



Stagnation in Serbia's integration with the European Union

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Serbia's integration with the EU has made no progress for almost five years, due to a lack of improvement in the rule of law and a regression in democratic standards. Furthermore, the country only selectively aligns its foreign policy with that of the EU. These shortcomings mean that, despite the European Commission (EC) maintaining its opinion in July this year that Serbia is ready to open Chapter 3 (competitiveness and growth), some Member States are opposed. The country will be able to accelerate its accession negotiations if, following the elections, a government committed to integration with the EU emerges—snap parliamentary elections are due to be held in late October this year.

The current stalemate in Serbia's EU accession talks is the longest since they [began in 2014](#). The only progress in the negotiations since the [change to the enlargement methodology in March 2020](#)—under which improvements to the rule of law are a condition for opening further chapters—was the December 2021 opening of Chapter 4 (green agenda and connectivity). There has been no progress even though, in October 2024, Serbia adopted a Reform Plan—necessary to secure implementation support amounting to nearly €1.6 billion from the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans—and the government signalled that it would carry out these reforms by 2027. Serbia has so far opened 22 of the 35 chapters (grouped into six clusters), and two have been provisionally closed.

Serbia's political scene has also remained at a standstill for almost a decade and a half. The main ruling party since 2012 has been the conservative-liberal Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Its long-standing president and de facto leader remains Aleksandar Vučić, who served as Deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister from 2012 to 2017 and has been President since 2017. Under its rule, parliamentary elections have been held once within the constitutional timeframe (in 2020), whilst on four occasions they were held early (in 2014, 2016, 2022 and 2023), a practice the party justified as necessary to strengthen its mandate. Although the SNS list typically secured an outright majority, it always formed a coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia, whose leader for two decades, Ivica Dačić, has almost continuously since 2008 held the

post of First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior or Foreign Affairs.

Simulated reforms. The key area requiring reforms in Serbia is the rule of law. This mainly concerns the need to ensure the independence of the judiciary and to combat corruption and organised crime. Meanwhile, reforms in this area have often been merely cosmetic. For example, changes intended to increase the independence of judges—including those in the form of constitutional amendments ratified in a referendum in 2022—have not curbed the political influence highlighted by the European Commission in its annual reports on Serbia's European integration, including the most recent one from October 2025.

Beyond imitating reforms, Serbia has adopted laws that directly contravene EU requirements. For example, in 2023, the government amended the media laws which—despite their declared compliance with the media strategy adopted in 2020 under the auspices of the European Commission—non-governmental organisations assessed as having increased the government's influence over the sector. In 2026, it pushed through legislation undermining the independence of the judiciary, only backing down under pressure from the EU.

Serbia—although it declares integration with the EU to be a strategic objective—is the only Balkan country to selectively align its foreign policy with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. According to the European Commission, in autumn

2025 the level of alignment stood at 63 per cent, compared with 59 per cent a year earlier and 45 per cent in 2022. The main area of divergence remains [the approach to Russia](#)—Serbia has not joined the EU’s sanctions packages against Russia—and Belarus. Furthermore, the EC has identified the Serbian-Chinese free trade agreement, which came into force in 2024, as an issue of strategic importance. Although there is no consistent approach within the EU towards Kosovo, the normalisation of relations with it forms part of Serbia’s negotiating framework; according to the EC, Serbia is failing to fulfil its existing commitments.

Democratic backsliding. The superficial reforms and the introduction of laws contrary to EU recommendations are leading to the erosion of democratic standards. In Serbia, elections have for years been marred by irregularities and abuses, including the 2026 local by-elections. The OSCE regularly highlights the use of state resources for party political purposes, the transport of voters from abroad, vote-buying and even violence against voters and journalists. As a result, almost all opposition parties fielded no candidates and boycotted the [2020 parliamentary elections](#), and there was no real opposition in the National Assembly until the subsequent elections.

