. This is the key to understanding the mass civil protest that after November 5, 2024, quickly swept across Serbia, including students, with long columns of citizens who, regardless of the weather, carried their dissatisfaction all the way to Strasbourg and Brussels.

And such peaceful columns of protesters were often initially run over by angry drivers, encouraged by more than one statement by Aleksandar Vučić in which he expressed understanding for their anger that the “blockades” were hindering their movement. However, the participants in the protest in front of the Presidency and Parliament buildings⁷⁶, in the center of the Serbian capital, who blocked one of the city’s

⁷⁶ <https://net.hr/danas/svijet/tko-su-caci-studenti-koji-hoce-da-uce-4e8770bc-01a0-11f0-b485-829ff0affdfc>

main traffic interchanges for months, 24/7, were not called blockades. Thus, from the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025, Serbia faced a significant change in the perception of security issues with a continuous increase in security risks in the confrontation between dissatisfied citizens and students and the ruling structures.

LEGACY OF SECURITY PROBLEMS

In 2024, the year at the end of which Serbia witnessed the largest and longest civil protests and uprisings in the recent history of Serbia, both the government and the state and society entered with a problematic legacy of open and unresolved issues in the field of security policy. The failure of the government to push through the Draft Law on Police,⁷⁷ which at the end of 2023 was not even released for further parliamentary procedure due to numerous criticisms of the legislative proposals it contained. The “stalled law” provided, among other things, for the planned use of new modern technical equipment and weapons. These criticisms primarily referred

⁷⁷ <https://www.juznevesti.com/bbc-news-na-srpskom/policija-i-srbija-povucen-nacrt-zakona-o-unutrasnjim-poslovima-sta-je-sve-sporno/#:~:text=Tik pred početak 2023%2C,Ministarstvo unutrašnjih prposlova je,da je i ovaj edlog povučen iz>

to biometric surveillance equipment⁷⁸ which enables the recognition and identification of citizens, but also to the procurement of the so-called sonic cannon – which will be re-actualized in the months of civil protests, from the spring of 2025. At that time, citizens began to receive reports for participating in the protests, although they were neither identified nor detained during them. The public reacted to this openly, expressing suspicions that the authorities had begun to resort not only to the illegal use of devices for biometric surveillance of citizens, but also to suspicions that, in addition to such questionable use, Huawei cameras for biometric surveillance⁷⁹ were purchased in much larger numbers than the Serbian authorities had initially mentioned. Serbia has been criticized in recent years by the European Union and the White House administration for its decision to purchase this equipment.

It will also turn out that the so-called sound cannon, the use of which was hotly debated after March 15, 2025, when the largest non-violent protest of citizens against the government and corruption was held, was purchased before its use and purchase were legalized by the aforementioned Draft Law. This is just one more issue on the responsibility of the government, which may be on some agenda in the future.

The protest on March 15, 2025 in Belgrade, the first of the significant milestones of the 2025 civil uprising and its peak in terms of the number of participants, was interrupted

78 <https://direktno.rs/vesti/drustvo-i-ekonomija/525282/kineske-kamere-nadzor.htm> L

79 <https://direktno.rs/vesti/drustvo-i-ekonomija/525282/kineske-kamere-nadzor.html>

before the scheduled time it was supposed to take place, at a moment when the gathered citizens were paying tribute to the victims of the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station with a minute of silence. During those minutes, incidents occurred in the area in front of the National Assembly, a few blocks away from Slavija Square, where the main protest was taking place, i.e. in one of the main streets leading to that square, also filled with its immense mass of people. However, they will suddenly, in panic, quickly run towards the sidewalks, leaving the middle of the roadway of that street completely empty, which could also be seen in the live TV broadcast.

The protest was interrupted, while the footage from that street will then be repeated several times, soon with the additional information that an unauthorized and dangerous weapon for dispersing gatherings was used against the protesters in that street – a sound cannon. Aware of the far-reaching nature of these accusations and their perniciousness for the government, the President of the State will later that evening, in a live TV address, categorically deny the claims about the use of that weapon⁸⁰ The Minister of the Interior will also assert the same after him,⁸¹ who will also say that not only was the sound cannon not used, but that the police do not even possess it! However, he will then be rudely disavowed on social networks and in the free media

80 <https://www.b92.net/info/drustvo/112273/vucic-o-zvucnom-topu-sramotne-optuzbenismo-pendrek-podigli-oglasio-se-i-mup-foto-vest>

81 <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/161607/dacic-mup-nema-zvucne-topove-crta-siri-lazi-vest>

and his denial effectively refuted by the publication of footage of police vehicles on which L-Rad devices were mounted, i.e. sound cannons that were claimed not to be in possession, and which vehicles were deployed in several places in the city. This will be followed by an almost comical new address by the minister⁸², again on TV, as the devices were shown to be set to be harmless and intended only for informing citizens and, when necessary, calling people participating in protests to disperse. In the aforementioned street and in the recordings from it, that calling could not be heard. All that was seen was the fleeing of panicked people from the middle of the street.

Surprisingly quickly, after only 48 hours, as previously announced by the President, the First OJT will issue an unequivocal statement that the sound cannon was not used⁸³. The prosecution referred to reports submitted to it by the Ministry of the Interior and the BIA that the sound cannon was not used, but without additional information on whether there were any hearings of people who claimed to have felt the effects of its effects, statements of witnesses or opinions of experts and experts, as well as leaving aside numerous video recordings that called such an explicit claim into question. On the other hand, the TOK (Organized Crime Prosecutor), which has received several reports against unknown persons accused of (mis)using this weapon, will declare the TOK

⁸² <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/161607/dacic-mup-nema-zvucne-topove-crta-siri-lazi/vest>

⁸³ <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/161607/dacic-mup-nema-zvucne-topove-crta-siri-lazi/vest>

incompetent, finding no reasons for its actions⁸⁴ and forward this case to the First OJT for further action, as a “hot potato”. Representatives of the government, even from the highest positions, will accuse the opposition media and the protesters that the case of the panicked fleeing of the protesters from the sound cannon and the video footage were a planned and premeditated and prepared staging, as another attempt to overthrow the government. The events surrounding the sound cannon are a demonstrative, almost textbook example of conducting information warfare and a hybrid incident, which, at the insistence of the President of the Republic, will also gain its significant international dimension, in a process and with consequences whose dimensions cannot yet be fully and completely seen.

In response to the unequivocal concerns about the sound cannon that were sent from the EU and the UN, the President of Serbia responded that both the Russians and the Americans will be asked to thoroughly investigate everything surrounding the alleged use of the sound cannon. However, the response came only from the Russian side⁸⁵, while the mention of the American side was apparently intended to create the illusion of objectivity with the aim of arriving at a final, authoritative narrative that would stop further discussions in the sound cannon.

⁸⁴ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/protest-beograd-tuzilastvo-zvucni-top/33351699.html>

⁸⁵ <https://www.blic.rs/bbc/sta-nismo-saznali-iz-izvestaja-ruskog-fsb-o-zvucnom-topu-u-srbiji/tbws4n3>

This is one of the crucial but also ambiguous moments not only in the so-called sonic cannon case but also for a broader understanding of the events and perception of the protests in Serbia. Namely, the response from the Russian side came not from the Russian state but from the Russian intelligence service, the FSB, and was prepared on the basis of material provided to it by the Serbian BIA; since an investigation by FSB members on the territory of Serbia would be a direct violation of state sovereignty, despite the existence of the Agreement on Security Cooperation concluded with Russia between the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Russian FSB, during the mandate of Minister Stevanović.

However, referring to the report of the Russian intelligence service that the Government “had access to” in Serbia opens up many disturbing and controversial questions, starting with those regarding the disregard of normal procedures in interstate cooperation, diplomatic and legal channels. The public had no insight into the way in which the authorities implemented the president’s idea that everything be investigated by the Russians and Americans, nor whether the BIA “skipped” the Serbian government and its official address to Russia by directly addressing the FSB, which inaugurated extra-procedural action and direct connections between

security services, and the BIA itself entered the domain of active foreign policy, which is outside its legal mandate, further strengthening itself as the dominant factor in determining and managing the security narrative. It must also be added that when speaking about security cooperation with Russia, Vučić and other government actors used the expression cooperation with “sister services” as a “geopolitical code” (meaning the FSB, GRU and others), which indicates almost fraternal confidentiality and an identical Serbian-Russian worldview, while a regular expression such as partner services was used for cooperation with the security services of other countries. The government used the phrase “sister services” not only for its internal political message to the pro-Russian population, voters, and political competitors, but also to signal Serbia’s strategic orientation towards partners abroad and the EU.

Russia’s “sister services” in cooperation with the BIA are key actors in the formation of the current narrative about the civil protests as a “colored revolution” and a demonstration of how the Serbian authorities trust Russian intelligence more than domestic or EU institutions.

It is precisely the Russian “sister services” that are responsible for imposing evidence that the protests in Serbia were directed from the outside, and that the repressive attitude

towards the protest participants is justified in order to defend sovereignty, as well as that the current government in Russia has a reliable partner in that defense. The security-laden and explosive situation that arose after November 1, 2024. Vučić and the government made it difficult and worse precisely by unreservedly accepting that Kremlin narrative, persistently declaring the student and citizen rebellion a so-called colored revolution and external influences from the West.

This was also the easiest way for the authorities in Serbia to contest and delegitimize the protests of students and citizens (similar to the ways in which Putin once suppressed mass protests in Moscow and other cities in Russia) while simultaneously shifting the focus from their true internal sources and justified demands for a constitutional state and the rule of law, to the authorities' position that the protests of citizens threaten national interests and the stability and security of the country. By bracketing the entire discourse and argumentation related to systemic problems, corruption in public procurement (which was also mentioned by the public most in the case of the railway station in NS), the authorities declared all participants in the civil and student protests who insisted on corruption and responsibility for political enemies and foreign agents.

From the very beginning of the civic and student protests, the government – through its dominant control over the media and direct influence on editorial policies – has pursued a deliberate strategy to delegitimize the demonstrations. Borrowing rhetoric from Russia, it labeled peaceful protesters,

who have consistently expressed their dissatisfaction without a single act of violence and who even cleaned the streets and squares after their gatherings, as “blockaders.” This manipulative use of language serves to stigmatize civic engagement and portray legitimate dissent as a threat to public order. Over time, such narratives have created a dangerous framework in which rebellious students and citizens participating in peaceful protests could ultimately be branded as “terrorists.”

Such an approach in the continuation of the protests has paved the way for the further consolidation of authoritarianism, the normalization of state violence, and the deep erosion of civil liberties. This trajectory fundamentally undermines democratic values and, in the long term, risks distancing Serbia – as both a state and a society – from the reforms essential to its proclaimed path toward EU membership. Moreover, Serbia's authoritarian drift increasingly poses a security challenge to neighboring countries in the Western Balkans, reinforcing instability and obstructing regional democratic consolidation.

During the civil protests, the BIA continued the practice of expelling foreign citizens from Serbia and banning them from entering the country under the guise of their security risk, acting on the basis of an illegal decree of the Ana Brnabić government.⁸⁶ It made its decisions without any transparency.

During the months-long student protests, in a series of new cases of banning entry into Serbia or denying residence in it, foreigners of Croatian origin were particularly targeted,

86 https://fbd.org.rs/index.php/en/?option=com_content&view=article&id=1110

whose targeting is primarily in the service of supporting the regime's narrative that the protests in the country were supported and organized from abroad and within the framework of a "colored revolution."

The Security and Information Agency (BIA) has also targeted individuals who held valid permanent residence permits but were suddenly labeled as "security risks" after publicly expressing support for, or directly participating in, the student protests. In a few cases, deportations were temporarily suspended following legal appeals and significant public interest. However, despite several detailed reports in opposition media, the broader public remains largely unaware of the scale and systematic nature of this policy toward foreign residents in Serbia.

All this points to the continuation and growth of the partisanship of the security services and the subordination of their work to the political interests of the ruling SNS, with the absence of any effective mechanism of democratic and civilian control of the work of these services. Formal control mechanisms exist, but they are insufficiently efficient precisely because of the aforementioned politicization and the extremely limited influence of the civil sector, while without more radical and deeper structural reforms of the security sector and oversight of the BIA and the police, democratic control remains reduced to the level of symbolic and formal procedure⁸⁷, which was also mentioned in the previous HO report.

87 Tek krajem avgusta 2025 predsednik skupštinskog Odbora za odbranu i

Security risks and paramilitary groups The list of "inherited and unresolved security problems" from the previous period must certainly include the problem created in Serbia by the aggressive excursion, the incursion, of Milan Radoičić and his paramilitary group into Banjska on September 24, 2023, in terms of events on the territory of Serbia (outside Kosovo) that are related to the organization and preparation of that "security incident" in relation to which the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade is still conducting an investigation and in which Milan Radoičić is still the only named suspect, although dozens of people participated with him in the Banjska incident.

Numerous unresolved issues remain in Serbia regarding the Banjska incident, the main ones being the identification of all direct participants, as well as determining how Radoičić's group obtained the weapons that were confiscated by the Kosovo authorities after the incident. Serbia's inaction in this matter has cast doubt on Serbia's resolve to solve this case and has given rise to speculation and rumors that members of Radoičić's group were also involved in breaking up mass protests in the country after November 1, 2024. Although the Serbian prosecutor's office announced that it would indict Radoičić⁸⁸ for his involvement in this incident in January 2025, the prosecutor's office itself has not re-

.....
unutrašnje poslove Drecun od nadležnih organa traži izveštaje o obojenoj revoluciji, napadima na policiju i izveštaj o tome da li je policija upotrebljavala prekomernu silu, "jer se interesuju članovi odbora".

