



SERBIA'S CIVIC AWAKENING: THE 2024–2025 STUDENT PROTESTS IN FOCUS

ABSTRACT

The 2024–2025 student protests – triggered by the fatal collapse of the Novi Sad train station canopy – have become the most formidable civic challenge to Serbia's authoritarian trajectory to date. This policy brief traces their evolution, dividing it into five distinct phases. Phase 1 began in November 2024 with spontaneous gatherings and student blockades demanding accountability. Phase 2, in January 2025, featured mass mobilisations, clashes and the eventual resignation of the prime minister. In Phase 3, students staged symbolic cross-country marches and the largest protest in Serbia's history on 15 March, which was cut short by the suspected use of a sonic weapon. Phase 4 saw the internationalisation of the movement's activities, as students cycled to Strasbourg and ran relays to Brussels, sending a message that Serbia's democratic crisis requires the EU's engagement, not indifference. As the regime showed no serious intention of meeting their demands, the movement entered Phase 5, marking a shift from a catch-all civic movement to political engagement. As the crisis is nowhere near its end, this brief concludes with policy recommendations for a more proactive EU response, arguing that the protests may signal a turning point in Serbia's democratic development and reshape its European future.



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1. Introduction: from screens to streets

Until recently, Generation Z in Serbia was often perceived as apolitical and more immersed in the digital world than in reality.¹ Born after key moments in Serbia's modern history, Gen Z youth were frequently criticised for being glued to their screens and out of touch with broader societal needs. Older generations – millennials and boomers – had largely written them off. In 2024, however, student-led protests in Serbia emerged as a defining moment in the country's recent political history, surprising many with their tenacity. Sparked by the tragic collapse of a train station canopy in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024 – claiming 16 lives – the protests quickly evolved into a broad-based civic uprising centred on demands for transparency, accountability and the rule of law. As such, they have continued into 2025 – with no end in sight.

To understand how Serbia reached this pivotal moment, the policy brief is divided into five key sections, covering the period up to late April 2025. The first, "Serbia's student protests 101", traces the movement's evolution from a national tragedy in November 2024 into a sustained civic uprising. The second, "A catch-all movement: What do the polls say?", analyses public support across different demographics, showing how the protests have united diverse segments of society. The third section, "Explaining the heterogeneity", explores how students have maintained cohesion despite internal differences and why they deliberately avoided foreign policy debates to remain focused on the rule of law. In the fourth section, "What about the opposition parties?", the brief examines how opposition actors have responded – supporting the protests without overshadowing them. Finally, "Between Belgrade and Brussels" assesses the EU's role and offers policy recommendations for the European Commission and the European Parliament to constructively engage with Serbia's democratic momentum.

2. Serbia's student protests 101

Since 2012, Serbia has been ruled by the regime of Aleksandar Vučić, which has shown a persistent ability to absorb and deflect protest movements, challenging conventional models of civic influence. This has included the first student protests in 2014; the 2016 protests against the regime's milestone project Belgrade Waterfront; the 2017 protests "against dictatorship" in the wake of the presidential elections; the protests dubbed "1 in 5 million" in 2018–2020 over the rise of political violence; the 2020 protests over "pandemic mismanagement"; the environmental protests in 2021–2022; the 2023 "Serbia against violence" protests in the wake of a school shooting and subsequent mass shooting; the protests over suspected electoral fraud in the 2023 parliamentary and Belgrade City Assembly elections; and another environmental protest in 2024. Simultaneously, according to reports by international watchdogs such as Freedom House,² Transparency International,³ and Reporters Without Borders,⁴ democracy in Serbia has been declining. Reports by the European Commission and the European Parliament have expressed similar concerns, indicating that this democratic backsliding explains why Serbia has failed to progress on its path to EU membership since opening accession talks in 2014.⁵ Accordingly, in a domestic environment characterised by an uneven playing field, the consolidation of power and the erosion of democratic institutions were possible despite recurring waves of civic resistance. However, the biggest crisis for the regime began on 1 November 2024 with the collapse of the canopy at the newly reconstructed Novi Sad train station, killing 16 people and injuring many more.

The parts that follow divide the development of the protests into several phases, describing how students became the biggest challenge to the ruling regime in Serbia.



Although the tragedy sent shockwaves through the country, few could have predicted that they would have ushered in the development of a protest movement like none before in terms of scale and intensity.



Phase 1 (November–December 2024): a spark of outrage

Although the tragedy sent shockwaves through the country, few could have predicted that they would have ushered in the development of a protest movement like none before in terms of scale and intensity. What began as a spontaneous gathering of people across the country for moments of silence in memory of the victims soon evolved into massive protests. Many irregularities regarding the train station's reconstruction quickly surfaced, and the government was caught attempting to cover up evidence of mismanagement. At the same time, the interstate agreement between Serbia and China – whose companies were involved in the construction – remained shrouded in secrecy. Facing growing outrage, Tomislav Momirović, the then trade minister, resigned on 20 November. A week later, the minister of construction, transport and infrastructure, Goran Vesić, resigned as well. While no one took responsibility for the tragedy, the resignations were tokens of goodwill vis-à-vis President Vučić and expressed the hope that they would bring calm.

These actions were far from sufficient, as the response to the protests took a violent turn in the period between the two resignations, when, on 22 November 2024, students and professors from

the Faculty of Dramatic Arts were attacked by an organised group suspected of having links to the regime. Shortly afterwards, students began blocking their faculty buildings in protest, thus increasing the intensity of the demonstrations. By December they had formulated their key demands, including, above all, full disclosure of the documentation related to the reconstruction of the station and accountability. With this, the students sent a message that they were serious and ready to sacrifice their academic year to see their demands met.