The decline of democracy in Serbia was particularly highlighted by the aftermath of the construction disaster in Novi Sad in November 2024. The collapse of the railway station’s canopy, renovated just a few months earlier, claimed 16 lives, and participants in the mass protests against the government—which continue to this day—linked the disaster to corruption and demanded the disclosure of the full documentation relating to the project and the prosecution of those responsible. Meanwhile, the authorities ignored these demands and have cracked down on both the protesters—including using force against students—and civil society and non-governmental organisations supporting the anti-corruption demands. The government reshuffle, followed by the change of prime minister in April 2025, did not bring the protests to an end, as it had no significant impact on the exercise of power, which is informally wielded by President Vučić. The authorities resisted the protesters’ continual demands for early parliamentary elections from May 2025, only changing their stance in August 2026, after the Student List, formed based on the demonstrations, began to take a slight lead in the polls. Two months earlier, however, President Vučić had announced that he would step down before the end of his term of office, which was due to end in spring 2027.

The ongoing breakdown of democracy in Serbia for more than a year is particularly evident in international rankings. In Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index for 2025, Serbia scored 33 points and ranked 116th, compared with 35 points and 105th place the previous year (the sharpest decline since the start of EU accession negotiations in 2014, when it scored 41 points and ranked 74th). Meanwhile, in Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index for 2026, Serbia scored 50.8 points, down from 53.6 points the previous year, falling out of the top 100 for the first time, from 96th to 104th place (75 points and 54th place in 2014). For the first time in both these rankings, the only European countries—excluding those in the South Caucasus and Türkiye—to fare worse than Serbia were Belarus and

Russia. These setbacks were confirmed by the European Commission: in its latest report, it highlighted limited progress in combating corruption, including at the highest levels of government, and noted a regression in the area of freedom of expression—a highly unusual finding, as in 2025 it did not assess any other area in this way in the other Western Balkan countries.

Democratic backsliding drives the government to justify itself through anti-Western rhetoric, and this contributes to a decline in public support for European integration. According to the annual WeBalkans.eu surveys (co-ordinated by the European Commission), in the spring of 2026 this support stood at 31 per cent (15 per cent among SNS voters, according to a survey by the Serbian NGO CRTA) compared with 33 per cent in 2025 and 39 per cent in 2024, with Serbia recording by far the lowest figure in the region (in second-placed Bosnia and Herzegovina, it stood at 64 per cent). Furthermore, it is the only country in the Balkans where opponents of membership are in the majority—40 per cent in 2026. The European Parliament explicitly blames the Serbian authorities and the media they control for this waning support.

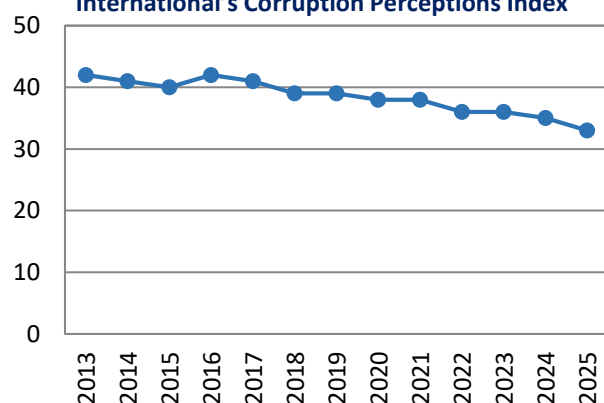
Conclusions and prospects. The stagnation in Serbia’s European integration stems mainly from the authorities’ lack of genuine will to bring the country into line with EU standards. Subsequent EU initiatives, including financial ones, aimed at accelerating its enlargement have not changed this: due to a lack of reforms, Serbia has so far received only a few per cent of its allocated funds from the Growth Plan, which remains in force until the end of 2027—while Albania and Montenegro have each received around a quarter of their funds. Unclaimed funds will represent an additional cost of the lack of democratisation.

The rejection of democratisation manifests itself not only in the simulation of change, but also in the erosion of the rule of law. Furthermore, Serbia’s foreign policy is only partly aligned with that of the EU—something that is a political choice contrary to its declared strategic goal of European integration. This, in turn, means that Bulgaria, Belgium, Croatia, the Netherlands and Sweden may highlight shortcomings in the rule of law, whilst Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia may raise allegations of pro-Russian leanings, thereby opposing Serbia’s progress towards EU membership.