88 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/tuzilac-stefanovic-odluka-o-podizanju-optuznice-protiv-milana-radoicica-najkasnije-pocetkom-2025/>

leased any new information or updates⁸⁹ regarding this investigation since December 2024. It should be noted that the eventual disclosure of the organization and all the events related to the Radoičić and Banjska cases would also facilitate the understanding of the mechanisms of “recruitment” and “engagement” of other para-security groups, groups of thugs, bullies, or criminals by state structures and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, which have been witnessed by participants in civic and student protests since the November protests in Novi Sad in 2024, and especially in 2025, into which they could be inserted as provocateurs and elements for the destruction of the protests. Any presence of members of such formations or groups during student protests and civil rebellion and the use of physical force against citizens and students was already illegal by definition. The thugs, protected by masks, notorious balaclavas, uniformed in black, equipped with batons, and crowbars, were seen not only in Belgrade, but in many cities in Serbia and especially in Vojvodina. It was not possible to identify them, and therefore there were no lawsuits filed against them as specific individuals. All of this created a climate of complete impunity for the use of violence against citizens and students at protests. In the few cases where the perpetrators were identified, such as the attack on a student in Novi Sad, who had her jaw broken and for which the Prime Minister of Serbia, Vučević, resigned, they were ultimately, as activists of the SNS party, even proclaimed

heroes and were eventually released by pardon from the President of the Republic.

The political orientation of the paramilitary formations was not loyalty to the state or the constitution, but most often to the political party SNS and the President of Serbia. They were on the side and protected the regime, not the citizens and students. Whenever such cases of attacks on citizens and students occurred, the state and the government turned a blind eye, even though these incidents occurred before the eyes of the uniformed police, using the gray zone of oversight or denial, despite strongly expressed doubts, but also the facts and video recordings (which were clear, convincing and shocking, showing direct, physical violence against citizens by unlicensed, anonymous actors, shown on non-regime televisions and social networks) that the hooligans and beaters were both coordinated and tolerated by the authorities.

The fact that the uniformed police did not react, and sometimes even dressed some of these individuals in uniforms without identification marks, indicates that they were not some “third party”, but that they acted in tandem with official structures, which distinguishes them from “ordinary” hooligans.

The use of such groups allowed the authorities to achieve the desired goal of suppressing protests and intimidating their participants and those citizens who intended to join them

⁸⁹ <https://naslovi.net/2025-01-17/politika/neizvesna-optuznica-protiv-radoicica-za-slucaj-banjska/38779879>

– always with the possibility that when violent incidents occurred, the authorities could say that professional police did not use such methods, although everyone saw the opposite.

The intimidation of citizens and the suppression of the potential of protests, while leaving the dirty work to anonymous groups⁹⁰, were not just occasional incidents of violence, but a symptom of a much deeper problem in the structure of government and the security apparatus and the state.

During the 2025 protests, the topic of police brutality⁹¹ returned in a big way, without answering the questions and criticisms of 2024, and especially when the protest at the beginning of the summer entered a new phase, which would become another conflicting social and political field.

Police brutality and media narrative Here too, the deep division of Serbian society was manifested, expressed in completely opposite narratives regarding police brutality. On the one hand, the narrative of the government and the media under its influence or directly connected to the government, which was dominant due to their large numbers and dominance, emphasized the protection of peace and order. In doing so, the behavior of the police was emphasized as necessary and principled, emphasizing its duty to protect property and public goods from the “blockade” (blockers). Protests often began to be presented not as dissatisfaction of citizens and students with the state of society, but as violent ones.

⁹⁰ https://www.24sata.hr/news/oni-su-tu-da-biju-srbiju-krvna-slika-batinasa-brace-vucic-1069789#google_vignette

⁹¹ <https://autonomija.info/rodoljub-sabic-institucije-stite-nasilje-policije/>

This created a context for public support for more brutal police actions. The perceived police brutality⁹² was either completely denied⁹³, or was portrayed as benign⁹⁴ in comparison to police actions in EU countries and the USA; or the number of injured police officers⁹⁵ was cited – which could not have been an acceptable response to scenes of beating and harassment of protest participants by police officers. The few free media and civil society organizations, on the other hand, pointed out that the abuses of authority and police brutality were not isolated incidents, but a systemic approach aimed at scaring citizens and discouraging protest participants, using so-called “targeted violence” moderated towards protest participants and students who had become recognizable in the media and in the public during the days of the uprising, and whom the authorities recognized and presented as leaders or symbols of the protest.

The absence of institutional responsibility and the fact that none of the brutalities that irritated the public were ended by an efficient investigation and punishment were highlighted as evidence that the police were evading the supervision of the law⁹⁶ and as a reason for the need for a complete

⁹² <https://autonomija.info/rodoljub-sabic-institucije-stite-nasilje-policije/>

⁹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8Rko-dyG4>

⁹⁴ <https://nova.rs/vesti/hronika/sramna-odbrana-na-pitanje-o-brutalnosti-direktor-policije-dragan-vasiljevic-odgovorio-snimcima-prebijanja-demonstranata-u-inostranstvu/>

⁹⁵ <https://www.b92.net/info/politika/155522/dacic-brutalan-napad-na-policiju-privedeno-18-lica-nastavlja-je-se-hapsenja-vest>

⁹⁶ <https://nova.rs/emisije/slavic-radovanovic-pukovnica-u-penziji-policija-se-potpuno-i-apsolutno-raspada-postali-su-falanga-politike-komandovane-sa-andricevog-venca/>

reform of the security sector, an independent investigation and the resignation/removal of the Minister of Police and the highest police officers.

The debate on police brutality ultimately became a political issue, going beyond the level of questioning the regulations or procedures by which the police operate – directed by the authorities and pro-government media to questioning who is for and who is against Serbia, showing how much media propaganda was a key or aggravating factor in the perception of the protests.

In discussions on police brutality, political and party pressures and abuse of the police, poor personnel policy and suppression of professionalism at the expense of loyalty to the regime, a system of non-transparent internal control of the police⁹⁷ and the passive functioning of the prosecution were often mentioned. Serbian society entered a phase of dual reality, with a polarized public and a phase in which truth and facts became less important than controlling the narrative about them, and a phase in which free media and civil society organizations were exposed to continuous attacks and stigmatization. With the accusations that these were foreign mercenaries, the aim was to suppress the perception that it was precisely the few free media outlets not under direct control of the authorities and non-governmental organizations that were the last line of defense and protection of the public interest and human rights and civil liberties. In such

⁹⁷ <https://vreme.com/vesti/sta-nam-govori-izvestaj-unutrasnje-kontrola-mup-a-u-koji-je-vreme-imalo-uvicid>

a context, further escalation of violence and brutality seems like a predictable pattern of future events.

Digital repression: how technology is used against citizens and students At the end of 2024 and in 2025, the public's attention was also attracted by the topic of increased application and unauthorized surveillance measures. Although this is not a new problem in Serbia, the increased surveillance measures and their abuse have begun to be more intensively pointed out, primarily by student protest activists.

On the eve of March 15, 2025, several television stations with national frequencies simultaneously broadcast a multi-hour program with the aim of presenting the announced joint protests of citizens and students as an event directed against the constitutional order and security of Serbia. As a “crowning evidence” several times during the program, an audio recording of a secretly recorded conversation between student activists about plans to impose the idea of a transitional government on March 15 and the possibility of taking over the public media service of Serbia (RTS) was broadcast. The method of obtaining such a recording itself is extremely public attention, and then suppressed by the scandal surrounding the use of a sonic cannon. Unauthorized wiretapping in Serbia was argued a few years ago. At that time, the academic center for the study of cybercrime from Toronto, Cyber Lab⁹⁸, found that the mobile phones of some of the critics of the Vučić regime, Bojan Klačar from the Center for

⁹⁸ <https://citizenlab.ca/2024/01/pegasus-project-journalists-in-serbia-hacked-with-nso-groups-pegasus-spyware>

Free Elections and Democracy, journalists Ana Lalić and Jovana Gligorijević and some of their colleagues whose phones were infected with Pegasus during the 2021 election campaign were mentioned. This analysis did not explicitly state who ordered this hacking, but it is known that this program is sold exclusively, if not directly to the governments of the interested countries, then to their security agencies.

Aleksandar Vulin, the then head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, stubbornly rejected these findings calling them lies and insinuations, and the President of Serbia added that such a thing could not have happened without his knowledge.

Unlike Pegasus, for which there is no conclusive evidence of use, it is far more likely that the Predator spyware – less expensive and more accessible than Pegasus – has been employed in Serbia. It is also used for so-called targeted surveillance, and offers versatile possibilities for eavesdropping on phone conversations and the phone's surroundings, reading SMS, and Msg, WhatsApp, e-mails, tracking GPS locations, controlling the front and rear cameras on the phone without the will and knowledge of its owner user, downloading documents and photos from the mobile phone. After the "job" is done, e.g. recording conversations or downloading data, its self-destruction can be initiated in the monitored phone. The Predator software together with Predator Admin represents a complete spying package that is sold to governments or security agencies, as a useful tool for targeted surveillance of political dissidents, journalists, activists and is a serious threat to human rights and democracy

Predator was used in Greece, Armenia, Madagascar, Egypt and elsewhere. Behind this system is a network of Intellex – Cytrox companies, with roots reaching to Cyprus, which, in turn, has strong ties to the Western Balkan region. Also connected to this network is the Serbian company Area Security, headquartered in New Belgrade, registered with the APR for intelligence business, consulting related to intelligence services and for investigation activities.

Two years ago, the organization Security Without Borders⁹⁹, which provides assistance to civil society organizations in defending against cyberattacks and hacking, within the framework of its large research project Cyber Partisans, stated that the aforementioned Serbian company had direct administrative access, or was deeply involved, in maintaining part of the server infrastructure used for Predator. Almost at the same time as this was announced, all traces of its access and involvement in 2024. Area Security d.o.o. was no longer active in this. It was speculated that it may have been just a front company for some other security services or para-services, useful for easier denial of unauthorized surveillance, if an unwanted discovery about it occurs.

Finally, bearing in mind that within the framework of Russian-Serbian security cooperation, in which since 2017 there has been a special emphasis on cooperation and use of the experience of the Russian police in suppressing high-tech and cybercrime, the application of Russian spy software that the FSB and GRU use to intercept communications of activists,

99 <https://cyberpartisans.github.io/press/predator-in-serbia/>

journalists and diplomats cannot be ruled out. Russian portable so-called “catchers”, devices with programs for “tying” mobile phones that recognize them not as surveillance but as the strongest signal of their operator, have proven effective in monitoring and suppressing mass street protests in cities Russia. After “tying” to the Russian service, all calls and data that circulated on the protesters’ mobile phones would be visible, just as it could open fake pages in their phones’ browsers or redirect them to phishing sites, paving the way for the installation of malicious software.

Secret surveillance as a weapon against protests During the 2024/2025 protests, students’ messages and posts on social media and student groups often showed that there were systematic and coordinated attacks on their privacy. Student activists in Belgrade and Novi Sad noticed and talked about the strange behavior of their mobile phones, their overheating or rapid battery drain. They also encountered and recognized information or facts they said in their private phone conversations on fake profiles on social networks. They also noticed that their phones behaved strangely after saying certain words or phrases such as “protest”, “blockade”, “Vučić” “SNS”, after which messages with various warnings would arrive on their phones or they would then notice the presence and activity of unusual followers. All this pointed to the massive interception of communications of participants in student and civic protests and the active, deliberate and aggressive use of technology to hack, intimidate or disable civil resistance. The aim was not only to collect the necessary information about

the protests, but also to psychologically crush and demoralize the student protest.

And in this domain, ever since the time when, thanks to the government of Zoran Đinđić, Serbian security services received from their Western colleagues the first effective tools of modern technological surveillance, their use, as well as the entire operation, has traditionally been marked by very little transparency and the absence of any more complex and efficient parliamentary control. This has been pointed out from time to time in various ways on various occasions and in the EU-Serbia dialogue. Since the outbreak of student and citizen protests in an emergency resolution in November 2024, the European Parliament has directly addressed allegations of illegal surveillance, while in the European Parliament in March 2025¹⁰⁰, Green and Socialist MEPs called for an investigation into the alleged use of spyware.

The Group of States against Corruption¹⁰¹ (GRECO) and the Venice Commission¹⁰², in their reports for 2024/2025, speaking about the lack of independence of the judiciary, the media, and control over the security services, stated that

100 <https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/en>

101 www.coe.int/greco

102 www.venice.coe.int (look for country link for Serbia) * It is quite possible that access to certain websites such as Citizen Lab, CyberPartisans, and others has been blocked by some internet providers based on an unofficial order — a standard practice in authoritarian regimes. The most effective way to bypass this is by using a VPN, which routes your internet traffic through a server in another country, hides your real IP address, and allows you to access blocked content. Also, websites such as Archive.today (or the Wayback Machine) store snapshots of web pages. Simply enter the original URL in the search field on Archive.today.

this creates favorable circumstances for the abuses discussed here.