BOX 1. THE ORIGINAL FOUR DEMANDS

1. Publication of the complete documentation regarding the reconstruction of the railway station in Novi Sad.
2. Dismissal of charges against students and young people arrested and detained during the protests following the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station.
3. Filing of criminal charges against and persecution of those who attacked students and professors.
4. A 20% increase in the Serbian state budget allocation for the material expenses of public higher education institutions.

Instead of opting for a reconciliatory approach towards the students, the regime chose to escalate the situation by adopting a strongly combative stance. Notably, the term "colour revolution" began appearing in the regime's rhetoric – used to delegitimise the protests by portraying the students as foreign-orchestrated and manipulated. Yet, amidst a smear campaign by pro-government tabloids, the protests intensified when President Vučić began defending individuals who drove cars into crowds of students on the streets. For example, in one case he claimed that students were "out of their minds" for demanding a driver's arrest, arguing that he was "just going on his way" while adding that no law had been broken.⁶ The movement soon spread to high schools and

even primary schools, significantly disrupting their normal operations.

When the government threatened to fire those accused of "misusing their positions" in educational institutions, the protests only gained further momentum. In the meantime, farmers joined with their tractors and bikers with their motorcycles to express solidarity with the students. Simultaneously, workers from the Kolubara mining basin – a mine known for its key role in the protests during the 2000 revolution – expressed their full support for the students. As the year was nearing its end, students had become a central force in Serbia's ongoing socio-political upheaval, which culminated in a high turnout – around 100,000 people – at

BOX 2. WHAT ARE THE PLENARIES

Many observers were sceptical when the students first began organising themselves into plenaries. These represent a form of collective decision-making, allowing students to practise direct democracy. At one point, the regime accused the students of adopting plenaries as a concept "imported from Croatia" – perceived as a malicious source from which nothing positive could come.⁷ However, the idea was not entirely new; it had first been introduced in 2011. At that time, though, the use of plenaries was limited, focusing primarily on improving study conditions. This time around, plenaries became central hubs whose decisions repeatedly caught the regime off guard.

The students chose this form of self-organisation for three key reasons. Firstly, they had lost faith in traditional student institutions such as student parliaments, which were widely believed to have been infiltrated by the regime long ago. Secondly, by adopting a leaderless approach, they effectively prevented the regime from targeting individuals through smear campaigns, as it had routinely done. Finally, by refusing to concentrate power in the hands of one or a few people, they made it difficult for the regime to co-opt their leaders. In other words, the plenaries of 2024 became a symbol of resistance – an adversary against which the regime found itself unable to employ its traditional tactics.

the Belgrade protest on 22 December 2024.⁸ Students have thus become a force to be reckoned with.

Phase 2 (January 2025): raising the stakes

The beginning of 2025 marked a new phase of the protests. While many believed the movement would fade away when the students "went home" for the winter break – which was extended by the government – the students once again proved them wrong. As the number of cities hosting protests grew, so too did the regime's mishandling of the situation. Rumours of so-called SNS (Serbian Progressive Party) loyalists swearing blood oaths were accompanied by a rise in hooligan and car attacks on students, as well as a pro-regime "flipped middle finger" campaign in response to student posters depicting "bloody hands". In contrast, tens of thousands of protesters held a massive gathering in front of the Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) building on 17 January 2025 in response to RTS's comparison of students to Hamas, demanding objective reporting by the public broadcaster.⁹ The blockade lasted 24 hours.

On 24 January, the regime further escalated the confrontation by organising a counter-rally in Jagodina, central Serbia, attended by around 14,000 people, where the president announced the launch of a new political movement – the People's Movement for the State.¹⁰ In development since at least 2022, the initiative aims to move beyond the ruling SNS – increasingly associated with corruption and even occasionally criticised by the president himself for harbouring "bad apples" – to include individuals who have previously remained outside of politics. On the same day, the students called for a general strike. Three days later, students blocked one of Belgrade's key crossroads for 24 hours. By taking such

actions, the students have repeatedly been one step ahead of the regime.

On 28 January, in a grim turn of events, a group of students from Novi Sad were chased and beaten, leaving one seriously injured with a dislocated jaw. This attack occurred just hours after the regime unveiled a plan to address the students' demands. It was soon discovered that the attackers, one of whom was reportedly a close friend of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević's son, had emerged from the SNS office in Novi Sad. In the face of mounting pressure, the prime minister had no choice but to resign. This marked the students' greatest political victory – one they had neither anticipated nor demanded. However, the protesters were not appeased, particularly as their original demands had not yet been met. In practice, the prime minister's resignation changed nothing. Interestingly, it was only acknowledged in March by the National Assembly. All things considered, the government was decapitated, yet the true power remained in the hands of the president.

Phase 3 (February–March 2025): through marches to awakening

As their core demands were still being largely ignored, the students opted for a new course of action. On 1 February 2025, they began marching from Belgrade to Novi Sad to support their colleagues. The tactic proved successful, drawing the attention of residents of the smaller towns and rural areas between the two cities, where the students were welcomed as "liberators". Upon reaching Novi Sad, they blocked the city's three bridges for 24 hours. Similar endeavours followed, including a student march to Kragujevac on 15 February, marking the anniversary of Serbia's 1835 Constitution. On the same day, the president held another counter-rally, this time in Sremska Mitrovica (having originally planned it for Novi Sad). Two

weeks later, another student march reached Niš, where the students issued the "Student Edict", a symbolic reference to the Edict of Milan by Roman Emperor Constantine, who was born in Niš. The Student Edict centred on fundamental principles such as freedom, the state, justice, youth, dignity, knowledge, solidarity and the future. In short, this phase of the movement was defined by strong decentralisation and a reaffirmation of the belief that for the students to succeed, they would need the support of the entire nation.

