



BiEPAG

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# The Future of the Protests and Democracy in Serbia

By Florian Bieber, Marko Kmezić,  
Claudia Laštro\* and Lura Pollozhani







For three months, tens of thousands of citizens, led by students from all over Serbia, have been protesting in demonstrations, blockades, vigils and other actions throughout the country. They constitute the most serious challenge to the thirteen-year rule of Aleksandar Vučić. The outcome of the protests is not just crucial for Serbia, but for the entire region, as Vučić has been a disruptive force with his support for Serb nationalist parties and interference in neighboring states. These massive protests also hold lessons for challengers to autocratic rule elsewhere. They fundamentally differ from previous demonstrations against the Vučić government over the past decade – in terms of scale, countrywide scope and tactics, as well as the students' central role in them.

## Change through Protests?

The real question is how these protests can lead to change in Serbia. They have clearly defined demands: they seek a legal process against those responsible for the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad train station, release of all documents pertaining to its construction, investigation into subsequent attacks against the students and finally, increased funding for universities. While the students did not explicitly demand sackings or new elections, the ruling party and President Vučić have responded with resignations, offers of pardons and other measures outside the institutions' jurisdiction. Thus, the president and the ruling party offer solutions that reinforce the extra-constitutional power of the president and a political response, rather than an institutional one, as demanded by the students.

The four demands raised by Serbian students can be summarized into one fundamental call: they seek accountability from their government and the reinstatement of the rule of law in the country. Over the past thirteen years of SNS' (Serbian Progressive Party) rule, widespread corruption has eroded the rule of law, transforming key institutions into mere tools for those in power. Elections have been marred by irregularities, leaving no realistic opportunity for the opposition to gain power through democratic means. State-run media serve as a mouthpiece for the ruling party and the police and intelligence services target civil society organizations unlawfully. In such a climate, the restoration of a functioning rule of law—one that holds government officials accountable, limits their power and ensures legal checks and balances—is essential not only for democracy, but for any semblance of political normalcy.

After three months of protests, president Vučić wants to give an appearance of fulfilling the demands—at least to his voters—without actually doing so. As Serbia is at an impasse, the question arises of the possible and likely scenarios.



# Limited International Support

At this moment, there is little chance of intense pressure from the outside. While the regime keeps suggesting that Western intelligence agencies support the protests and have been warning of so-called ‘coloured revolutions’, the demonstrators have yet not received any Western support.

The government, on the other hand, does have Western support, as well as that of other external actors. The US under Trump has supported Vučić, as indicated by recent messages from his special envoy Grenell. The business interests of Trump’s son-in-law, who is seeking to build [the Trump Tower](#) in Belgrade, suggest that Trump is determined to support the Serbian regime in the future. The messages from the [EU have not been much](#) different. The support is partially grounded in the false yearning for ‘stability’ as EU’s foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas recently [stated](#). Marta Kos, in charge of Enlargement, has also been notably late and reserved in her [comments](#) on the protests.

Member states have made lucrative deals with the regime. This includes [the sale of French fighter jets](#) to Serbia in 2024 and the [lithium mining project by Rio Tinto](#), which has received strong support from Germany. This does not mean that their support for Vučić is inevitable. However, the EU is likely to take action only if the regime either increases repression that would make continued silence more deafening, or if there are apparent fissures in the regime. Russia and China are staunch supporters of the regime and dislike citizens expressing their opinions anyhow.

# Pathways to Change in Serbia

While the students rightfully demand that the institutions operate according to the Constitution, this does not happen without the blessing of the president, who controls all key institutions in the country. Following months of foot-dragging and attacks against the protestors, there is little hope that Vučić will fulfil the student protests’ demands or give green light to the institutions. Furthermore, it is evident that even if the protestors’ demands were met, the structural problem remains. The regime of SNS and President Vučić is fundamentally undemocratic and cannot restore the rule of law without threatening itself.

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Vučić will not risk his own political survival voluntarily. While he has announced multiple times over the past decade that he would retire from politics, he is eager to stay in power. His system rests on total control of the state; thus, he is unlikely to make any concessions that will threaten his power unless left with no choice. Any concessions he might make willingly are likely insufficient to threaten his power. Of course, this does not preclude miscalculation. Both Boris Tadić and Slobodan Milošević (not to suggest that the previous presidents were otherwise comparable) miscalculated their personal popularity in 2012 and 2000, respectively, and ran for office in elections, thinking it would be sufficient to bolster the ruling party. Both failed and lost their posts. Vučić might make the same mistake, but he is arguably more shrewd.

