European Parliament

Anti-government protests in Serbia

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and his ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) have governed the country since 2012 with a heavy concentration of power, media control and a weak system of checks and balances. Serbia is marked by deep political polarisation and popular discontent. In December 2023, Serbia held snap parliamentary elections, just 20 months after the previous elections, which brought SNS a larger-than-expected victory: SNS won 46.7 %, far ahead of the newly formed opposition coalition Serbia Against Violence (SPN) on 23.6 %. In November 2024, anti-government protests erupted again following the roof collapsing at the renovated Novi Sad railway station. In summer 2025, protests intensified, accompanied by violence and renewed calls for snap elections. Vučić's second and final five-year presidential term ends in 2027, when parliamentary elections are also due.

Current situation

Novi Sad station collapse – catalyst for new anti-government protests

On 1 November 2024, a renovated concrete canopy collapsed at the railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia's second-largest city, killing 14 people on the spot and injuring several others (two more people died later, the 16th victim being a 19 year-old student). Just two days before the Novi Sad station collapse, the Commission's 2024 report on Serbia (in Chapter 5 on 'public procurement') warned that 'Serbia has a tendency to circumvent its legislation in this area [of public procurement] through intergovernmental agreements and special laws'. Observers note that, as the reconstruction of the railway station in Novi Sad was part of a 'capital state project' – the construction of a high-speed railway from Belgrade to Budapest – it was based on the bilateral agreement between Serbia and China and not subject to the Law on Public Procurement.

Public outrage erupted, pointing to shoddy construction and suspected corruption, forcing Construction Minister Goran Vesić to resign. The protests began with student-led blockades of educational institutions, starting on 22 November at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts. Every day at 11:52 am – the time the station roof fell – protesters halted traffic for 16 minutes of silence to honour the 16 lives lost. These solemn 'Serbia, stop' actions galvanised ordinary citizens to join *en masse*. By early 2025, the anti-corruption protests had spread to over 400 towns and cities in Serbia, becoming the largest grassroots uprising in decades.

Escalation and early government response

Unlike earlier protests in Serbia, the student-led movement of 2024-2025 shattered turnout records, with youth and first-time protesters (Generation Z) pouring into the streets. Demonstrations in Novi Sad drew up to 100 000 people, and Belgrade saw rallies of similar scale. Protesters' demands coalesced around justice and the rule of law: they insisted on full transparency in the station project (the release of all construction documents) and prosecution of those responsible for the corruption that led to the collapse. They also demanded action against the ruling SNS-connected perpetrators of the attacks on protesting students.

The sustained pressure achieved a partial victory on 28 January 2025, when Serbia's Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned, along with the Mayor of Novi Sad. This marked a major concession to protesters, who nevertheless continued their action as their key request was a call for snap elections. On 29 January, in an open letter to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, a group of Serbian intellectuals urged the EU to 'unambiguously support a free, democratic Serbia', instead of bolstering Vučić's regime.

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PE 775.906 – September 2025

Re-emergence of violence in June-July 2025

The climate shifted in mid-2025: after nine months of peaceful demonstrations, tensions peaked on 28 June when a massive protest held on Belgrade's Slavija Square – estimated at 140 000 participants – coincided with Serbia's historic Vidovdan holiday. Witnesses reported students and media representatives being beaten – four young protesters were hospitalised on 2 July, including one with a broken collarbone. Student Luka Mihajlović, beaten and arrested while standing calmly with hands raised, became a symbol of that shift. Riot police confronted groups of protesters, and dozens of civilians and police were injured, with the police allegedly using a long-range acoustic device against the crowds in Belgrade.

Hundreds of demonstrators were detained in early July as the authorities forcibly cleared road blockades. The Belgrade Center for Human Rights has filed 15 criminal complaints against the police. On 4 July, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern about the current human rights situation in Serbia and excessive use of force to curb demonstrations; the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights similarly urged the Serbian authorities to exercise restraint.

President Vučić's compromise proposal

As of late August 2025, President Vučić has hinted at compromise without fully yielding. On 17 August, Vučić denounced the protesters as 'terrorists' attempting to bring down the state, and justified the 'strong response'. Pressured by further protests and the unified call for snap elections, in a televised address on 22 August Vučić moderated his tone by inviting student representatives to televised debates, urging 'dialogue… no conflict, no violence'. Protesters swiftly rejected this as a delaying tactic, insisting they will only debate during an election campaign once elections are called. With regular elections not due until 2027, the standoff pits an energised civil society against an entrenched leadership.

Serbia's society remains deeply polarised between government loyalists and reform advocates. Vučić's base includes many older and rural voters, drawn to his nationalist rhetoric and promises of stability. On the other side, the protest movement has united an ideologically diverse coalition – liberal pro-EU activists march alongside conservatives and even nationalist groups disillusioned with corruption. Trust in the EU in Serbia (at 37 %, according to the Standard Eurobarometer Spring 2025) is the lowest among all accession countries in the Western Balkans, as certain political elites, particularly those with ties to or aligning with Russia, blame the West and Europe for various internal and regional issues, including democratic movements. According to the Lowy Institute, 'Vučić's close allies … claim that the West is behind protests, reportedly aiming to overthrow the Serbian leader. The same rhetoric comes from the Kremlin, whose officials have repeatedly stated that the West is attempting to orchestrate a "colour revolution" in Belgrade.'

Position of the European Parliament

The European Parliament resolution of 8 February 2024 on the situation in Serbia following the December 2023 elections pressed for investigations into the reported irregularities. The most recent resolution, of 7 May 2025, on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Serbia supports European integration of the country while calling on Serbia to accelerate reforms on media freedom, judicial independence and fundamental rights in line with EU standards. It also notes that 'limited progress has been made in the fight against corruption despite the adoption of a new anti-corruption strategy for 2024-2028'.

The European Union-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee held its 16th meeting in the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 12-13 February 2025. Taking part in this plenary debate, Marta Kos, European Commissioner for Enlargement, expressed concern about the incidents against demonstrators and stated that the European Commission is closely following developments in Serbia, particularly the ongoing student protests. She also underscored the fundamental importance of accountability in democratic societies. On 14 May 2025, the Parliament's Serbia Delegation was associated to the meeting of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, exchanging views on the human rights situation in Serbia in the context of the student-led protests.

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