The final part of this phase began with the Belgrade gathering on 15 March. According to some estimates, around 300,000 people (possibly more) attended, making it the largest protest in Serbia's history.¹¹ Remarkably, it even surpassed the demonstration of 5 October 2000, when the regime of Slobodan Milošević fell. Unlike the 2000 protest, however, this one was entirely peaceful – or at least, that was the protesters' intention. In fact, it was abruptly interrupted during the 13th minute of silence by what seemed to be a type of sound cannon.¹² The blast caused havoc and panic, forcing attendees to flee the scene amidst a sudden and overwhelming sensation that a high-speed vehicle or aircraft was approaching. Although many later reported health issues, the regime denied any responsibility, claiming it was either a mass panic attack or a staged event.

This incident occurred alongside another controversial move by the regime: the deployment of a large number of gendarmes to surround a camp set up by a group calling themselves "Students 2.0" – students who claimed they "wanted to learn" while being largely affiliated with SNS – positioned between the Presidential Office and the National Assembly. While tensions around the camp were high, with some provocations reported from its direction, no violence broke out. In both this case and

the incident involving the sonic weapon, the students acted responsibly, ending the protests early in order to avoid potential conflict on the streets.

Phase 4 (April–early May): from the domestic to the international arena

As it appeared that the regime was prepared to use illegal sonic weapons against peaceful demonstrators, students decided to take the story to international institutions. Between 3 and 15 April 2025, over 80 individuals set off on bicycles on a tour to Strasbourg. They passed through Budapest, Vienna, Munich, Ulm and Strasbourg and were welcomed by the respective cities' mayors. In Strasbourg, they submitted a plea to the Council of Europe and presented their case at the European Parliament. The aim of the tour was to encourage "the European institutions to put pressure on the government and stand up for the rights of all those who are forced to remain silent".¹³ Simultaneously, President Vučić organised yet another counter-rally, this time in Belgrade, on 12 April, which drew around 55,000 people from across Serbia.¹⁴ This was considered a failure given allegations that attendees had been paid to show up, and more importantly that the regime had intended to use them to outnumber the 15 March protesters – which they clearly did not succeed in doing.

On 25 April, 16 student runners started the "Brussels route" in relay teams. They crossed Croatia, Austria, Germany, France and Luxembourg on the way to Belgium in order to deliver letters to members of the European Parliament and with the aim to engage with the European Commission. Upon the successful completion of that endeavour, it became clear that the EU had become more willing to engage with the students and that they had acquired a full picture of the state of play in Serbia.

The story, however, does not end there. Dissatisfied with the way RTS covered the tour to Strasbourg (but also the overall protests), the students launched a continuous blockade of the public broadcaster. These developments coincided with the formation of a new government led by Đuro Macut, an endocrinologist, previously unknown to the wider public and a member of Vučić's new political movement.¹⁵ RTS employees were prevented from entering its premises. In response, RTS escalated its rhetoric, at one point implicitly comparing the students to Nazis.¹⁶ Interestingly, however, some RTS employees have voiced support for the students' demands.

Despite RTS's retaliation and the government's attempts to delegitimise the blockade, the students have continued to stand by their simple demand: restart the process for electing members of the Regulatory Media Agency (REM) – an agency whose recent selection process has been marred by serious misconduct – or take decisive steps to reform the broadcaster's editorial policy. After two weeks, the blockade was ended after the government agreed to restart the selection process of REM Council members – a decision that coincided with Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos's arrival in Serbia.

Phase 5 (from May): taking matters into their own hands

With the internationalisation phase successfully completed, the students paved the way for a new phase: the transition from a civic to a political movement. This strategic shift reflects the growing recognition among the students that the regime will not respond to core demands voiced through protest alone. In response, on 5 May 2025, they collectively called for snap parliamentary elections. While electoral conditions remain far from free and fair,



What makes these protests stand out is that they have morphed into a catch-all movement. The concept of a "catch-all" is traditionally associated with political parties, with Serbia's SNS being one such example. When applied to the arena of civic activism, the term refers to a movement capable of capturing broad attention and mobilising support across all or most regions and socio-economic groups.



there is a shared sense that the limits of civic mobilisation have been reached. By entering the political arena, the students are sending a message that they will no longer rely on the regime to fulfil their core demands; instead, they will do it themselves by competing and, potentially, acquiring power. Of course, there is a long road ahead of them, particularly given that they are entering uncharted territory, while it remains uncertain whether and when the call for snap elections will be answered. Nonetheless, their decision marks a turning point – one that could reshape not only the movement, but also the broader landscape of Serbian democratic politics.