Unless Vučić makes a mistake, he will not give up power at his own will, which means the system will only collapse if a part of the power structure around Vučić shifts loyalties. This is going to be tricky. The current regime is highly personalized, making an elite split difficult. There are few other regime insiders who are popular and independent enough to lead an effective counter-coalition against Vučić from within. Another obstacle is the vulnerability of many actors in the system, as Vučić will have ways to blackmail or pressure them.

Nevertheless, certain actors could shift loyalties. These include the Socialist Party (SPS) led by Ivica Dačić, which has been a loyal ally since 2012. Still, SPS has a history of coalescing with other parties, having been an ally to both the Democratic Party and their rival during the 2000s, the Democratic Party of Serbia. Smaller parties could assist in increasing the heat on Vučić, but many of them have been coopted by the regime, ranging from minority parties to the far right. While none of them are significant in terms of electoral support, they are essential for securing the SNS majority, which could give them some leverage against the regime.

Media outlets with national reach, the fourth element to be considered, such as Pink or Kurir, have been loyal supporters of Vučić. However, Pink's owner, Željko Mitrović, has a record of opportunistically switching sides, having supported Milošević in the 1990s and the Democratic Party in the 2000s. In addition to these actors, most state institutions have been captured by the ruling party. These might act more independently if the circumstances are right. Such a shift is only likely if costs of staying aligned with the regime outweigh their benefits, and where there is a viable and legitimate political path towards change, including negotiations with Serbia's institutional and extra-institutional opposition.

If the protests help lead to substantial change, i.e. the democratization of Serbia, this will not be possible with President Vučić in charge. In the absence of external support or apparent allies within the institutions, there has to be a political process that leads to unification of opposition and a clear path to substantial reforms. This requires a significant shift within the opposition which, despite a short period of cooperation ahead of the 2023 elections, has been fragmented.





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A failure of the protests will not bring about 'stability' but rather greater uncertainty. The Vučić regime is more vulnerable due the protests and display of public distrust. It will not be able to restore citizens' trust. As a result, it can only govern by using an increased level of fabricated external threats and instability or by resorting to greater repression. The pathway of Turkey under Erdoğan after the repression of the Gezi Protests in 2013 is indicative.

## How to Rebuild the Rule of Law and Democracy in a Captured Country?

The first precondition is to maintain the protests' momentum as this is the most effective way to bring SNS' undemocratic practices to light of a domestic audience. In parallel, from the ranks of legal academia, lawyers – who also [suspended work](#) for one month in support of the protests – and international rule of law experts, a group of senior specialists should be recruited by the Rector's Council of the Conference of Universities of Serbia and students in protests, to carry out a rapid analysis of the situation and provide recommendations to address pressing rule of law related issues. The expert group must have diverse expertise in areas such as law enforcement, communications interception, free and fair elections, media freedom, prosecution services, the judiciary, human rights, and transitional justice. This team should not be tasked with assigning political accountability but rather with offering an impartial, fact-based assessment of the situation. Its main focus areas should include corruption, judiciary and prosecution, external oversight by independent bodies, elections, and the media.

Implementing the group's recommendations will require political will and determination to address shortcomings and to make changes, as well as consistent support and oversight from the EU and other partners. To improve democratic governance, all bodies, institutions, and actors must assume responsibility according to their mandate. In this regard, in the third step – in parallel to domestic pressure – based on the findings of the expert group, it is necessary to gradually convince the EU and its key member states that the Serbian government is no longer a credible partner, but a threat to fundamental EU values. In light of Serbia's shortcomings with regard to the EU fundamentals, which had been well evidenced at least since the [2018 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy](#), and in particular, the systemic problems which were revealed and confirmed in connection to the Novi Sad tragedy, the European Commission must be vocal when it comes to the implementation of urgent reform priorities to address the systemic weaknesses of the Serbian political system. The EU is able and competent to do so; in fact, it has already done so in 2015 when appointing a group of legal experts, resulting in the 'Priebe Report' to facilitate the urgent reform priorities in North Macedonia as part of the accession conditionality.



# What the EU can do

The EU engagement in the 2015/6 North Macedonia political crisis offers a blueprint for Serbia today. The EU became involved reluctantly and only after some hesitation, but once Commissioner Hahn did engage, the EU changed domestic dynamics, using its leverage to create a path out of the political crisis based on the EU accession criteria, the rule of law and democracy. These clear principles worked even though North Macedonia had not yet begun accession talks, having been blocked by Greece over a bilateral name dispute. One would expect that the EU could emulate this achievement in Serbia, especially since Serbia is an accession candidate.