Cooperation between the security services of Russia and Serbia Since the aforementioned acceptance of the Russian narrative that the protests of citizens and students in Serbia are actually a “colored revolution” inspired by the West, the geopolitical dimension of the 2024/2025 protests will be their immanent, integral part, including, of course, the issues of institutional and operational security cooperation between Serbia and Russia in a dual role. On the one hand, as an associate of the Serbian authorities in dealing with the protests, but also through the visible participation of radical extreme-nationalist pro-Russian groups, whose flags in the first months of the protests were more visible than, for example, the sporadic appearance of EU flags. Cooperation between the security services of Russia and Serbia has been on the rise for a number of years as a solid, institutionalized and operationally active. Russia is looking for tools in it to maintain influence in the region, while for Serbia, in the security dynamics and puzzle of Southeast Europe, in proportion to its development it is becoming a risk factor for its proclaimed aspirations towards EU membership. The legal basis for this cooperation was formalized by an Agreement signed in 2017 in Moscow, which envisaged cooperation in the fight against extremism and terrorism, against organized crime, arms and drug trafficking, and computer and internet crime, etc. The main protagonists of this cooperation on the Russian side were the FSB, the successor to the former Soviet KGB, the foreign intelligence service

SVR and the military intelligence service of the General Staff GRU. From the Serbian BIA, MUP and VOA.

The core of the cooperation is the exchange of intelligence data, which includes information on the movements and activities of persons of interest to the security services of the two countries. Serbia thus provided data on the activities of opponents of the Putin regime on its territory, from eavesdropping on conversations of Russian oppositionists in Belgrade, which it informed Moscow about, all the way to providing transcripts, to their persecution on its territory. An example of intensive operational cooperation is the joint action of the FSB and BIA when, based on information received from Moscow, six people¹⁰³ were arrested in Belgrade and Novi Sad in February 2021 for allegedly spying on Russian facilities and citizens for the benefit of, as stated, Western services.

Through security cooperation with Russia, Serbia demonstrates that it will not tolerate activities on its territory that interfere with Russia’s interests, while at the same time showing its public its connection to Moscow. From the point of view of the protests that the Serbian authorities faced in 2024/2025, the education of Serbian security personnel by sending them to various courses in Russia, especially to the FSB Academy, focused and specialized in acquiring skills and knowledge in protecting the regime, is significant.

Cooperation between Serbia and Russia in the field of security is much less transparent compared to security

103 www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-55931864 I politika.rs/scc/clanak/467699/Otkrivena-spijunska-mreza-u-Srbij

cooperation with Serbian partners from the EU and the West. The latter is more transparent and more subject to democratic control compared to cooperation with Russia, which is characterized by less transparency and so-called. work behind closed doors. While the former is focused on rule of law reforms in line with its integration processes with the EU, cooperation with Russia refers to so-called hard security threats with an emphasis on and implied closeness of ideological and political positions of the two sides.

The reduced transparency of security cooperation between Russia and Serbia is not a side effect, but rather its essential characteristic is based on common geopolitical and ideological views, which is why it differs from the technical-reform cooperation with the West, which is accompanied by more precise democratic control mechanisms. At the beginning of cooperation, unlike Russia, the Serbian side did not see the EU as a security threat, but rather saw its individual entities working to discredit the government as risky, but in the months of protests in 2024/2025, a shift in focus was observed with more radical accusations directed ““towards some EU countries”. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine did not significantly affect this security cooperation, despite Serbia’s formal condemnation of Russia, while later Serbian-Russian coordination on the information and propaganda level became increasingly noticeable, which was reflected in the coordination of the narratives of Russian state media on the territory of Serbia, Russia Today and Sputnik, with Serbian

pro-government media and the shifting of blame for the war in Ukraine to the West and NATO and Ukrainian nationalists.

During the 2024/2025 protests, Serbia had at its disposal rich Russian experience¹⁰⁴ in suppressing opposition protests, both in terms of advice and methods, primarily monitoring the communication of protest participants and social networks with the aim of identifying the organizers of the protests. Also, advice on the use of force, limitations on appropriate force, isolation of the core of the protests and control of the media space. In the latter, the growing nervousness of the authorities towards the media, which it could not influence and control their reporting on the protests, was understandable. Direct participation of Russian intelligence agents on Serbian soil was unlikely due to the risk of a major geopolitical debacle and compromise with serious consequences for both cooperating parties in the event of discovery. In addition, both BiA and the Ministry of Internal Affairs have shown that they have sufficient capacity, experience and will to deal with the protests.

Russian-Serbian security cooperation is therefore not reflected in the physical participation of Russia but in a symbiotic relationship in which Serbia is the terrain of geopolitical struggle, and Russia is a shield for preserving power and the status quo with a further impact on the polarization of Serbian society torn between the East and the EU. The protests in Serbia were a new opportunity for Russia – on the one hand, to further discredit the EU enlargement process, but even

104 https://fbd.org.rs/images/pdfs/VIP_17.pdf

more so to strengthen Belgrade's dependence on Moscow, an opportunity to present Russia as the only true ally in a time of major internal crisis lasting several months.

In such a situation, Serbia appears vulnerable in terms of security on several levels. The most dangerous scenario could be the loss of full sovereignty over the security sector, and the worst scenario is that Russia could try to create factions within the Serbian security services that are more loyal to the Kremlin than to Belgrade and make decisions that are more in Russia's interest, without the possibility for the Serbian government to influence this at all.

Also, the more it enters the Russian security orbit, the more difficult it will be for Serbia to cooperate with other partners, turning it into a geopolitical hostage of Russia.

Deepening cooperation that would produce a discrepancy between Russian demands and the demands and expectations of the EU could put Serbia in an impossible position or to "betray" its fraternal protector or at the risk of facing serious sanctions from the EU without any guarantees and obligations that it will be helped in this. Along with the radicalization of internal divisions, this would further destabilize the Serbian state, creating long-term sources of tension.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

After the changes in 2000, with the support and assistance of the international community, Serbia took the first steps in attempting to reform the security sector. However, no government has succeeded in doing so – either because it did not want to, or because of unfavorable power relations. These services have, in fact, remained almost intact to this day. The regime of Aleksandar Vučić, however, reversed even these small advances and placed the services under its full control, abolishing the meaning of any oversight. This led to: Political instrumentalization of security services – The police, BIA and paramilitary structures were put in the service of the regime, not the protection of citizens. This eroded the rule of law and trust in institutions.

- Lack of democratic control – There are formal oversight mechanisms, but they remain symbolic and ineffective due to partisanship and the absence of independent oversight bodies.

- Information warfare and hybrid methods – The government uses propaganda, disinformation and narratives about a "colored revolution" to delegitimize protests and justify repression.

- Use of force and impunity – Police brutality and the use of beaters have created an atmosphere of fear and impunity. This normalizes violence and turns it into a model of governance.

- Digital repression – Biometric surveillance, illegal data collection and misuse of technology have shown a tendency towards authoritarian surveillance of citizens.

- Regional and international implications – Reliance on Russian "sister services" and rejection of EU standards are

distancing Serbia from the European path and creating a security risk for the region.

- Social polarization – Instead of dialogue, society has divided into opposing narratives about protests and the police, while the truth is becoming less important than controlling discourse. Bearing the above in mind, it is necessary to
 - Security sector reform – Depoliticization of the police and BIA, professionalization of personnel and establishment of clear civilian and parliamentary control are necessary.
 - Transparency and accountability – Every use of force must be independently investigated, and those responsible for police brutality and abuse of power prosecuted.
 - Prohibition and regulation of paramilitary groups – It is necessary to expose the networks that connect paramilitary and

parapolice formations with state structures and legally disable them.

- Protection of civil rights – Ensure the right to peaceful protest and freedom of expression, as well as protection from digital surveillance and misuse of technology.
- International cooperation – Rely on European standards and recommendations of the EU and OSCE in security sector reform, instead of geopolitical reliance on “sister services”.
- Strengthening independent media and civil society – It is necessary to protect journalists, activists and organizations that document abuses, as they represent a key corrective factor.
- Opening institutional dialogue – The government must open channels of communication with citizens and students, so that protests are recognized as a democratic right, not a security threat.

IV – MEDIA LANDSCAPE OF SERBIA: LIVING FROM TODAY TO TOMORROW

If current trends continue, by the end of the year Serbia will likely become the country with the highest number of unemployed journalists per capita – and the highest number of media outlets shut down per square kilometer. In the whirlwind of global turbulence, two media outlets – Voice of America and Al Jazeera – have already closed down; due to domestic circumstances, a cloud now hangs over several others – N1 television, Nova.rs, the dailies Nova and Danas, as well as the weekly Radar. Those that still appear stable are struggling with donor requirements, a hostile environment, and a practically non-existent market. They are forced to live from day to day, without the ability to plan anything, let alone innovate.

Political changes in the United States and the resulting withdrawal of USAID and IREX from Serbia have caused enormous damage to the media sector. For years, these organizations provided institutional support to numerous newsrooms, and their sudden departure left the media completely unprepared. They were confronted with accumulated debts, unfinished projects, and plans doomed to fail from the outset. There is no replacement donor, and European funds have neither relaxed their excessively strict requirements nor reduced the volume of documentation needed to apply.

At the same time, European donors still fail to understand the need for institutional support. In the current political climate, it is nearly impossible to implement any concrete project, even when the funds for it have already been approved. As for domestic budget funding, it is practically out of reach for professional and independent media. They are required to submit excessive documentation, and some are already labeled as “undesirable,” making it pointless for them even to apply. Meanwhile, pro-government media outlets are generously funded – from both national and local budgets – and enjoy advertising revenue that independent newsrooms are denied, as companies are prohibited from purchasing ad space in them.

At the same time, Moscow-funded media continue operating normally – Sputnik Srbija, Russia Today, Russia Beyond the Headlines, along with local media that relay their content.

This has created more space for the spread of Russian influence and the already pervasive pro-Russian narrative, while simultaneously reducing the ability to promote human rights and European values. For that reason, the media situation goes beyond a question of domestic democracy and, in a sense, becomes an issue for the European Union as well.

The situation took on an absurd dimension on September 15, 2025, when pro-Russian media published findings from Russian intelligence claiming that some media outlets in Serbia – by promoting European values – were actually working to overthrow the government, create a “new Maidan,” and “brainwash the youth.” Several independent media outlets allegedly financed from Brussels were included on this list.¹⁰⁵ Such conspiracy theories would not find fertile ground in a regular media environment, but in a situation where media pluralism does not exist, they easily reach an audience.

Despite occasional mild verbal rebukes toward the regime, the European Union remains silent – not only in the face of the omnipresent pro-Russian narrative but also regarding the fact that the Council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) has not been appointed even after two electoral cycles, due to blatant noncompliance with regulations. Yet, this very Council is a condition for opening the third cluster in EU accession negotiations.

The absence of this regulatory body effectively means that Serbia has no broadcasting regulator: the fifth national frequency has not been allocated for years, broadcasters routinely violate the law without consequence, and the airwaves are dominated exclusively by pro-government media, while independent television channels N1 and Nova.rs remain trapped in the cable system – under constant threat of being shut down.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/optuzbe-ruske-sluzbe-da-eu-sprema-majdan-u-srbiji-su-apsurdni-opis-realnosti-i-pokazuju-nemoc-rusije/>

A particular problem is the erosion of the very function of the media, which over the past decade has led to a complete collapse of public trust. On one side are pro-government outlets, openly and aggressively supporting the authorities' actions; on the other are professional media, forced into a situation where they cannot uphold the well-known journalistic rule of “the other side.” Government officials refuse to appear on their programs, avoid interviews and statements, and limit communication exclusively to press conferences. This dynamic further deepens the already severe political polarization.

Even the student protests have, in a sense, rendered mainstream media irrelevant. The overwhelming number of daily events made it impossible for newsrooms to inform the public in real time. Social media accounts of student organizations and activist groups became the only agile information channels. According to Reuters, as many as 67 percent of Serbian citizens now get their news via social media.¹⁰⁶

This environment is fertile ground for phenomena that are already widespread: hate speech, violations of professional standards, targeting, orchestrated smear campaigns against political opponents, and open calls for violence. Anyone who dared to speak out against the government, participate in rallies, or publicly comment on the protests ended up on tabloid front pages – targeted and labeled. This practice is not new, but it has intensified: hate speech has grown harsher, and calls for violence more explicit.

¹⁰⁶ <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/srbi-prednjace-u-evropi-po-informisanju-putem-drustvenih-mreza>

Each such piece of content appeared simultaneously across all pro-government media outlets, often unsigned and almost always in the same format – clearly pointing to a single source. In 2025, the Press Council recorded a record number of orchestrated smear campaigns against professional media and journalists conducted in the tabloids, which coincided with a record number of documented physical and verbal attacks on journalists.¹⁰⁷ In August 2025 alone, the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation registered 137 instances in which state officials targeted journalists and media outlets.¹⁰⁸ The clearest illustration of the nexus between the state and the media came in the form of a leaked phone conversation between United Media CEO Sten Miller and Telekom executive Vladimir Lučić.¹⁰⁹ During this call, acting on President

Aleksandar Vučić's orders, the removal was requested of the United Media director responsible for operations, as well as the editorial leadership and editorial policy of N1, Nova, Radar, and Danas.

This incident fully exposed a system in which the media are managed from a single office, according to a single political will – at the expense of the public interest and of a democratic society where freedom of speech and pluralism of opinion are supposed to be fundamental.