3. A catch-all movement: what do the polls say?

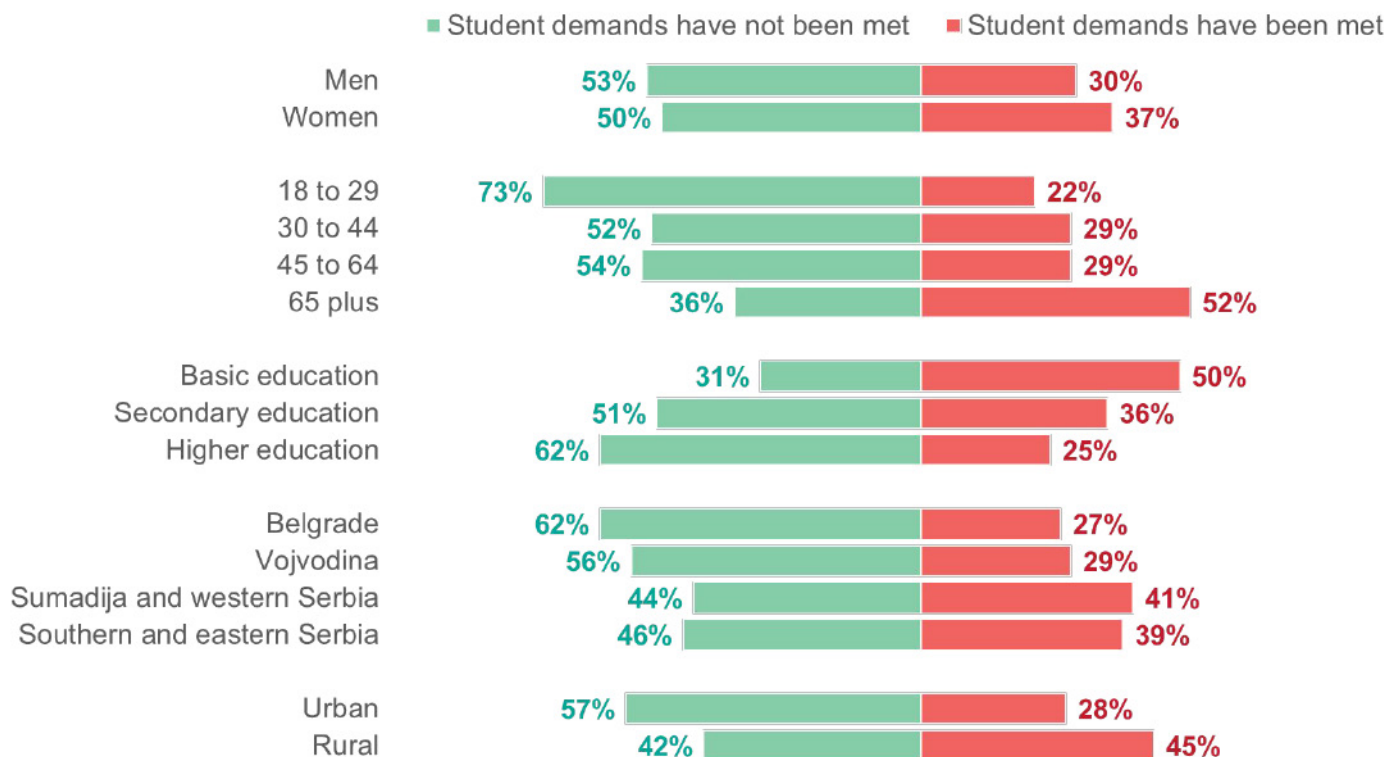
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In Serbia, this is precisely what the students have managed to achieve, as a clear majority in almost all population groups agree with their demands and argue in favour of continuing the fight for these to be implemented. For instance, the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability's (CRTA) February 2025 poll indicates that nearly all socio-economic categories – with the exception of those over the age of 61 and individuals with only primary school education – perceive the students' demands as still unfulfilled (see Table 1).¹⁷ This represents a novelty in Serbia, where opposition parties have long struggled to gain broad support that goes beyond higher-educated individuals living in urban areas. In doing so, a catch-all movement of this kind transcends traditionally entrenched ideological, geographic and class-

based divides, thereby opening new avenues for articulating political goals with the aim of influencing the state to change one or more policies. However, unlike political parties that compete for power and rely on broad appeal to win elections, such a movement uses its broad support as a powerful tool for mobilisation and action outside the traditional electoral arena. This is, however, not to prejudge the possibility that the movement may evolve, either fully or partially, into a political movement over time and participate in the next elections.

A comparative look at the polls shows the sustainability of the movement.¹⁸ Namely, CRTA's findings demonstrate that overall support has remained steady over time – even increasing from 61% in December 2024 to over 64% in

Table 1. Perceptions of the fulfilment of student demands – demographic profile



Source: CRTA, "Attitudes of Serbian Citizens", Public opinion poll, February 2025, p. 17, <https://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/CRTA-Public-Opinion-Polling-Serbia-February-2025.pdf>.

February 2025. Among those who support the protests, 97% of opposition-leaning individuals back them, while a staggering 76% of those who are "undecided" about political parties also express support. Interestingly, support for the protesters among those who traditionally lean towards the ruling party increased from 11% to 20% in just two months. President Vučić, who has long enjoyed undisputed dominance over Serbia's socio-political landscape, finds himself in second place. The data indicate that 58% of the respondents trust the students more than Vučić, while 33% favour Vučić over the students. These protests represent the biggest challenge to the ruling regime to date, which has been in power since 2012.

Similarly, compared with a December 2024 poll by New Serbian Political Thought,¹⁹ the group's March 2025 poll shows a consolidation and a slight rise in support for the student protests across different socio-economic categories (see Table 2).²⁰ In December, 52% of the respondents supported the protests related to the Novi Sad tragedy, with 41% opposed. By March, 60% of citizens supported the ongoing student protests, while just under 32% opposed them. This represents a 15% relative increase

in support and a 22% relative decrease in opposition within just three months. In terms of education, support among gymnasium graduates was 77% in December and 79% in March, while among university-educated respondents it rose from 67% to 76%. Mid-range educational categories remained fairly stable, with support from secondary vocational school graduates increasing from 47% in December to 56% in March. At the other end of the spectrum, those with only primary education consistently showed very limited support: 18% in December and 19% in March. Regarding age cohorts, support remained high among 18–40-year-olds, at around 85% in March. Among those aged 41–60, support increased from 60% to 65%. Although support among older age groups (61+) remained the lowest, data show a relevant shift: opposition dropped from 65% to 53%, while support rose from 27% to 36%. These findings reaffirm that the catch-all movement continues to broaden its appeal across different social groups and remains on an upward trajectory, even months after the initial trigger.