Serbia’s setbacks in its integration with the EU are detrimental to countries, including Poland—which support EU enlargement with a view to expanding the area of security, stability and prosperity in Europe—as they slow down this process. At the same time, the EU’s efforts to accelerate Serbia’s European integration—while in Poland’s interest—should remain based on conditionality, as this ensures that the reforms necessary to implement EU standards, including in the rule of law, are carried out. Meanwhile, Serbia will only be able to return to the path of democratisation—and thus to genuine talks on EU membership—once elections have been held properly and authorities who are genuinely committed to European integration have been elected. However, this remains uncertain, given both the voting irregularities observed to date and indications that Vučić will return to the post of Prime Minister, potentially facilitated by the early parliamentary and presidential elections he has announced.

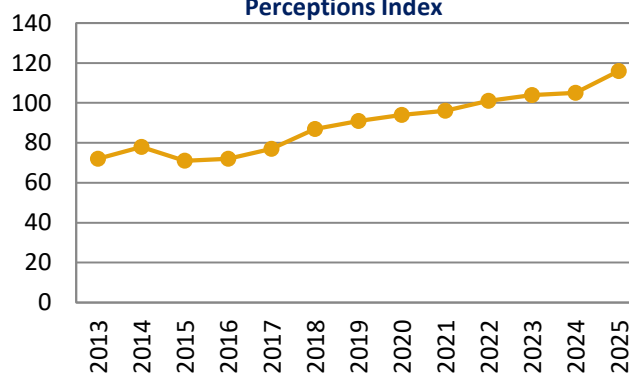
PISM BULLETIN

Serbia's scores in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index



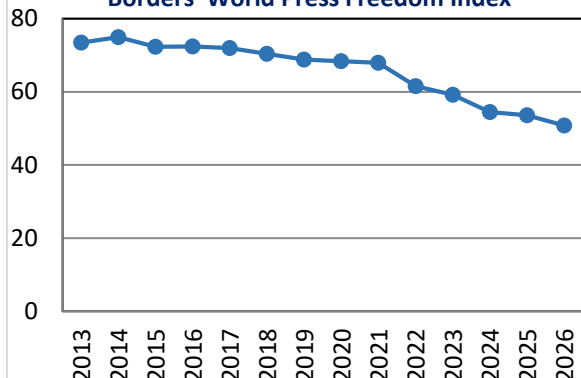
PISM, based on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index

Serbia's ranking in the Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index



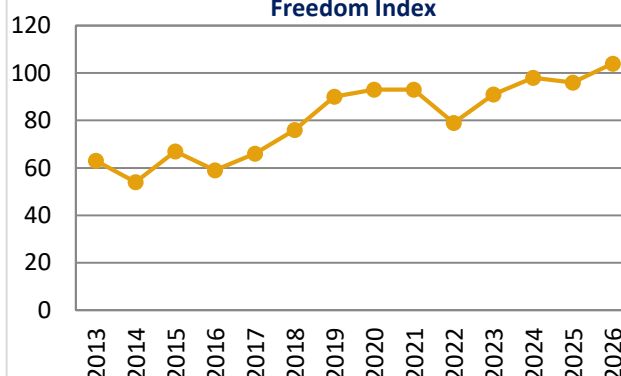
PISM, based on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index

Serbia's ranking in Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index



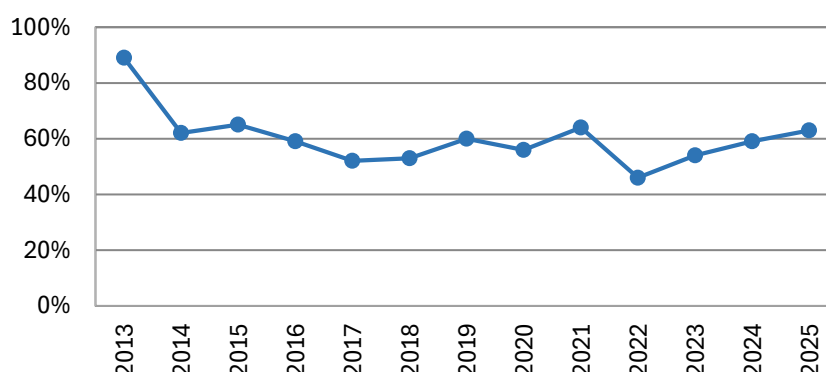
PISM, based on Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index

Serbia's position in the global Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index



PISM, based on Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index

Indicator of the alignment of Serbia's foreign policy with the EU's CFSP, according to European Commission reports



PISM, based on the European Commission's regular reports on Serbia's progress towards European integration