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¹⁰⁷ <https://savetzastampu.rs/lat/vesti/saopstenje-za-javnost-18/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/fondacija-curuvija-drzavni-zvanicnici-tokom-avgusta-avgusta-137-puta-verbalno-napali-novinare/>

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/krik-snimak-razgovora-generalnog-direktora-united-group-e-i-bliskog-saradnika-vucica-predsednik-trazio-smenu-kljucne-osobe/>

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Serbia's media landscape is in deep crisis, facing the shutdown of newsrooms, the withdrawal of key donors, and the complete dominance of pro-government and pro-Russian media. Independent outlets operate in a hostile environment, without institutional support and with no access to the market, while state authorities systematically deny them public funding. At the same time, the media space is saturated with propaganda, targeting, and smear campaigns against journalists, further eroding public trust.

The European Union remains passive despite clear violations of media freedom. This situation goes beyond an internal democratic issue and is becoming a regional and European challenge. The only actors that continue to work effectively are investigative media outlets – the last bastion of professional journalism. Despite constant threats and tabloid campaigns, they manage to pursue investigations and expose scandals. But the question remains: will their stories have real impact if they are not picked up by mainstream media? And how will investigative journalists take over the media scene once – or if – the current situation changes?

The state's treatment of the media should become a central topic in reports by European and human rights organizations. Unfortunately, it seems that Serbia's media crisis has become normalized in the eyes of external actors – something expected and passively observed. Yet the situation has significantly worsened.

Every society needs media – and therefore needs journalists. But if the search for solutions is delayed too long, journalists may simply leave the profession altogether.

The media situation in Serbia, like its political crisis, cannot be solved from the outside – this is the responsibility of Serbia's citizens. However, under the current circumstances, the EU could help by easing funding criteria and strengthening institutional support for independent media outlets. Furthermore, the state's relationship with the media should become a more prominent topic in EU reports and negotiations, as Serbia's media crisis transcends domestic democratic concerns and is evolving into a regional and European issue.

The disappearance of Voice of America and Al Jazeera – trusted and relevant sources of information – might be offset by creating a new media outlet with stable funding and a clear editorial policy.

V – CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL OCCUPATION: PROMOTING THE SO-CALLED “TRADITIONAL SYSTEM OF VALUES”

The relationship between the formal, normative projection of education and culture in Serbia and the actual state of these areas – which form a vital part of every society – is marked by an inverse proportionality: the more norms that are produced, the less order and coherence there is in practice. This discrepancy between the formal and the substantial has led to a situation in which it has become impossible for state normative acts to encompass social reality. The gap between the normative and the real has very serious consequences, not least because the functioning of society as a whole cannot be rationally organized if the actions of state institutions are not clearly predictable for all actors. This is particularly important since legal norms represent the main medium through which state decisions are transferred into social reality – they are the necessary precondition for the realization of any state’s fundamental task: ensuring the security of citizens within the existing order.

Hence, the dissonance between the normative and the real constitutes a condition that any state aspiring to be rationally organized must seek to neutralize as much as possible. The basic prerequisites for the stable functioning of the

state order concern not only the consistent implementation of legal norms but also the necessity for such decisions to be both legal and legitimate. In other words, they must not be the result of arbitrary or self-willed use of state mechanisms. Otherwise, tensions and asymmetries between society and the state inevitably arise, as there is no two-way communication between these two spheres – effectively suspending any possibility of social control over state authority.

In 2024, however, this asymmetry between society and the state reached its full escalation. It was a post-election year (the elections, according to domestic and international experts and organizations, were marked by numerous irregularities) in which the new Government, formed on May 2, 2024, revived activities related to lithium exploitation – triggering a new wave of public discontent. It was also a year in which society was still recovering from the shock of the mass murders at Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade, followed a day later by the killings in Malo Orašje and Dubona, as well as the year that saw another major tragedy – the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad Railway Station.

These events provoked a deep sense of insecurity among citizens, along with open and widespread dissatisfaction with the functioning of institutions and the general state of the country. The state, on the other hand, responded to this highly conflictual situation with unilaterally articulated and aggressive decisions and actions, further confirming the authoritarian nature of the current regime. The construction of such an aggressive policy rested on the idea that society is, in fact, the property of the state (and not the other way around), and that the state therefore has full right to intervene uncontrollably in social and political reality.

This proprietary attitude of the authorities was particularly evident in education and culture. Through a series of decisions, the Government in 2024 continued de facto to suspend the existing Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing until 2030¹¹⁰ as well as the document Strategic Priorities for the Development of Culture of the Republic of Serbia from 2021 to 2025¹¹¹.

Despite the declarative positions emphasizing the need to “harmonize education policies with scientific, technological, and sustainable development and contemporary trends in society and the economy, and to align education regulations with international documents of the United Nations, the European Union, and the Council of Europe,” as well as to

¹¹⁰ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 63, June 23, 2021 – (<http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2021/63/1/reg>)

¹¹¹ <https://kultura.gov.rs/extfile/sr/6132/Strateški%20prioriteti%20razvoja%20kulture.pdf>

affirm “all historical layers and cultural expressions,” both education and culture were in essence interpreted exclusively as state and national issues.

AN IMPORTANT FRAMEWORK FOR IMPLEMENTING THIS APPROACH IN 2024: THE CHARTER ON THE SERBIAN CULTURAL SPACE

An important framework for implementing this approach in 2024 was the Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space¹¹² a document signed in 2019 between the Ministries of Culture of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. Starting from the premise that “the boundaries of the cultural space cannot be confined within the borders of a single political or state territory,” the Charter implies that the unity of the cultural space should serve as an anticipation of a unified political space. The Charter emphasizes: “We pay special attention to establishing systematic care for the Serbian language and Cyrillic script, supporting programs for teaching the Serbian language, history, and culture, as these represent one of the fundamental tools in the legitimate effort to avoid the denationalization of new generations – not only in the increasingly numerous diaspora but even within Serbia and Srpska themselves.”

The key instrument for operationalizing the Charter’s goals is the Teacher’s Manual for Primary Education and

¹¹² Повеља о српском културном простору (kultura.gov.rs)

Upbringing: Nurturing the Culture of the Serbian People and Developing National Identity¹¹³, published in 2024 by the Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing (Zavod za unapređenje obrazovanja i vaspitanja). The Manual begins by noting that new teaching and learning programs are oriented toward quality education that provides students with the development of linguistic, mathematical, scientific, artistic, cultural, health, ecological, and digital literacy – “necessary for life in a rapidly changing modern society.” The authors state that the Manual “successfully meets students’ needs to develop their personality, identity, and potential, to respect others and their identities, needs, and interests, and to participate actively and responsibly in the economic, social, and cultural life of society,” thereby contributing to its “democratic, economic, and cultural development.”

However, although the introduction explicitly states that “the purpose of this Manual (...) is to support primary school teachers in achieving the goals and outcomes related to nurturing the culture of the Serbian people and developing national identity (...) as well as encouraging intercultural awareness and responsibility,” and that “knowledge and respect for one’s own language and cultural heritage enable respect for other languages and cultures and the development of tolerance and openness toward all forms of otherness,” the content of the Manual makes it clear that its true purpose is exclusively the nurturing of the culture of the Serbian people and the development of national identity – through the

teaching of Serbian language and literature, social and natural studies, history, geography, visual arts, and music.

The Manual provides a “practical presentation of content implementation, which can serve as a useful guide and support in achieving the goals and outcomes related to developing national identity and a sense of belonging to the Republic of Serbia.” The authors define seven shared interdisciplinary thematic areas: my Identity, the Serbian Ethnos, the Serbian Language, Benevolence and Legacy, The Serbs through History and the Serbian Cultural Space, the Life of My Kin.

THE CULTURE OF MEMORY AND REMEMBRANCE

The proposed thematic areas are presented as flexible models that can be supplemented and expanded. It is also noted that “the contents of the Manual related to nurturing the culture and national identity of the Serbian people may be used by members of the Serbian nation in the region and diaspora, as well as by teachers who conduct classes in Serbian abroad”.¹¹⁴

Apart from ignoring the fact that primary schools are not attended solely by pupils of Serbian nationality, the Manual aggressively fixes the issues of identity and tradition as overarching concepts, superior to the standard curricula adopted through regular procedures. Introduced without prior public debate or consultation, this type of intervention assumes an

exceptional character justified by a “reason of state” or a “national interest” of the highest order – matters about which no discussion is permitted.

AN ADDITIONAL IMPULSE IN “PRESERVING TRADITION”

An additional impulse in the “preservation of tradition” came from the announcement by Minister Selaković that all future public procurements of IT equipment would be required to include alphabetic (Cyrillic/Latin) keyboards. The goal of this initiative, as he explained, was to create conditions “for Cyrillic to become at least equal in technical use to the Latin script”.¹¹⁵

This requirement applies to all public procurements of IT equipment by direct and indirect budget beneficiaries, all state-owned enterprises, as well as local self-government units and institutions established by them.

In addition, Minister Selaković announced that, in order to protect the Cyrillic script, a decision had been made that in the upcoming year, during the literary work acquisition process carried out by the Ministry for public libraries, the state would purchase exclusively Cyrillic editions by domestic publishers. On that occasion, he emphasized that “the state has nothing against publishers issuing works in another

script, but what the state will buy must be printed in Cyrillic – the beautiful Vuk’s Cyrillic”.¹¹⁶

The overall cultural policy was most clearly reflected in the amount and structure of funds allocated in the state budget of the Republic of Serbia. In 2024, funds allocated for culture amounted to less than 1% of the national budget, and within that share, the majority went to projects related to the research, protection, and preservation of immovable cultural heritage, the restoration and protection of the Hilandar Monastery, the digitalization of cultural heritage, conservation, restoration, and presentation of archaeological sites, and similar activities. In contrast, funds allocated for contemporary cultural production accounted for only slightly more than 3% of the Ministry of Culture’s budget.

A particular problem in the cultural sector lay in the decision-making procedures. As the Association of the Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia noted, “large sums from the small cultural budget are being allocated to ‘predatory’ organizations, leaving only crumbs for everyone else. Furthermore, money is being granted to ‘suspicious projects,’ for which there is no evidence that they were ever actually implemented”.¹¹⁷

The lack of transparency in funding procedures, frequent allocations outside of official competitions based on ministerial discretion, and competition procedures that are

¹¹⁵ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/nikola-selakovic-cirilica/>

¹¹⁶ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/nikola-selakovic-cirilica/>

¹¹⁷ <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/manje-od-jedan-odsto-budzeta-ide-na-kulturu-a-novac-ide-predatorskim-organizacijama>

consistently delayed – all illustrate the degree to which culture in Serbia has been marginalized.

A particularly telling example was the case of the Belgrade Philharmonic, which in 2024 celebrated its centennial anniversary while facing “the lowest orchestral musician salaries in the region, a shamefully small budget year after year, no director, no advertising, no new concert uniforms for ten years, and no firm assurance that a new concert hall would be built”.¹¹⁸ Before a concert in early February, the Philharmonic musicians read a letter to the audience, stating that they were increasingly confronted with the fact that “in their own city and country, they are so highly educated yet so poorly valued.” They added that “the Ministry of Culture’s ignorance or unwillingness to engage in genuine dialogue shows that it behaves as though we exist for it – rather than the other way around.”

These cases precisely illustrate the regime’s preoccupation with issues of national identity and its persistent use of institutional capacities in education and culture to project and reinforce a desired image of collective identity. The way a political community relates to its past, present, and future undeniably defines the form of its identity. The orientation toward the past – a sort of “backward gaze” projected through culture and education – reveals the conservative nature of the authorities and their consistent creation of a closed society.

This tendency has been accompanied by increasing centralization, or etatization, in these sectors. The absence of

dialogue, unilateral decision-making, and the imposition of inadequate personnel have created not only a deep divide but also permanent tension between the government (the state) and education and culture (society). These tensions are expected, since neither education nor culture – due to their inherently autonomous nature – can be fully integrated into Serbia’s existing authoritarian system of governance. On the contrary, both culture and education are constantly perceived by the authorities – who equate themselves with the state – as sources of crisis and instability.

In this context, the first serious conflict occurred on March 28, 2024, when a group of young men, responding to a call from the Student Parliament, de facto occupied the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. Their demand was that Professor and journalist Dinko Gruhonjić be dismissed for alleged hate speech, the pretext being a doctored video that had circulated on social media for weeks prior to the incident. “They locked the entrance with chains and padlocks, further blocking the doors with chairs. They carried Serbian flags, and one of them wore a T-shirt with the image of Milorad Ulemek ‘Legija,’ convicted for the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić. (...) The blockade was called by student vice-rector Damjan Vakanjac and the president of the Student Parliament of the Faculty of Philosophy, Ivana Mačak. The group then issued an ultimatum demanding Gruhonjić’s dismissal”.

In a written statement, the student vice-rector declared that their plan was to block the Faculty and maintain the

118 Ibid–

blockade until the administration issued a response, explaining that they resorted to protest because the administration “was deaf to their demands.”

The Dean’s Office of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad appealed to the competent institutions to react urgently, citing threats to property and safety. However, when the police were called, the Dean’s Office was informed that “the blockade of a public higher education institution does not constitute grounds for misdemeanor or criminal liability.” All classes and planned activities were canceled, with only the dean, two vice-deans, several professors, and administrative staff remaining inside the building. Following a wave of threats, tabloid attacks, and public targeting by ruling coalition representatives against Professor Dinko Gruhonjić and NDNV president Ana Lalić, a group of 80 intellectuals and public figures from Serbia and the region addressed an Appeal for the Freedom of Public Speech and Critical Thought to the international community on March 25.