Table 2. Comparison of protest support (December 2024 vs March 2025)

Category	Support Dec. 2024	Support Mar. 2025	Relative increase
Overall	52%	60%	15%
Gymnasium graduates	77%	79%	3%
University educated	67%	76%	13%
Secondary school	47%	56%	19%
Primary education	18%	19%	6%
Age 18–40	85%	85%	0%
Age 41–60	60%	65%	8%
Age 61+	27%	36%	33%

Source: Author's representation.

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The students consistently reminded the public that holding state officials and institutions accountable is a foundational principle in any functioning democracy.

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4. Explaining the heterogeneity: impact on tactics and foreign policy orientations

A catch-all movement has heterogeneity at its core, as it brings together citizens from potentially opposing ends of the political spectrum around a minimal common denominator that, under specific circumstances, may outweigh the importance of traditional political affiliations. In the case of Serbia, this common denominator is the rule of law. The heterogeneous nature of the protests can be attributed to several key factors.

From the outset, the students have deliberately kept their distance from party politics. On the one hand, their demands had nothing to do with the individuals currently in power. They skilfully avoided being drawn into the political arena and framed their demands around values of fundamental importance that can resonate with every citizen. They did not call for a change of government, the president's resignation or new elections. They chose a path that allowed them to remain non-partisan actors with a clear political goal: the restoration of the rule of law in the country. In theory, their demands could even be met by the current regime. This would require transparency, including the disclosure of all relevant documents and full accountability. That such steps would inevitably expose the regime's long-standing undemocratic practices is another matter entirely.

At the same time, the students consistently reminded the public that holding state officials and institutions accountable is a foundational principle in any functioning democracy. This commitment to institutional oversight was one of the key reasons they refused to engage in direct discussions about their demands with the president, emphasising his limited constitutional powers. "You do not have jurisdiction", they would reply whenever he insisted that it was up to him to decide whether, how and when their demands would be met. By doing so, they not only rejected the personalisation of power but also highlighted the necessity of respecting institutional roles and legal procedures.

Through this principled stance, they successfully cultivated the image of an authentic civic movement grounded in democratic values rather than partisan interests. This helped reinforce public trust in their intentions, persuading many that their actions were genuinely aimed at achieving the common good, not at gaining political power or advancing personal ambitions. Their refusal to be co-opted or redirected by political elites gave the movement moral credibility and broad-based legitimacy, both of which are rare and powerful in the context of Serbian political life. In a political environment often marred by distrust, this sense of authenticity became one of the movement's most compelling assets.

Although many were impressed – and even surprised – by the scale and intensity of the protests, some were left wondering about the absence of EU flags. In Slovakia, EU flags were used as a powerful symbol against the increasingly authoritarian and pro-Russian regime of Robert Fico, which shares similarities with the regime in Serbia. EU flags have also become one of the key symbols in the ongoing protests in Tbilisi against the ruling Georgian Dream party and have been used to differentiate

the opposition and civic movements from a regime accused of growing ties with Russia and of flouting the rule of law. Unlike what has happened in these countries, foreign policy orientation is not a central issue in the Serbian protests. The absence of EU symbols does not necessarily indicate that the movement is pro-Kremlin or nationalist; rather, it reflects an effort to transcend the traditional East–West dichotomy. By focusing squarely on the rule of law, protesters are not challenging Serbia's current foreign policy direction. At the same time, there is an awareness that it would be misguided to expect the EU to do the work that ultimately falls to citizens themselves when it comes to defending and advancing democracy.

Given that foreign policy was not among the reasons for the start of the protests, students have deliberately chosen to keep the EU outside the scope of their activities for several key tactical reasons. Firstly, Serbia has been stalled on its path to EU membership for years – it has been 11 years since the official start of negotiations, but it has been 25 years since Serbia's "European dream" began following the 2000 revolution. This prolonged stagnation has fostered a complex mix of fatigue, dissatisfaction and hopelessness regarding the EU accession process. Such sentiments help explain the widespread disinterest in engaging with the EU.²¹

Secondly, many view the EU as unwilling to actively defend the rule of law in Serbia, instead favouring a strategy of "stabilocracy", that is, offering tacit support and financial aid to the regime so long as it maintains regional stability.²² The EU's persistent insistence on the exploitation of lithium – an extremely unpopular project – only reinforces the growing perception of a "neocolonial approach" towards Serbia.²³

Thirdly, even in the absence of these frustrations, students would likely still avoid relying on EU rhetoric. Past experience has shown that whenever EU flags appeared at protests, pro-government tabloids quickly seized the opportunity to claim that the EU was behind the demonstrations. Today, even without EU flags, the regime still accuses the EU of orchestrating a "colour revolution". Displaying EU symbols would merely offer the regime additional ammunition.

Finally, if this analysis reveals one thing, it is that the protests are heterogeneous. Since student decisions are made collectively at plenaries, introducing foreign policy debates could threaten internal unity and would, in practice, represent a waste of time and energy. By remaining autonomous and value-driven, this diverse front of students and citizens has maximised its legitimacy. Diversity has become a source of strength.