Over the past decade, the EU's approach to the region has failed to deliver. Instead, it has led to the rise of a new generation of autocrats, epitomized by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Unlike his authoritarian predecessors, he has learned to be less antagonistic in relations to the West. Still, his unconstitutional presidentialism allows him even greater control over electoral processes, state institutions and the media. Thus, preventing state capture requires a new strategy which calls for concerted domestic and EU efforts.

In this regard, in the short term, a resolution of the institutional crisis requires that the EU urgently supports Serbian students' demands and initiates a dialogue with them.

Secondly, the EU must support the establishment of an independent expert group to assess systemic issues (corruption, judiciary, elections, media) and provide binding recommendations.

Thirdly, the restoration of democracy hinges on the ability to hold free and fair elections. Another rigged election would only entrench the authoritarian regime and further normalize a culture of impunity. Therefore, it is critical to establish accountability and level the playing field before snap elections. This necessitates supporting the creation of a non-partisan government, or power-sharing within institutions tasked with overseeing elections, with a limited yet realistic mandate to implement the rule of law expert group's recommendations on urgent reforms addressing the systemic weaknesses of Serbia's political system. Three key actions are required to make this happen: 1) sustaining bottom-up pressure through continued street protests, 2) ensuring the involvement of all political parties in the reform process, and 3) securing continuous international support and oversight from the EU, OSCE ODIHR, and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission.

Fourthly, the EU must increase support to civil society organizations with a proven track record of independent and objective monitoring, to organize observation missions and use their findings in their further assessment.



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Finally, if the necessary conditions for holding free and fair elections are not met, coordinated efforts will be needed to delay the elections once again. Should SNS go on with another fraudulent election, the EU must reconsider Serbia's membership candidacy.

### Recommendations:

1. The European Commission needs to urgently engage in mediation, including a high-level visit by the Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos to meet student representatives, civil society, opposition and government representatives.
2. The establishment of a rule of law mission for Serbia to draft a clear, independent analysis of the shortcomings of the rule of law in Serbia based on the model of the "Priebe Report" for North Macedonia.
3. Support a political process that ensures the implementation of these recommendations, involving all key actors in Serbia from civil society, the government and the opposition.
4. Increased financial support for civil society involved in monitoring rule of law and elections, especially considering the uncertainty of USAID funding for many existing projects.
5. Overseeing that conditions for free and fair elections are met, by supporting the formation of an expert government.



# About us

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a group of policy analysts, scholars and researchers, established as a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans and the Centre for Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz with the aim to promote the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is composed of prominent policy researchers from the Western Balkans and all of Europe who have established themselves for their knowledge and understanding of the Western Balkans and the processes that shape the region.

Members are Florian Bieber (Coordinator), Bojan Baća, Dimitar Bechev, Matteo Bonomi, Srđan Cvijić, Milica Delević, Nikola Dimitrov, Marika Djolai, Vedran Džihić, Donika Emini, Richard Grieveson, Damir Kapidžić, Marko Kmezić (Assistant Coordinator), Srđan Majstorović, Jovana Marović, Zoran Nechev, Lura Pollozhani, Tena Prelec, Corina Stratulat, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Alida Vračić, Marina Vulović, Gjergji Vurmo, Natasha Wunsch.

[www.biepag.eu](http://www.biepag.eu)

Contact: [info@biepag.eu](mailto:info@biepag.eu)

The European Fund for the Balkans is a joint initiative of the Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Foundation and King Baudouin Foundation that envisions and facilitates initiatives strengthening democracy, fostering European integration and affirming the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's challenges. Its strategy is focused on three overarching areas – fostering democratisation, enhancing regional cooperation and boosting EU Integration. The EFB supports the process of affirming the efficacy of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, improving regional cooperation amongst civil society organisations based on solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides means and platforms for informed and empowered citizens to take action demanding accountable institutions and democracy. The focus is on continuous reforms of the policies and practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession.

[www.balkanfund.org](http://www.balkanfund.org)

Contact: ALEKSANDRA TOMANIĆ, Executive Director

[aleksandra.tomanic@balkanfund.org](mailto:aleksandra.tomanic@balkanfund.org)





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The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. The Centre also aims to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through articles, monographs and other publications. The centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

[www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/en/](http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/en/)

Contact: UNIV.PROF. DR. FLORIAN BIEBER, Professor of Southeast European History and Politics

[florian.bieber@uni-graz.at](mailto:florian.bieber@uni-graz.at)



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