New incidents at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad occurred again on September 23, 2024, during the elections for the Student Parliament. These elections were marked by “explosions, shoving, hoods, and masks,” while students from the informal group STAV blocked the voting six times, claiming it was illegitimate because only one list of candidates had been submitted. The Rectorate remained silent about the explosive devices, the group of masked men dressed in black, the slapping, and the attacks on students, while the uniformed individuals involved claimed to be “private security.” Almost

all opposition parliamentary groups expressed support for the students. After the incident, professors from the Faculty of Philosophy sent a request to the Dean’s Office demanding protection for the Faculty of Philosophy, its students, and the integrity of the Student Parliament elections. Once the elections were finally concluded, the president of the Faculty’s Student Parliament, Ivana Mačak, left the building. According to some professors, the Student Parliament at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad has long served as a “springboard for future officials of the ruling party and, for ten years, has not represented the students but has functioned as a platform for partisan bargaining and financial gain.”

In April 2024, in front of the Ministry of Culture in Belgrade, members of the Belgrade Philharmonic held a percussion performance to draw public and institutional attention to the fact that culture in Serbia has been humiliated and that people working in cultural institutions are demotivated to produce programs because they have only minimal means of subsistence.

The crisis between education and culture, on one hand, and the authorities, on the other, escalated after the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad Railway Station on November 1, 2024. This tragic event, which claimed the lives of 16 people, sparked a wave of protests across the country. It began with blocked intersections and fifteen minutes of silence to honor the victims. During a gathering held in front of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts on November 22, 2024, a group of thugs – among whom, as it later turned out, were officials of the

ruling party – attacked the assembled students and citizens. Student Nikola Terzić was injured in the attack and transported to the Emergency Center due to the severity of his injuries.

Members of the Belgrade Philharmonic joined the “Stop, Serbia” (Zastani, Srbijo) action on December 6, 2024, at 11:52 a.m., standing at the intersection of Studentski Trg and Uzun Mirkova Street in Belgrade. During the protest, a car drove through the blocked intersection and injured two members of the orchestra, who were rushed to the Emergency Center.¹¹⁹

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¹¹⁹ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/autom-na-beogradsku-filharmoniju-dva-clana-orkestra-povredjena-tokom-akcije-zastani-srbijo/>

members of the orchestra, who were rushed to the Emergency Center.¹²⁰

This and numerous similar attacks that followed caused great outrage among students and led to a wave of faculty blockades. At the beginning of December, classes were suspended at 28 out of 31 faculties at the University of Belgrade. The University of Belgrade expressed support for the students' demands, which included: the publication of documentation related to the reconstruction of the Novi Sad Railway Station; the dismissal of charges against those arrested during protests; the prosecution of attackers who targeted students and professors; and a 20% increase in funding for public universities. Soon, more than 50 public faculties across all four university centers – Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, and Kragujevac – were under blockade as part of the student protests demanding accountability for the tragedy at the Novi Sad Railway Station.¹²¹

The Association of Dramatic Artists of Serbia called on its members, starting Friday, December 13, to stand in silence for fifteen minutes before every performance, in front of their theaters and in costume, to honor the victims of the Novi Sad Railway Station tragedy. The Association's statement read: “Understanding the sensitivity of everyone's position within theaters and ensembles, and in order to avoid mutual targeting and tension among colleagues, we call on everyone to respect each person's right to support or not support this call

¹²⁰ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/autom-na-beogradsku-filharmoniju-dva-clana-orkestra-povredjena-tokom-akcije-zastani-srbijo-Priručnik-negovanje-kulture.pdf>./

¹²¹ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/fakulteti-blokada>

and to protect each other from any attempt to divide or incite us.”¹²²

By mid-December, dozens of high schools across Serbia had also joined the blockades, expressing full solidarity with the students. For example, final-year students at the Medical High School “7. April” in Novi Sad voted overwhelmingly to block their school, stating: “The reason for this decision is our support for the students’ demands and for the students of Jovan Jovanović Zmaj Gymnasium in Novi Sad. This act is not a sign of disrespect for classes or knowledge, but a clear and unequivocal message that young people refuse to remain silent observers of the problems affecting our society. The decision to blockade is an expression of our commitment to the right to safety and free thought, guaranteed by the Constitution of Serbia, and it is not the result of influence from any political parties.”¹²³

The end of 2024 marked the beginning of the most serious confrontation between the government and students (and high school pupils) since 1968. However, unlike the response of the authorities back then – when the slogan was “The students are right!” – the current regime in Serbia reacted very differently. The President of Serbia declared that “students can do whatever they want, but high school pupils are exploited children.”¹²⁴

¹²² <https://vreme.com/vesti/glumci-se-pridruzuju-studentskom-protestu/>

¹²³ <https://www.021.rs/story/Novi-Sad/Vesti/396344/FOTO-Raste-broj-novosadskih-skola-u-blokadi-Pridruzili-se-mali-medicinari-gimnazijalci.html>

¹²⁴ <https://kompas-info.com/protesti-2024-koje-su-sve-srednje-skole-u-blokadi>

Even more extreme was the statement of Vladimir Đukanović, a member of parliament from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), who commented on the high school blockades involving minors by saying: A child is the property of the state until they reach adulthood.”¹²⁵

He also called on “the relevant institutions to respond.” This scandalous statement was condemned by numerous individuals and civil society organizations.

The government soon reacted as well – the Government of Serbia adopted a conclusion obliging the Ministry of Education to end the first semester early, on December 23, 2024, and to start the winter break on December 24. This was an attempt – ultimately unsuccessful – to stop the wave of high school blockades.

The major confrontation with education and culture that the autocratic regime in Serbia began at the end of 2024 was no surprise, but rather an anticipation of its future policy. That anticipation was soon realized: at the beginning of 2025, amid continuing waves of protests by students, professors, and citizens, the authorities responded with even more repressive measures reminiscent of the 1990s, when in 1998 the so-called Šešelj Law on Higher Education abolished university autonomy and led to the dismissal of dozens of “disobedient” professors.

In a similar radical spirit, and following the formation of a new government on April 16, 2025, Minister Dejan Vuk Stanković announced amendments to the Law on Textbooks

¹²⁵ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vladimir-djukanovic-deca-reakcije/>

and their “nationalization.” In professional circles, this move was seen as yet another manifestation of state monopoly in education, which – under the pretext of preserving national identity – is actually intended to ensure dogmatic support for the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

According to Vladimir Pajić, a Member of Parliament from the Movement of Free Citizens, the latest amendment to the Law on Textbooks will effectively turn them into “SNS pamphlets,” marking the beginning of a dark era for education in Serbia. He stated that “revenge against education” is underway – not only ideological but also legal and administrative: “By arresting and detaining professors, creating monopolies in the textbook market, leaving four thousand people jobless through legal amendments, terminating contracts, and reducing salaries via changes to the Law on Higher Education that enable the appointment of deans by political order – this government is systematically destroying our education system.”

In this context, it is also telling that Russia and Serbia are considering establishing a branch of a Russian university in Serbia, alongside plans to organize a Rectors’ Forum – a step toward creating a Russo-Serbian university association as part of broader academic cooperation.

This new phase of the state’s crackdown on education began in March 2025, when the Government in a technical mandate adopted a Decree that effectively punished university professors for supporting student protests by introducing new criteria for evaluating teaching and research work. The previous system – 20 hours of teaching and 20 hours of research per

week – was changed to 35 hours of teaching and 5 hours of research, meaning that 87.5% of a professor’s salary would now come from teaching and only 12.5% from research. This legal framework allowed the government to drastically reduce salaries for professors during faculty blockades and teaching suspensions, granting them only that 12.5% portion.

According to Maja Kovačević, Dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences, the decree represents “another form of open repression against the University for several reasons: first, a government in resignation cannot pass binding regulations; and second, it cannot unilaterally alter the ratio between teaching and research hours”.¹²⁶

Following this de facto unconstitutional decree, which resulted in professors and teaching assistants at universities and colleges receiving meager monthly salaries (between €100 and €200) for over two and a half months – and after several deans and rectors were taken in for “informational interviews” – the government formed a Working Group to analyze the current state of higher education funding and performance. Its task is to pave the way for a new Law on Higher Education.

The draft law introduces a set of provisions that would drastically reduce the managerial and financial autonomy of universities and colleges, while allowing foreign universities to operate in Serbia without proper accreditation, financed from the state budget, thereby reshaping the higher education landscape.

It also proposes the introduction of vouchers as the main model of financing higher education – something Professor Jelena Teodorović of the Faculty of Education in Kragujevac warns could “significantly contribute to the destruction of society as a whole”: “The aggressive push for voucher-based financing will only worsen the already alarming situation – universities will compete to make studies shorter and easier, producing worthless knowledge and worthless diplomas, both in the public and private sectors.”¹²⁷

According to sociologist Irena Pejić, “Privatization doesn’t only mean changing ownership or funding models – it also erases the status of education as a public good. And what is education, if not a public good? What remains once we give up all public goods? (...) This is undoubtedly a struggle for the very defense of society itself.”¹²⁸

After the formation of the Working Group for the Analysis of Higher Education Financing and Performance and for drafting the new law, a group of professors and lecturers from universities across Serbia launched a Petition for the Defense of Higher Education in Serbia. Within 24 hours, it was signed by nearly two thousand university employees.

The petition calls for the fulfillment of student demands, a halt to the drafting of the new law that undermines university autonomy, and an end to political pressure on universities, as well as the release of political prisoners (including one professor and several students) and the calling of early

¹²⁷ www.danas.rs

¹²⁸ www.masina.rs

parliamentary elections, which is also the final demand of the students still maintaining the blockade. The petition emphasizes that the primary purpose of higher education is “to educate and empower future generations, to contribute to social development, science, and critical thinking.” The authors and signatories stress that the struggle for university autonomy and academic freedom is not about privilege but about defending the right to education as a public good.¹²⁹

At a session held on June 11, 2025, following pressure from the academic community, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted a Conclusion annulling the previous decision on the establishment of the Working Group for the Analysis of the Current State of Financing and Performance in Higher Education in Serbia and for drafting the new Law on Higher Education. The dissolution of the Working Group was one of the demands of professors and teaching staff from the Rebel University initiative. Among their other demands were the repeal of the Government Decree that changed the calculation of salaries and the ratio between teaching and research work, as well as the determination of budget quotas for the enrollment of new students at universities. Although an “oral agreement” was reportedly reached between the Prime Minister and the Rector on meeting these demands, the Rebel University initiative continued to block the Nemanjina–Knez Miloš intersection in Belgrade and announced that the blockade would remain until all the demands submitted to the Government were fulfilled.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Throughout 2024, the gap between the normative and the real continued to widen in Serbia’s everyday political practice. On one hand, there was the ritual reaffirmation of the country’s “commitment to European integration,” while on the other, the creation of an unmistakably retrograde policy aimed at national homogenization, an extremely conservative interpretation of tradition, and an equally conservative vision of the state as the unquestionable center (and source) of power from which decisions are made without any possibility of critical scrutiny by citizens.

In this sense, institutional structures themselves are perceived as the “property” of the state (or, more precisely, of the ruling party) rather than of the citizens. This pronounced etatization of Serbia’s political space has been especially visible in the fields of education and culture – areas perceived as state-ideological apparatuses and channels for implementing a predesigned collective identity. This form of refeudalization of the Serbian political sphere has resulted in a permanent conflict between the state and society, between the government and the spheres of education and culture.

This conflict is not unexpected. Although institutions in these fields are formally and procedurally dependent on the state, both education and culture have demonstrated a high degree of autonomy and social relevance – which is precisely why the regime has identified them as major sources of instability to be neutralized. This stems from the fundamentally different natures of authoritarian rule and the spheres of education and culture.

Where the authoritarian system demands blind obedience, education and culture offer doubt and critical inquiry. Where the authoritarian system imposes preassigned political identities, education and culture respond with debate and open dialogue. Where the authoritarian system insists on control, efficiency, and effectiveness at any cost, education and culture insist on freedom and autonomy – on reflection about methods and processes. Between an autocratic mode of governance and the academic and cultural worlds, there exists a deep, essential, and irreconcilable opposition. In Serbia today, the coexistence of these two modes of thought appears, by all accounts, impossible.

Paradoxically – though not unusually for Serbia today – the government’s aggressive intervention in education is in fact aimed at privatizing the educational sphere in order to achieve more effective political control under the current authoritarian regime. Seen in this light, the struggle for education in the first five months of 2025 has evolved into a struggle for the public good and the collective interest – a struggle to defend the autonomy of public universities as one of Europe’s key achievements.

In this sense, the internationalization of the problem – by alerting the international academic community and relevant international institutions that could serve as mediators – appears to be the most important recommendation for overcoming Serbia’s deep social and political crisis and mitigating its already destructive and highly conflict-prone consequences.

CONCLUSIONS

The attack on education currently being carried out by Serbia's government is fundamentally anti-European – not only in the repressive methods used to implement these so-called "reforms," but also in the value systems they promote and embed within the educational framework.

This state-led confrontation with the academic community and the entire educational system is unfolding in two directions: through repressive state usurpation of education and the abolition of university autonomy, and through the aggressive reshaping of value systems that education naturally transmits into public life – systems now being modeled on the overtly nationalist framework of the 1990s.