5. What about the opposition parties?

The students' rejection of party affiliations included distancing themselves from any association with Serbian opposition parties. This fact reflects the extent to which the Serbian opposition has been discredited. Serbia's status as a "competitive autocracy" or "hybrid regime"²⁴ has resulted in an "uneven playing field"²⁵ that heavily favours the incumbent, making it virtually impossible for the opposition to engage in free and fair electoral competition. This imbalance is especially pronounced during pre-election periods, but serious shortcomings are also evident on election days, as documented by international watchdogs.

As the regime has persisted, the playing field has become increasingly skewed, with a particular focus on demonising the opposition and its leaders. This tactic has been effective;

today, many people perceive opposition figures as dehumanised due to a targeted, continuous and widespread smear campaign led by pro-government tabloids. In response, the students have concluded that in order to succeed, they must remain leaderless – unlike the traditional opposition. This is why, to this day, student movements have operated as collectives, with decisions made through student plenaries.

This is not to suggest that the opposition's overall lack of success can be attributed solely to an unfavourable political environment. The opposition has played a significant role in its own marginalisation by displaying persistent disunity, strategic disorientation and a lack of clear, inspiring leadership capable of mobilising broader support. These internal shortcomings have been further aggravated by a pattern of defections, with numerous traditional opposition parties, leaders or standout members subsequently aligning themselves with the ruling regime – often as part of mutually beneficial exchanges of favours and positions. Such moves have severely damaged public trust, reinforcing the perception that the political class as a whole is self-serving and interchangeable.

In this context, the students have drawn a clear boundary, effectively sending a message to these political actors: "You've had your chance – now it's our turn to take matters into our own hands." This sentiment has allowed the student movement to carve out a unique and credible space within the broader landscape of resistance. As a result, they have succeeded in mobilising not only sympathisers from existing opposition circles but also, and more significantly, those who had long remained outside politics altogether – namely, the abstainers and the politically disillusioned. The student movement has reignited a sense of civic engagement that traditional opposition actors had failed to inspire.

Despite being kept on the sidelines, the opposition parties – ranging from the left wing (Green–Left Front)²⁶ to the centre (Freedom and Justice Party)²⁷ to the right wing (Democratic Party of Serbia)²⁸ – have fully endorsed the students, echoing their demands. This is unsurprising given that the regime's political opponents have, year after year, uncovered multiple scandals. Their most significant success to date was the "1 in 5 million" protest movement, which previously represented the biggest challenge to the regime.

Instead of interfering with student plenaries, opposition groups have taken three notable actions since the protests began in late 2024. First, in January 2025, they organised a protest in front of Novi Sad City Hall – an event the regime attempted to violently suppress, marking the first instance of clashes. Second, in early March 2025, the opposition strongly opposed the government's attempt to pass dozens of its laws through Parliament, despite the government being within its technical mandate to do so. At one point, smoke grenades were used in the Assembly, and a brawl erupted. Finally, in late March 2025, they presented a proposal for a transitional government, referred to as the "Government of Public Trust". The establishment of such a government would be time-limited – lasting up to nine months – with the task of fulfilling the students' demands and creating conditions for free and fair elections. Only then could elections be held. In short, the opposition understands the importance of allowing the students to remain the protagonists. By consciously staying in the background at rallies – avoiding flying party banners and refraining from political speeches on the protest stage – they have helped preserve the movement's civic character.



Although EU flags are absent from the protests, students continue to send clear signals that they envision a greater role for Europe. They have repeatedly called on the Commission to drop the bureaucratic language and clearly articulate the concerns already stated in its annual reports on Serbia.



6. Between Belgrade and Brussels: what role for the EU?

The culmination of Serbia's 2024–2025 student protests places the EU at a sensitive crossroads in its relationship with Belgrade. The EU has long championed democracy, the rule of law and human rights as core values – yet many Serbian protesters perceive the EU as "loudly silent" in the face of malpractice by the current regime.²⁹ Indeed, the EU's hesitant approach during the crisis – driven by its traditional prioritisation of regional stability – has drawn criticism for enabling a "stabilocracy". However, the EU – through both the European Parliament and the European Commission – has a crucial role to play in constructively supporting Serbia's pro-democratic trajectory.

Although EU flags are absent from the protests, students continue to send clear signals that they envision a greater role for Europe. They have repeatedly called on the Commission to drop the bureaucratic language and clearly articulate the concerns already stated in its annual reports on Serbia. As mentioned previously, after more than 80 students cycled 1,400 kilometres to meet with members of the European Parliament and the Council of Europe, and 16 students ran a relay on the "Brussels route" to deliver letters to members of the European Parliament and

to meet with the European Commission, their overall message was clear: they do not expect the Union to pursue regime change – they only want it to change its posture towards the regime and its malpractice.

With all these developments in mind, the following are specific policy recommendations for each EU institution, tailored to their instruments and competencies, to help channel this moment of grassroots energy into lasting democratic resilience in Serbia.³⁰

7. Recommendations

Recommendations for the European Commission

- **Prioritise daily engagement:** The Enlargement Commissioner should be the most engaged EU official vis-à-vis Serbia – on a daily basis, if necessary. From November to early February, she was almost entirely absent. While her engagement later intensified, for some observers this may have been too little, too late. As the protests have entered a new phase, with potential snap elections on the horizon, the Commissioner's active monitoring and engagement in making sure the regime abide by the rules of the game is critical.
- **Draw clear red lines:** The European Commission needs to draw clear red lines. While it is understandable that diplomacy and bureaucratic language remain the standard mode of operation, silence in the face of the Serbian government's accusations, such as claims that the EU and its member states are staging a "colour revolution", risks reinforcing that narrative. These red lines should include a warning not to harass civil society – as happened in the wake of the "USAID affair",³¹ when the police stormed several civil society organisations' offices – nor to continue with

the practice of "political detentions" – as in the case of six activists arrested and held in prison by the regime – including any future attempt to use sonic weapons against non-violent protesters.

- Enforce reform conditionality: With the anticipated disbursement of funds under the Reform and Growth Facility (RGF) as part of the New Growth Plan (NGP) for the Western Balkans, the Commission should stress the importance of conditionality. Each reform step is tied to specific commitments. Given that the European Commission holds the key in this matter, it must not act with leniency when regimes engage in mere "window dressing".
- Uphold preconditions for pre-financing: Even before the RGF funds are fully accessed, pre-financing of 7% is available. The underlying rationale is to ensure that beneficiaries have immediate access to "start-up funding", enabling them to launch the first stages of reform without delay. It should not be forgotten, however, that even these funds have "soft conditionality" in the form of "preconditions". These preconditions, outlined in Article 5 of the Regulation, include commitments to the rule of law and democratic institutions. As long as the crisis in Serbia lasts, the Commission should not take these preconditions lightly.
- Strengthen monitoring of democratic institutions: Looking towards autumn 2025, the European Commission is already engaged in the process of collecting input for its annual report on Serbia. The "Functioning of Democratic Institutions" section in the Commission's annual report lacks consistency and accurate evaluation, as a number of think tanks have warned.³² It remains the only sub-area in the fundamentals cluster that lacks a qualitative assessment of the level of preparedness and progress. This must be corrected in the 2025 report through the application of a unified methodology.

Recommendations for the European Parliament

- Remain consistently vocal: The European Parliament is on the right track in solidifying its position as the most vocal EU institution addressing the crisis in Serbia. The plenary session on the crisis in February 2025 paved the way for the adoption of a report in May.³³ However, the momentum must be sustained. As the crisis is likely to persist, the rapporteur for Serbia should provide regular updates to the Foreign Affairs Committee while inviting think tanks, academics and student representatives to share first-hand insights.
- Build cross-group support: The tour to Strasbourg was a significant media success, especially due to the symbolic reception of student cyclists by the European Parliament. However, the event took place just before the Easter holiday, limiting MEPs' participation to only three members from two political groups (Renew Europe and the Greens). If other groups which previously supported the students' demands during the February 2025 plenary wish to create meaningful impact, they should stand with their liberal and green colleagues – holiday season or not.
- Defend integrity in interparliamentary dialogue: The most recent meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee failed to adopt a resolution due to the Serbian ruling party's insistence on weakening its language – a move allegedly supported by the European People's Party (EPP).³⁴ Going forward, this institution must remain committed to supporting clear language in cases of democratic backsliding – even if that means forgoing resolutions.
- Offer institutional incentives: The European Parliament has already voted in favour of the idea of gradually involving candidate countries in its work,³⁵ aligning with the Staged Accession Model proposed by the

Centre for European Policy Studies and the European Policy Centre (CEP) in Belgrade.³⁶ In the case of Serbia, the actual application of this incentive should be contingent upon the resolution of ongoing democratic deficiencies.

- Engage with European national governments: Given the frequent accusations of support for stabilocracy among member states, MEPs who support the student movement should make their engagement more visible to their home governments. To further improve their understanding, they should conduct regular scoping missions to Serbia, meeting with students and civil society to share updates and support.
- Leverage soft power on conditionality: Although the European Parliament has a limited formal role in the enlargement process, it wields significant soft power. It should use this influence to urge the European Commission to strictly apply conditionality when allocating funds under the RGF – and to give greater weight to preconditions when determining the disbursement of 7% pre-financing.
- Call for oversight of EU-funded projects: The European Public Prosecutor's Office has announced the start of its investigation of a possible misuse of EU funds in the case of the Novi Sad train station project. The European Parliament should encourage this and other agencies – such as OLAF (the European Anti-Fraud Office) – to reassess the implementation and integrity of all EU-funded projects in Serbia, ensuring that no fraud has occurred, particularly where citizen safety and public trust are at stake.
- Nudge the EPP: Political groups supporting the students' demands should publicly call on the EPP to reassess the associate membership of the SNS. Remaining silent sends the wrong

message. MEPs must apply peer pressure to Vučić's Christian democratic allies to stop shielding him and instead actively defend democratic norms.

- Be prepared: In the event of snap elections, the European Parliament should be ready to act swiftly – potentially by deploying an election observation mission – to help safeguard the integrity of the process and ensure the protest movement's momentum is not stifled.

In conclusion, the EU has a valuable opportunity to take action in defence of democracy in the wake of Serbia's student protests. The European Parliament can serve as the Union's democratic megaphone, ensuring the plight and fight of Serbian students are heard in Brussels and across EU capitals. The European Commission – steward of the accession process – can back this up by credibly wielding the tools of conditionality and support to steer Serbia back onto a reformist, democratic track. Together, these institutions should encourage what the protesters seek: a Serbia that upholds the rule of law, punishes corruption, protects free expression and ultimately aligns with the European democratic family not just in name but also in practice. By constructively engaging now, the EU can help turn the current protest momentum into lasting institutional change. This means standing firmly with Serbia's democratic actors and making it clear that the path to Brussels runs via a democratic Belgrade. In short, the EU should seize this moment to be not a distant sponsor of "stability" but an active partner for positive change – helping Serbia's citizens build a freer, more resilient democracy on their European journey.

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Jean-Jaurès is the leading French political foundation, which not only works as a think tank but also as a grassroots actor and a historical memory centre at the service of all those who defend progress and democracy in the world.

www.jean-jaures.org | X: @j_jaures

About the Kalevi Sorsa Foundation

Kalevi Sorsa Foundation is a social democratic think tank established in 2005 and based in Helsinki, Finland. The foundation's objective is to promote public debate on equality and democracy and to produce research and publications.