It is clear, however, that the value systems upon which a democratic and open society must rest cannot be fundamentally transformed without first changing the anti-European policies that underpin the political practices of Serbia's current regime.

VI – THE MAJORITY CHURCH IN SERBIA – BETWEEN UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM

In his Easter interview with a Belgrade weekly, Patriarch Porfirije of the Serbian Orthodox Church described the current situation in Serbia as, “to put it mildly, very difficult.” The Patriarch observed that “a deep division manifested at all levels, based on exclusivity that even reaches hatred, reigns in many spheres of social life. All this begins to remind us of the darkest periods of our national history, tragically marked by numerous internal divisions and conflicts.” [“Patriarch Porfirije for NIN: Illuminated by the light of Christ’s Resurrection, we see in others our brothers and sisters without whom we cannot live,” SPC, 20 April 2025.¹³⁰

Since November 1, 2024 – following the collapse of the canopy at the railway station in Novi Sad – public expressions of citizen discontent have multiplied. For months, students and citizens have organized protests and blockades across Serbia, and society is now deeply divided between those who support the current government and those who demand its accountability for pervasive corruption.

¹³⁰ <https://spc.rs/sr/news///13821.patrijarh-porfirije-za-nin-obasjani-svetloscu-hristovog-vaskrsenja-vidimo-u-bliznjima-bracu-i-sestre-bez-kojih-nemozemo.html>

In the aforementioned interview, the Patriarch sought to deny claims that the Serbian Orthodox Church, or its officials, had failed to support the students, or that their support had not been expressed clearly enough. He emphasized that he himself had “personally and continuously” supported them through direct conversations with hundreds of students. However, since his “insight was based on direct conversations with students, not on media information or politically tinted interpretations,” the Patriarch concluded that he was not “the one who should or may choose one side or the other, or place himself among those already divided within and among themselves, and whom many others are dividing even further. I have always had, and still have in my mind and heart, that the role of a pastor, priest, and especially of a bishop or patriarch, is always and above all to be with everyone and to reject no one.”

To overcome the crisis, the Patriarch emphasized that dialogue and mutual respect were essential, and for that reason, “in the middle of last month, he issued a public call for

dialogue, even offering the Church as a potential space for such a meeting,” but the dialogue never took place.¹³¹

In an attempt to justify the absence of a clear stance by church officials regarding the student and civic protests in Serbia, church scholars have worked earnestly to explain and defend this position from both theological and secular perspectives. A notable example was the presentation by Reverend Stevan Jovanović, assistant to the chairman of the Committee for Religious Education of the Archdiocese of Belgrade and Karlovci. In an article published on the official website of the Serbian Orthodox Church and during an appearance on public television, he denied the allegedly political role of Patriarch Pavle in 1997 and sought to demonstrate that the actions of the current Patriarch were consistent with those of his revered predecessor, wrongly interpreted as political, and fully in line with the mission of the “Serbian Church.”

After serious public pressure from parts of the protesting public demanding that the current church leadership follow the example of their predecessors and support the people’s resistance to unjust rule, senior clergy and certain intellectuals made a concerted effort to refute the notion that Patriarch Pavle had engaged in political activity or taken sides. They insisted that his actions had been aimed at calming tensions and preventing the escalation of conflict.¹³²

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² “The Church in the Public Sphere,” SPC, 29 January 2025, <https://spc.rs/sr/news/iz-zivota-crkve//13267.crkva-u-javnoj-sferi.html>

The day after the mass protest of March 15, 2025, in Belgrade, Patriarch Porfirije served the liturgy in the Temple of Saint Sava and stated: “And of course, I should also say this, since it has often been questioned what we think about the students’ demands. I think there is no one who does not wish for the students’ demands to be met. But I am not the one – and probably few of us gathered here are – who can say whether they should or should not be. That should be said by those competent, appointed, and paid for that task. Therefore, we must block hopelessness, block the lack of direction, block in ourselves exclusivity, block selfishness, block vanity – block everything that excludes the other.”¹³³

It is true that the Patriarch, on several occasions, reacted promptly and clearly to acts of violence suffered by students during the blockades and protests. When a student from the Faculty of Law was struck by a car, the Patriarch officially stated that he was deeply shaken by the incident and expected “those responsible for this act to be held accountable under the law.”¹³⁴ Two days later, the Patriarch visited the injured student at the Clinical Center of Serbia and wished her a speedy and full recovery.¹³⁵ Similarly, after several students were beaten in front of the ruling party’s offices in Novi Sad,

¹³³ “Patriarch Porfirije: May our children return to classrooms, to elementary and high schools, and to universities,” SPC, 16 March 2025,

¹³⁴ “Patriarch Porfirije: Aggression and violence will bring good to no one,” SPC, 16 January 2025, <https://spc.rs/sr/news/patrijarh//12360.patrijarh-porfirije-agesija-i-nasilje-nikome-nece-doneti-dobro.html>

¹³⁵ “Patriarch Porfirije visits injured student Sonja Ponjavić at the Clinical Center,” SPC, 18 January 2025, <https://spc.rs/sr/news/patrijarh//12369.patrijarh-porfirije-u-klinickom-centru-posetio-povredenu-studentkinju-sonju-ponjavic.html>

the Patriarch officially reacted: "I am appalled to learn that a third female student has been seriously injured, this time in already wounded Novi Sad. I expect that those responsible for these and all other criminal acts will be punished in accordance with the law. As always, I remind everyone that violence has never brought good to anyone. Violence is contrary to all Christian principles and as such is unacceptable – especially against our students."¹³⁶

INTRA-CHURCH INTERFERENCES

Following an incident that took place at the Saint Sava Academy in Novi Sad, a text appeared on the website of the Serbian Orthodox Church sharply criticizing the actions of a group of students critical of the Church's passivity. The author of the text, Dušan Stokanović, an employee of the Serbian Patriarchate, pointed to the existence of "parallel universes": "...while some proudly carry icons and national flags, kissing them and crossing themselves, others – even at three faculties: Organizational Sciences, Political Sciences, and Law – silently and without protest watch as that same flag is desecrated on stage, while those who make the sign of the cross are subjected to the most shameless insults."

As evidence that "Serbian students live in parallel, if not multi-universes," Stokanović cited the following situation:"...

¹³⁶ "Patriarch Porfirije: Violence against students is unacceptable, I demand accountability," SPC, 28 January 2025, <https://spc.rs/sr/news/patrijarh//12416.patrijarh%C2%A0porfirije-nasilje-prema-studentima-neprihvatljivo,-zahtevam-odgovornost.html>

while students of the University of Belgrade filled the grand Temple of Saint Sava in prayerful silence during the pre-feast vigil, then listened to the magnificent sermon of His Holiness Patriarch Porfirije, and afterward enjoyed the Saint Sava Academy, in the Serbian Athens – in Matica Srpska, the temple of Serbian science, culture, and art – a group claiming to be students violently interrupted the local Saint Sava Academy, seeking to impose their anti-Saint Sava, anti-Christian, and anti-Serbian narrative and concept of life."

He concluded with the following: "It is up to the students to decide in which universe they wish to live. Whether it is the universe about which the successor of Saint Sava's throne spoke to them last night, or the world where all Saint Sava values and Serbian identity markers are ridiculed. Whatever they decide – so shall it be."¹³⁷

The next day, the Church's Information Service published a disclaimer emphasizing: "The text published on the official website of the Serbian Orthodox Church under the title Parallel Universes or the Contribution of Student Protests to Modern Science represents the personal opinion of its author and in no way reflects the position of His Holiness Patriarch Porfirije. On the same web address, many articles and public statements on theological and social issues have been published. With the firm intention of halting unfounded insults, threats, and attacks on the Patriarch, we remind the public that the aforementioned text was a reaction by the author

¹³⁷ "Parallel Universes or the Contribution of Student Protests to Modern Science," SPC, 27 January 2025, <https://spc.rs/sr/news/patrijarh//12403.paralelni-univerzumi-ili-doprinos-studentskih-protesta-savremenoj-nauci.html>

to the screening of a play at three Belgrade faculties under blockade and to the interruption of the Saint Sava Academy in Matica Srpska.”¹³⁸

A statement signed by 18 theologians, priests, monks, and nuns strongly condemned the controversial text published on the Church’s website, describing it as “tendentious, condescending, and ending with a clumsily constructed false dilemma.” The statement noted that all student demands “come down to one: they want respect for the Constitution and the law – nothing more. They have clearly chosen to live in the universe of respect for the law, advocacy for justice and human rights, steadfast pursuit of truth, honor, and integrity. In other words, they have chosen the universe of the original Gospel. In that choice, they have our full support.”¹³⁹

At the end of February 2025, the official website of the Diocese of Kruševac published an article titled “Zduhaći, Maniacs, and People of Bad Faith,” written by Metropolitan David, in which students were compared to Ustaše (Croatian fascists). The article analyzed the student protests and sought to undermine their actions, which aimed to hold those responsible for the Novi Sad station canopy collapse accountable and to establish rule of law in the country. Metropolitan David supported the government’s and President

138 “Disclaimer of the Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church,” SPC, 28 January 2025, <https://spc.rs/sr/news/patrijarh/12415.demanti-informativne-sluzbe-srpske-pravoslavne-crkve.html>

139 “‘Not in Our Name!’: Priests, Monks, and Nuns Distance Themselves from the SPC Statement Criticizing Students,” *Danas*, 28 January 2025, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/ne-u-nase-ime-svestenici-monasi-i-monahinje-ogradili-se-od-saopstenja-spc-u-kojima-se-kritikuju-studenti/>

Vučić’s narrative that the student protest was in fact a “color revolution”: “When riots, rebellions, and revolutions of various colors are underway, they always end up red – the color of blood – and all parade participants become responsible for far-reaching historical consequences. Both the unscrupulous masterminds and the naïve pawns know this. It creates a situation where a vulgar type of politics, cooked up in domestic and foreign kitchens, serves everyone a diluted poison. Such politics brings with it a ‘great axe that separates people from prayer and from each other.’ It lacks reason and calm deliberation and is detached from peaceful, persistent argumentation and solutions.”

He went on to claim that gatherings across Serbia resembled “Illuminati councils and Davos lotteries,” and made the scandalous comparison: “Caught in the act, they weep over their own copies because none is an original; and it is known they will never reach originality. Hence the mirrors – not for souls, but for copper trinkets. They loiter in the streets, collect consensuses, and even have their ajvanli-pashas training them to become ‘Serbian Ustaše’ and new demons of Lubyanka.”¹⁴⁰

In response, six Serbian Orthodox hierarchs – Metropolitan Grigorije of Germany, Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral, Bishop Justin of Žiča, Bishop Dimitrije of Zahumlje-Herzegovina and the Littoral, Archbishop Maksim of Los Angeles and Western America, and Bishop Irinej of

140 “Metropolitan David of Kruševac Compared Students to Ustaše,” *Danas*, 25 February 2025, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/mitropolit-krusevacki-david-uporedio-studente-sa-ustasama/>

Washington–New York and Eastern America – addressed an open letter to the public calling for respect toward students and responsible communication.

“As various accusations against students have recently appeared in public, some voiced by church dignitaries and published via the official SPC outlets, we feel the need and duty to express our position and appeal for respect toward students and their just and dignified struggle, as well as for responsible expression and reporting. As hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church, we have a duty to publicly reject and distance ourselves from any speech that dehumanizes another person – especially when that speech diminishes young people, students, as agents of social development and the future, or humiliates them as those called to think and seek truth. (...) History teaches us that every discourse denying another’s dignity leads to great social tragedies, and as pastors, we must not allow such rhetoric to take root among our people and in our Church. (...) In these pre-Lenten days, Metropolitan David of Kruševac, in his latest text published on the official SPC website, placed students in the context of a ‘color revolution,’ labeling them as ‘Serbian Ustaše,’ which is offensive and unacceptable. We believe it is unjustifiable today to be a bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church and remain silent in the face of such words – words that reveal insensitivity and disregard for the Body of the Church. Their dehumanizing nature compels us to speak out. (...) To label our youth in such terms is more than a disgrace – it is a shameful mark upon the Body of the Church. Students are our future, and our duty is to guide

them with love and understanding – even if they err – toward the Truth, not to reject or belittle them. Only with such an approach can we preserve unity, freedom, and the dignity of every person – the essence of Orthodox faith, of our Church’s ethos, and of Saint Sava’s values. For all these reasons, we can no longer stand aside. After such statements – including those published on the official website of the Serbian Orthodox Church – we must clearly and unequivocally declare: our Church does not believe our students are ‘Serbian Ustaše.’”¹⁴¹

Theologian Blagoje Pantelić expressed shock that the controversial article had been published on the Church’s official website, saying he did not expect Patriarch Porfirije to allow it: “Instead of preventing further compromise of our Church by that hierarch, he actively participated in it. Of course, there is a possibility this was done without his knowledge – but a very small one. I hope he will act responsibly and within his authority, urgently convening a Synod meeting, because Metropolitan David’s actions are deeply anti-Gospel and anti-Church.”¹⁴² Metropolitan David attempted to deny and protest against alleged misinterpretations of his controversial text, publishing a rebuttal titled “I Protest and Deny!”¹⁴³

141 “Six SPC Bishops Support Students, Distance Themselves from Metropolitan David’s Letter,” *Danas*, 28 February 2025, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/sestorica-episkopa-spc-podrzala-studente-ogradili-se-od-pisma-mitropolita-davida/>

142 “The SPC Has Its Own Tabloid: Metropolitan David Calls Students ‘Serbian Ustaše,’ Cites Patriarch Porfirije, Vučić, Marko Vidojković...,” *Danas*, 26 February 2025, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/studenti-spc-rezim/>

143 “Metropolitan David of Kruševac: I Protest and Deny!,” *SPC*, 28 February 2025, <https://spc.rs/sr/news///13429.mitropolit-krusevacki-david-protestujem-i-demantujem!.html>] However, Patriarch Porfirije did not respond publicly to the open letter of the six hierarchs.

THE BLOOMING DECLARATION

In late April 2025, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church met in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin, in the presence of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and Metropolitan Irinej of Bačka. During the cordial meeting, the Serbian Patriarch stated, among other things, that he did not know what would have happened to Kosovo and Metohija without the support of Russia and China. He also claimed that a “color revolution” was underway in Serbia and expressed hope that the country would “overcome this ordeal.” On that occasion, the Patriarch added: “We know and feel that the forces of the West wish to destroy the identity of the Serbian people and culture.”

He emphasized the tradition of close relations between the two churches, noting that his predecessors, the patriarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church, had always been connected with the patriarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church. Together with his spiritual father, Metropolitan Irinej of Bačka, he recalled the words of the late Patriarch Irinej: “He used to say that our small boat, sailing on a turbulent sea, must always be tied to the great Russian ship.” The Patriarch also conveyed greetings from the President of Serbia, along with a personal message: “He will be here on May 9, regardless of circumstances in Europe and elsewhere.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ “Patriarch Porfirije with Putin and on the ‘Color Revolution’: What the Entire Conversation Looked Like,” NIN, April 23, 2025, *sastanku-s-putinom-u-srbiji-u-toku-objena-revolucija*

The condemnation of the “color revolution” and “Western centers of power,” as well as the desire to align Serbia with the “Russian world,” drew sharp reactions from parts of the Serbian public and directly contradicted the Patriarch’s own months-long insistence on political neutrality.

According to foreign policy analyst Boško Jakšić, “the fact that the Patriarch confirmed Vučić’s upcoming visit to Moscow means he met with him before departure and clearly received instructions, requests, or a plea to intervene with Vladimir Putin to help Vučić escape what he keeps calling a ‘color revolution.’”

Student protests have divided the leadership of the majority church. While the church hierarchy, through its messages from Moscow, aligned itself with the authorities, some members of the clergy expressed support for the students. “It is well known that a conflict always simmers between the conservative and liberal wings of the Church. The conservatives were now in Moscow, while the liberal wing made its voice heard in Munich, where Bishop Grigorije delivered a welcoming speech to students who arrived there by bicycle,” Jakšić explained.

Theologian Vukašin Milićević stated that the Patriarch’s rhetoric showed he did not go to Moscow as a representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church or the Serbian people, but “exclusively as a representative of the regime.” He added: “More and more voices within the Church are openly and clearly speaking out, guided by conscience and faithfulness to Christian values, and I believe that the wave of change

initiated by students in Serbia will also reach the Serbian Orthodox Church.”¹⁴⁵

Within the majority church, support for students and the protests most often comes from bishops serving abroad – one likely reason being that, in managing their dioceses, they operate almost completely independently from the Serbian state authorities.

President Aleksandar Vučić announced his first visit to Russia since Moscow launched its military invasion of Ukraine three years earlier in early March, after a phone call with Putin. In subsequent statements, Vučić emphasized that he would not change his decision to travel, despite warnings that the West could respond with sanctions.

As a candidate for EU membership, Serbia has not opened a single negotiation chapter since December 2021. Progress has stalled due to its refusal to align its foreign policy with that of the European Union and to impose sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. Brussels is also demanding progress on the rule of law and dialogue with Kosovo.

The closeness between official Belgrade and Moscow was further demonstrated when investigators from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) provided support to Serbian authorities. Following accusations that banned sonic weapons had been used against demonstrators during a mass protest in Belgrade on March 15, 2025, the FSB investigation in Serbia concluded that such weapons had not been deployed.

¹⁴⁵ “Whom Did the Head of the SPC Represent in Moscow?”, Radio Free Europe, April 23, 2025, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srpska-pravoslavna-crkva-porfirije-moskva-putin-srbija-rusija/33394847.html>

The Patriarch’s statement in Moscow may have surprised the broader public, but for the informed, it was not the content that shocked – rather the spontaneity and ease with which it was delivered, in stark contrast to the tense situation in Serbia. The message was entirely consistent with numerous statements by his predecessors, their spiritual mentors, and the overall anti-European and anti-Western rhetoric that dominates the official discourse of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

For example, in addition to the already mentioned controversial text, Archbishop and Metropolitan David of Kruševac, in his analysis of current events in early 2025, just before launching into lavish praise of the current Patriarch, wrote the following: “Everywhere there are people (elementary and high school students, university students, teachers, professors, farmers, laborers, medical workers, public figures... the small and the great, the known and the unknown – and behind all those masses stand the opposition; behind the opposition again, the experts in color revolutions and Maidans; and behind them, foreign services working to break up Serbia...)”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ “Rhapsody in Gray,” SPC, February 8, 2025, <https://spc.rs/sr/news///13312.rapsodija-u-sivom-.html>

CONTINUATION OF THE TRIUMVIRATE SYMPHONY

The now traditional “Assembly luncheon” at the Presidential Palace was once again held in mid-May 2024, when President Aleksandar Vučić hosted a meal for Patriarch Porfirije, members of the Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska.

The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, who had recently been banned from visiting the Patriarchate of Peć, emphasized that during the ongoing Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Kosovo had become the main topic of discussion – alongside the draft UN resolution on genocide.

For President Vučić, the potential resolution on Srebrenica was crucial to “the survival of the Serbian people”: “Since the last time we met, during your Assembly, it seems that events have unfolded exactly as we predicted – unfortunately, quite accurately – both in the world and in our region. (...) Perhaps the only positive thing is that Serbia, and I believe also Republika Srpska, are developing well economically, even better than expected given the difficult global circumstances.”

Vučić reminded those present that a major pan-Serbian Assembly was scheduled for June 8, which “could not be pan-Serbian” without the participation of the Serbian Orthodox Church. He said he was pleased that the Patriarch had agreed to attend and extended an invitation to the bishops as well.

Speaking about the draft UN resolution on Srebrenica, Patriarch Porfirije stated: “Of course, we do not need to convince each other that every crime is a crime, and that a great crime

occurred in Srebrenica. We have never, according to our conscience, faith, or belief in Christ, compared crimes – deciding which was greater or lesser, or where a higher power intervened. However, we have now been placed in a position, through this UN initiative, where we must compare – not to diminish the scale of the Srebrenica crime, but to show that, at the very least, our suffering throughout history has been no less.”¹⁴⁷ A few days later, cooperation between the Church and the state was elevated to a spiritual level when the Patriarch, at the President’s request, gave Vučić his blessing and held a prayer service (moleban) at the Temple of Saint Sava. The Patriarch said that they had gathered to pray before Vučić’s trip to the UN, “where the great powers of the world intend to adopt a resolution on the so-called genocide in Srebrenica.”¹⁴⁸ That is why we raise our voices strongly – to expose absolute falsehoods and attempts at historical revisionism,” said the Patriarch during his sermon.¹⁴⁸

Patriarch Porfirije reacted swiftly and sharply after the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina sentenced Milorad Dodik to one year in prison and six years of political disqualification, describing the verdict as “extremely dangerous” and potentially harmful to all that had been achieved over the past three decades in healing war wounds and fostering reconciliation among Bosnia and Herzegovina’s peoples.

¹⁴⁷ “Vučić, Patriarch, and Dodik Prepare for the June 8 Assembly: ‘Serbs in Kosovo Exposed to Brutal Persecution,’” *KoSsev*, May 17, 2024

¹⁴⁸ “Porfirije and Vučić – A Tandem That ‘Clicked’ from the Start,” *Nova*, May 21, 2024

In a written statement, the Patriarch called the decision “unconstitutional and anti-Dayton,” warning that it could “lead to rising tensions” in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁴⁹The next day, the Patriarch traveled to Banja Luka and met with the President of Republika Srpska and bishops from Bosnia and Herzegovina – Metropolitan Jefrem of Banja Luka, Metropolitan Fotije of Zvornik-Tuzla, Bishop Sergije of Bihać-Petrovac, and Bishop Sava of Marča.

During the meeting, Dodik thanked the Patriarch for his visit and emphasized the importance of the Church’s support for peace, dialogue, and understanding. He informed the Patriarch and the bishops about how Republika Srpska’s institutions would respond to what he called “legal violence” suffered since 1995. The Patriarch, on behalf of the Church, expressed a unified position: “The clear goal of this verdict is to nullify the democratically expressed will of the Serbian people and thus delegitimize the existence of Republika Srpska – and with it, the existence of the entire Serbian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

He appealed to all officials to take responsibility for maintaining peace and urged EUFOR to “act within its mandate to reduce tensions and antagonisms rather than posing a threat to any community.”¹⁵⁰From the start of his mandate, Patriarch Porfirije has maintained close and frequent relations with Milorad Dodik, reflected in numerous official and

¹⁴⁹ “Patriarch Porfirije: The Verdict Against Dodik Is Extremely Dangerous and Could Lead to Tensions in BiH,” *Danas*, February 26, 2025

¹⁵⁰ “Dodik: We Invited the Federation Leadership to Dialogue; Patriarch Appeals for De-escalation,” *RTV*, February 27, 2025

informal meetings. On the celebration of his patron saint’s day (slava), the Patriarch hosted both President Vučić and President Dodik.¹⁵¹

Later, the Patriarch attended Dodik’s slava in Aleksandrovac near Banja Luka, where the host proudly posted on Instagram that it was “a great honor to welcome the Patriarch, who led the prayer and blessed the feast.”¹⁵²Only a month later, Dodik again shared that he and the Patriarch had attended a wedding together.¹⁵³

During a multi-day visit to the Diocese of Bihać-Petrovac, the Patriarch consecrated the Church of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker in the Rmanj Monastery in Martin Brod, with Dodik in attendance. For his contribution to the monastery’s restoration, Dodik was awarded the Order of the New Martyrs of Bihać-Petrovac, the diocese’s highest honor.¹⁵⁴

In December 2024, together with Prime Minister Miloš Vučević, the Patriarch visited Dodik in a private hospital in Belgrade, where he was recovering from surgery.¹⁵⁵

The intensity of the Patriarch’s relationship with Dodik was also reflected in a social media post where Dodik stated that he had met with the Patriarch before leaving for Moscow

¹⁵¹ “Patriarch Porfirije Celebrated His Slava; Among the Guests Were Vučić and Dodik,” *Telegraf*, January 20, 2024

¹⁵² “Patriarch Porfirije at Dodik’s Slava,” *ATV*, May 6, 2024

¹⁵³ “Dodik and the Patriarch at the Wedding of Katarina and Vasilije Perić,” *ATV*, June 16, 2024

¹⁵⁴ “Patriarch Porfirije Consecrates the Church of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker in Rmanj Monastery; Dodik Present,” *Vijesti* 365, September 14, 2024

¹⁵⁵ “Vučević and Patriarch Porfirije Visited Dodik in Hospital,” *Politika*, December 10, 2024

to attend the Victory Day celebrations. Declaring that the Serbian Orthodox Church “is not only the pillar of our faith but also the support of our unity and guardian of our identity,” Dodik did not specify where the meeting had taken place – though it was believed to be in Belgrade, from where he was to depart for Moscow.¹⁵⁶ No mention of this meeting appeared on the official website of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

MONTENEGRO: A VIEW FROM MOSCOW

During the Moscow meeting, Patriarch Porfirije told Vladimir Putin: “Our stance regarding Kosovo, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro depends, I believe, on Russia’s global positioning. My wish, and that of the majority of our Church, is that in the future, should a new geopolitical realignment occur, we remain close to that Russian sphere, in the Russian world.”

The Patriarch’s statements regarding Montenegro, delivered on April 22, 2025, sparked condemnation from parts of the opposition and a reaction from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro, which deemed his remarks inappropriate and an unacceptable interference in Montenegro’s internal affairs. In addition to placing Montenegro within the context of countries influenced by Russia’s global stance and expressing the desire to align with the “Russian world” in case of geopolitical shifts, Porfirije thanked Putin for support

¹⁵⁶ “Dodik Claims He Met Patriarch Porfirije Before Moscow Trip, Doesn’t Say Where the Meeting Took Place,” *Nova*, May 7, 2025

regarding Kosovo, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro, “because our people and our Church are also there.”

Only the opposition European Alliance condemned the Patriarch’s statement. Leader Ivan Vujović remarked: “The Serbian Orthodox Church voluntarily surrenders to Putin, while our ‘European government’ has already surrendered to the Serbian Orthodox Church.” None of the ruling parties, which are predominantly aligned with the Serbian Orthodox Church, reacted.¹⁵⁷

For context, two years prior, Patriarch Porfirije was actively involved in the population census campaign in Montenegro, calling on citizens at the Church of Christ’s Resurrection in Podgorica to identify as members of the Serbian people, followers of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and speakers of the Serbian language.

Another controversy involved the enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije of the Montenegrin-Primorska Diocese in October 2021, following the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije. The enthronement involved special forces and a military helicopter, sparking high ethnic tensions, protests, and incidents in Cetinje. With Joanikije’s arrival, the Diocese’s autonomy vis-à-vis the Patriarchate in Belgrade began to erode. The Episcopal Council of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro, established after Montenegro regained independence in 2006 and chaired by Metropolitan Amfilohije, was dissolved.