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ON SIMILAR TOPICS

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POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE EU AND THE CHALLENGES OF ENLARGEMENT



ABSTRACT

Today, enlargement policy is not a base for building electoral consent for any European party – quite the opposite. It is also a highly technical field where political propaganda can easily manipulate public opinion. Strong fears around new races to the bottom in the sphere of democracy and labour relations around competition for scarce resources or migration is a strategy for gaining votes in most EU countries. Yet, given the EU member states' role in the decision-making around enlargement, the role of national political parties in this policy can be crucial. This policy brief is an enquiry into European national political parties' positions on EU enlargement. It was compiled by gathering information from party programmes, parliamentary debates, news media and think-tank sources. In addition, it relies on interviews with a number of experts and journalists with specific subject matter expertise. It covers selected (non-social democratic) political parties in 13 of 27 member states, chosen on the basis of their relevance to the enlargement process.

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
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POLICY BRIEF
February 2025

FEPS
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MOVING TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE GREEN AGENDA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines the attempts of the Western Balkans (WB) to transition from a carbon-based to a carbon-free economy, highlighting the role in this of the European Union's (EU) Green Agenda, introduced in 2020 as part of the EU's broader Green Deal. The Green Agenda provides a framework for aligning the region with EU environmental goals, even though the countries of the WB are not themselves EU members. The brief explores how the Green Agenda contributes to the WB's integration in the Union through environmental reforms and the alignment of the region's economic and institutional systems with EU standards. Progress has been made in the WB in adopting renewable energy sources, climate adaptation strategies and legislative changes, but significant challenges remain. These include coal dependency, inadequate waste and water management, air pollution and energy poverty. This brief identifies areas for improvement, stressing the need to implement a more inclusive approach and to foster multilevel governance in the pursuit of enhanced transparency and accountability. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of addressing the transition fatigue that may be a consequence of pursuing EU accession. The analysis concludes by offering policy recommendations for strengthening the implementation of the Green Agenda and for ensuring that the region's transition to sustainability is fair, equitable and aligned with EU integration goals.

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POLICY BRIEF
March 2024

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EXTERNAL INFLUENCES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: WHERE ARE WE AT?



ABSTRACT

Alongside the EU accession path, other third countries have managed to create the conditions to expand their spheres of influence to the Western Balkans. Ethnic fragmentation, weak economic conditions and widespread cases of corruption created fertile soil for non-EU-aligned actors to enter regional dynamics and attempt to fill regional power vacuums. Multiple strategies have been adopted. These go from the use of diplomacy to direct financial investments; from promoting cultural adherence to establishing forms of economic dependence. The main actors involved in the process are Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States, all using different tools and capacities to pursue their objectives. The EU complex principles of conditionality and long negotiation processes have worsened the institutional and motivational obstacles to pursuing a smooth European path. Nevertheless, the conflict in Ukraine and the most recent global development, have led the EU to overcome political and institutional minutiae to work on reaching its main regional interests: security and stability. This paper focuses on the presence of external actors in the Western Balkan region, the interests and ambitions behind their manoeuvres and the direct consequences for the European Union.

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POLICY BRIEF
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LABOUR MIGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

CONSEQUENCES FOR THE REGION'S DEMOCRATIC LIFE



ABSTRACT

Labour migration is a phenomenon that is rooted in the structural problems of Western Balkans societies, such as the high rate of youth unemployment, a poorly performing labour market and inadequate welfare systems.

The phenomenon has severe repercussions not only on the quality of internal services, such as healthcare and highly qualified jobs, but also on the democratic stability of the countries analysed.

This policy brief provides an overview of the causes and consequences of labour migration from the Western Balkans, concluding with recommendations for the region's national governments and for the European institutions on how to jointly address the problem.

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THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY: INFORMALITY AS A KEY TO SUCCESS



ABSTRACT

The EPC has been established to create 'strategic intimacy' among European countries, at a time when Russian aggression against Ukraine demanded a show of unity and geopolitical resolve. Its lack of standing structures, institutions, budget and even final declarations should be taken as added value and not as a liability. Indeed, the EPC should not be considered as a loose replica of the EU or as a waiting room for EU aspiring members. Any comparison with the EU fails to capture the real added value of the EPC – an informal format allowing European leaders to freely discuss open issues at 'multilateral' level on the sidelines of the event, without the pressure of political consensus. While European leaders should resist the calls to institutionalise the EPC, they should also be aware of the risk of increasing fatigue. If this format fails to deliver tangible results in the long run, in order for the EPC not to become just a big photo opportunity for the whole European continent, organising host countries (which rotate on a six-month basis on the EU/non-EU country principle) should spend their political capital to keep the EPC a valid geopolitical institution with its distinctive features.

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BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

HOW TO BUILD A Viable ROAD TO EU MEMBERSHIP



ABSTRACT

Since its beginning with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2005, Bosnia-Herzegovina's EU path has been marred by the country's unwillingness to gather the necessary political consensus to adopt the reforms needed to improve its functionality, its rule of law and its democratic standard. This feature has proved itself true throughout BiH's EU journey. The limits of conditionality have been overcome by Brussels and the member states' several decisions to lower the bar and allow Sarajevo to go further. The 2022 decision by the Commission and the Council to grant BiH the candidate status stems from almost purely geopolitical considerations, rather than from the effort of Bosnian institutions to reform. The same will most likely be true when, in March 2024, the Commission might recommend the Council for the opening of accession negotiations.

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