¹⁵⁷ “When the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church Talks About Montenegro in Moscow,” *Radio Free Europe*, April 26, 2025

In March 2022, the European Parliament expressed concern over attempts by the Orthodox Church in Serbia, Montenegro, and Republika Srpska to promote Russia as the protector of traditional family values and to strengthen state–Church ties. The resolution condemned Russia's efforts to exploit ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans to inflame conflict and divide communities.

CASE: METROPOLITAN GRIGORIJE

In December 2024, Archbishop of Düsseldorf-Berlin and Metropolitan of Germany, Grigorije, receiving the award “Knight of the Call”, emphasized the importance of a selfless spirit dedicated to the common good: “Such a spirit full of potential for noble deeds appears today among young people, students, and pupils, who advocate for the common good, just when one might think knights no longer exist or are very few.”¹⁵⁸ A month later, in an interview, Metropolitan Grigorije highlighted the spiritual significance of youth activism: “Rebellion among young people is not only natural but spiritually crucial. If they reconciled themselves with what they see, it would be tragic. Everywhere we see poverty and misery, yet they are like angels who refuse to keep a veil over their eyes.”

He stressed moral integrity: “Corruption is not only financial; it can be moral and spiritual. These students embody none of that. Perhaps it is unfair to say ‘I stand with you,’

¹⁵⁸ Danas, December 8, 2024

when in fact we are merely spectators, but I wholeheartedly stand with the hope they have awakened.”

He pointed out that allowing diverse opinions could reduce societal divisions, contrasting his access to N1 with the absence of opportunities on RTS for over 20 years.¹⁵⁹ In a column, Grigorije praised students for defending truth and integrity: “Watching students, I have come to believe we finally have a generation able to name problems accurately and address them. They defend our honor and dignity. To be human today in Serbia is, at minimum, to stand with our children, because their goals are fundamentally human and, in the deepest sense, Christian.”¹⁶⁰

Ahead of the March 15, 2025 protest, he addressed participants via Instagram: “Dear students, citizens of Serbia... those on the streets tomorrow, fight for justice and truth resolutely and peacefully. Protect yourselves and each other, for no one else will. Protect even those whose political views you disagree with, as they might be exploited to tarnish your dignified struggle... You are our moral compass, our hope, and proof that as a nation, we still have a chance.”¹⁶¹

On April 3, 2025, students bicycled from Serbia to Strasbourg via Munich. At the end of one segment, Metropolitan Grigorije personally welcomed them, organizing dinner and overnight accommodation in church facilities. He addressed the students: “Dear noble youth... your struggle inspires us

¹⁵⁹ Danas, January 6, 2025

¹⁶⁰ Danas, January 9, 2025

¹⁶¹ Danas, March 14, 2025

to draw forth the best from ourselves, to be better and nobler people. Welcome under this house of God... Whoever strikes you strikes not only the best of our people but also Christ Himself, who always identified with the 'small' and the wronged."¹⁶²

Grigorije is one of the few bishops who regularly takes clear critical stances on controversial or taboo issues within the majority Church. Since December 2008, he has publicly challenged the Church hierarchy, including over lithium mining: "...I do not support lithium extraction and the destruction of the fertile Jadar Valley or any other, offering theological, ecological, and patriotic arguments."¹⁶³ Later, he faced criticism for relativizing restrictions on women's ordination, explaining that dogmatically no barrier exists, though traditional and church circumstances have historically applied. Critics also accused him of being too close to Catholicism. Grigorije suggested that tabloid attacks often target him for his positions on Kosovo and lithium mining. On Serbia's political situation, he said: "Too often, the coin has two faces – one side the letter, the other the head – and in my view, a third party manipulates it, tossing it right and left."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Radar, April 11, 2025

¹⁶³ Danas, August 9, 2024

¹⁶⁴ Danas, September 19, 2024

PASSIVITY AS A STRATEGY

A few days after the tragedy in Novi Sad, during the initial public reactions on November 5, 2024, riots broke out in the city center. In response, the Bačka Eparchy called for peace and condemned all forms of violence. Its official statement emphasized that "politically motivated violent protests and riots are not and cannot be associated with prayerful respect or any tribute to those tragically harmed at the Railway Station and in our city," and invited the faithful "to come to the churches of the Bačka Eparchy, where, with the blessing of Metropolitan Irinej of Bačka, daily services and prayers are held for the deceased and the healing of the injured, and to participate in these services. In this way, they will express their prayerful respect for the victims in the only proper Christian, Saint-Savian, and human manner."¹⁶⁵

On the evening before the announced large protest on March 15, 2025, the Patriarch served the Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos at the Church of Saint Sava, and in his sermon emphasized: "First, I address those I trust the most among us, namely the youth, to continue doing as they have done so far, to do everything within their power to avoid all forms of violence, but the same applies to all social actors. It is even more applicable to all state institutions, that we all do everything to prevent the manifestation of aggression among us, and God forbid, that hatred take hold and manifest among us." On this

¹⁶⁵ "Press Release of the Information Service of the Bačka Eparchy," SPC, 06.11.2024., <https://spc.rs/sr/news/patrijarh//12009.saopstenje-za-javnost-informativne-sluzbe-eparhije-backe.html>

occasion, the Patriarch also stressed the “neutral” position of the Church: “The Church is a place where we embrace everyone without exception, making no distinctions among them, but at the same time, refraining from telling anyone what they ought to do; we call everyone to love, to openness of heart for others...”¹⁶⁶

A good illustration of the promotion of authoritarian loyalty and uncritical obedience to authority, widely propagated in the public sphere, is the text by Bishop Sergije of Bihać-Petrovo published on the Serbian Orthodox Church website, titled “Mind Your Own Business!” In this text, the church authority, with the noble idea that “we should look into ourselves and our weaknesses with a desire to correct them daily, to be better than we are,” also advances the notion that we live in “crazy times” where everyone feels entitled to judge those above them. Quoting the well-known Sermon on the Mount [“First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Mt 7:5)], the bishop writes: “Today we can see, hear, and read how children teach parents, students teach professors, deacons teach bishops, priests teach the Patriarch, and the faithful people become confused by the arrogance of those who wish to correct everyone but themselves, especially in this age of the internet storm where anyone can say anything regardless of its truth or usefulness. Authorities are deliberately

¹⁶⁶ “Patriarch Porfirije: Let Us Make Tomorrow Pass in Peace, and It Will If We Have Christ in Our Hearts,” SPC, 14.03.2025., <https://spc.rs/sr/news///13528.patrijarh-porfirije-ucinimo-da-nam-sutrasnji-dan-prode-u-miru,-a-proci-ce-ako-imamo-ime-hristovo-u-srcu-.html>

trampled upon, belittled, and falsely slandered, because it is the task of the Evil One to make everything meaningless...”¹⁶⁷

According to theologian Vukašin Milićević, “...instead of Christian principles of love, freedom, and responsibility for others, impulses for unquestioning obedience to authority and tribal belonging are emphasized, along with a range of atavistic rituals and focus on collective traumas, whether real or imagined, it makes no difference.”¹⁶⁸

Officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church, led by the Patriarch, except for a few hierarchs mainly residing in the distant diaspora, have become adept at ignoring the most current and often urgent social issues, justifying this passive (play dead) status and disregard with theological as well as secular arguments.

Only a month and a half after Patriarch Porfirije’s enthronement, at the end of 2021, mass protests were organized against lithium mining in Serbia, and at one protest, the new Patriarch was called upon to stand “on the side of the people.” The Patriarch soon responded: “The Church is not primarily concerned with social, economic, or any other specific subjects, themes, or problems. It is concerned with the meaning of existence in every context, situation, and moment,” he wrote on his Instagram profile.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ “Bishop Sergije: Mind Your Own Business!,” SPC, 22.02.2025., <https://spc.rs/sr/news///13384.episkop-sergije-gledajmo-svoja-posla!.html>

¹⁶⁸ “Vukašin Milićević: SPC Leadership is With the Regime,” Novosti, 02.04.2025., <https://www.portalnovosti.com/vukasin-milicevic-vrh-spc-a-je-uz-rezim>

¹⁶⁹ “Porfirije and Vučić – a Tandem That Clicked from the Start: The Patriarch Stayed Silent on All Misdeeds of the Government, but When They Need Help – He’s First in Line,” Nova, 21.05.2024., <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/porfirije-i-vucic->

Unlike the refined spiritual, patriotic, and social awareness demonstrated in the demand to abolish gender-sensitive language prescribed by the Gender Equality Law, that awareness is trivially worldly regarding the Law on Expropriation and the Law on Referendum. It is also clear that “social and economic subjects, themes, and problems” were never seriously considered in the application of the Restitution Law or the regulation of taxation for religious communities, which is of significant interest to the Serbian Orthodox Church. To date, the leadership of the Church and its head have not commented on lithium mining in Serbia. Only Metropolitan Grigorije of Germany and the Australian-New Zealand Metropolitan, Metropolitan Siluan, have expressed positions on this issue.¹⁷⁰

Passivity and an ignorant stance were illustratively demonstrated after one of the numerous media appearances of President Aleksandar Vučić, in his final interview of 2024. Appearing on a national TV channel, he informed the public that within the Serbian Progressive Party there exists a group, which he called “loyalists” – a wing of the ruling party – that met in a small church, and that he could only speak positively of them, even though they were somewhat extreme in his view. According to the President, at the founding assembly, when there were 1,019 of them, they swore blood oaths never

.....
tandem–koji–je–kliknuo–od–pocetka–sva–nepocinstva–vlasti–patrijarh–je–precutao–ali–kad–im–treba–pomoc–prvi–stane–u–red/

170 “Bishop Grigorije and SPC Metropolitan from Australia Siluan Against Lithium Mining,” *Vreme*, 10.08.2024., <https://vreme.com/vesti/vladika-grigorije-i-mitropolit-spc-iz-australije-siluan-protiv-rudarenja-litijuma/>

to form a coalition with the “yellow scum,” and now they number 17,000, including his brother and another member of Vučić’s family.¹⁷¹

This statement was controversial not only because it legitimized the existence of an extreme political group under the cover of legal authority, but also because it implied a formal connection between the group and the Serbian Orthodox Church, or at least one of its organizational units.

Vice President of the Freedom and Justice Party, Marinika Tepić, reacted to the controversial statement, noting that no one from the prosecution showed interest for two days regarding the public acknowledgment by the President of the existence of an extremist faction of the party meeting “in a small church.” Tepić emphasized that the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church also did not clarify which “small church” the extremists were using.¹⁷²

In an interview, theologian Vukašin Milićević, when asked whether he felt that the leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church is too passive regarding the problems faced daily by Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija, said that the Church leadership behaves exactly as the current authorities wish.¹⁷³

171 “Vučić Reveals That a Group of Most Loyal ‘Loyalists’ Exists in SNS: They Meet in a Church, Swear Blood Oaths, and Include the President’s Brother,” *Danas*, 01.01.2025., <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-lojalisti/>

172 “Marinika Tepić Asks Patriarch Porfirije in Which ‘Small Church’ Vučić’s ‘Loyalists’ Meet,” *Vreme*, 02.01.2025., <https://vreme.com/vesti/marinika-tepic-pita-patrijarha-porfirija-u-kojoj-maloz-crkvi-se-sastaju-vucicevi-lojalisti/> Naturally, no official reaction came from the Patriarchate.

173 “Theologian for Beta: SPC Operates in the Spirit of Processes that Destroy Serbian Society under SNS Rule,” *Beta*, 09.09.2024., <https://beta.rs/content/211193-teolog-za-betu-spc-funkcionise-u-duhu-procesa-koji-razaraju-srpsko->

The Church reacts selectively and exclusively in a political context: the Patriarch was actively involved in the issue of the UN Resolution on Srebrenica, i.e., “the fight for national interests and the defense of Serbianhood, which has never been more threatened,” but he did not raise his voice as strongly when President Vučić accepted the Franco-German plan and later the Ohrid Annex, which many interpret as recognition of Kosovo, because that would not suit the authorities.

The visit to Moscow confirmed that Porfirije’s spiritual mentor, Archbishop of Novi Sad and Metropolitan of Bačka Irinej Bulović, remains the most influential authority in the Serbian Orthodox Church, i.e., the spiritual legacy of Justin Popović and Nikolaj Velimirović is still firmly maintained.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since Serbia is officially a secular state, but increasingly is not in practice, clear social action is needed to align the normative and actual, and to confine the SPC within the scope of its pastoral mission.

The SPC has historically been close to state structures, so it is important for it to take on the role of a neutral mediator – rejecting politicized polarization and uniting the people around the common good.

The SPC should clearly reject all violence and call for respect for human dignity, reiterating that nothing is more important than the common good of the people and the state and that “no one’s interest is more important.”

The SPC should strongly criticize any rhetoric that dehumanizes any group – especially the youth – as it has already been proven that such language leads to tragedies.

The SPC should encourage problem-solving through independent institutions, appealing to the state to conduct fair investigations (as students demand) while respecting the law.

The SPC should cooperate with other communities and initiate interfaith forums for peace, as student appeals for unity across religious communities have shown that in crisis, a coordinated voice of solidarity should be amplified.

Given its authority in society, the SPC can play an important role in calming tensions and promoting dialogue.