



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
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Western Balkans

THE VUČIĆ SYSTEM

An Analysis of the Consolidation
and Concentration of Power

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FOREWORD

"In practice, the political systems of Serbia and Montenegro are characterised by the virtual absence of institutional checks and balances. Power is concentrated in the executive (in the case of Serbia, unconstitutionally in the office of the president). The ruling parties dominate the state institutions and function as patronage systems that exchange sinecures for loyalty, so that one can justifiably speak of a 'captured state'.

Parliament is correspondingly powerless. There are hardly any real debates in the committees and certainly not in the plenary. Laws are often waved through in summary proceedings. The judiciary is inefficient and susceptible to influence and is little suited to the rapid resolution of legal disputes. A large part of the media is dependent on the government in terms of personnel and finances, and therefore provides governmental reporting.

The nationwide television channels, through which the majority of the population informs itself, serve as platforms for propaganda-like appearances by the executive. This includes the media staging of crises and threats (...). The pattern is always the same: the executive, with the active help of the media, conjures up a crisis that is resolved a short time later thanks to the courageous intervention of the head of state. The risk that critical media will call the bluff is negligible. Thus, the political discourse is permanently in election campaign mode and is characterised by polemics, personalisation and dramatisation. However, it would be wrong to 'read' this crisis-like discourse as an expression of instability. On the contrary, it is part of a proven technique of rule that can be called 'managed democracy'.¹

These lines date from 2017, written by the long-time South-East Europe correspondent of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Andreas Ernst.

Four years on, his analysis regarding Serbia can not only be confirmed but also continued in the same terms: according to Jovan Jovanović, Serbia's former ambassador to Indonesia, the country's development from the point of view of democratic rule of law has rather deteriorated further.

What the author of this pamphlet presents in detail about the "Vučić-System" and underpins with numerous sources is as illuminating as it is sobering.

He vividly traces the political career and ascent of the current president and leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS): from the long-time secretary-general of the extreme nationalist Serbian Radical Party to the founding of the SNS in 2008 and its imposing rise to become the strongest party, eventually overriding the entire political playing field, with currently around 700,000 members: a unique figure for a party even in a pan-European comparison.

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1 Andreas Ernst, *Echoraum, nicht Pulverfass*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, Heft 40-41/2017, 02. Oktober 2017, S.4-9, hier S. 5 f.

The concentration, consolidation and strengthening of Vučić's power are divided into four phases over the period from 2012 onwards, with the end of each phase being associated with a power gain.

Aided and abetted by insufficient reforms in the recent past, a prevailing authoritarian political culture, outdated patronage structures in politics and business, and a widespread "preference for informality", the president's preferred populist style of politics falls on extremely fertile ground.

Against this background, the continuation of the path towards an authoritarian political system seems more likely than that towards a democratic future based on the rule of law, despite the repeated official invocation of and supposed aspiration to EU membership.

"Whether such a dire situation will change for the better in forthcoming years", says the author in the final sentence of his Conclusion, "will depend both on the EU stance towards the Vučić regime, and the Serbian opposition's ability to create a strong, credible alternative that could represent a serious challenge."

Michael Roick
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Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia and leader of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, has been in politics for almost three decades. In 1993 he became a member of Vojislav Šešelj's extreme nationalist Serbian Radical Party; Šešelj was later convicted of war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). At the time when Vučić became a party member, he was still a student at the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Law. Out of the 15 years he spent as a member of the Serbian Radical Party, Vučić held the position of Secretary General for 13 – formally the number three position in the party hierarchy but, after Šešelj turned himself in to the Hague Tribunal in 2003, Vučić became in effect the most powerful party functionary.

As the Party's high-ranking member, he gained not only extensive parliamentary experience, but also important executive knowledge as Minister of Information in the coalition government lead by Slobodan Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia (1998 – 2000). His term, overlapping with the 1999 war with NATO, was marked by a serious crackdown on independent media. After Milošević was toppled in 2000, and the democratic transition process began, the Serbian Radical Party became Serbia's main opposition party. However, after experiencing several election defeats in the 2000s, and facing poor prospects of coming to power, Aleksandar Vučić and the Party's Deputy President, Tomislav Nikolić, decided in 2008 to leave the Radicals, rebrand themselves, and create the Serbian Progressive Party, with the latter at the helm. Former Serbian President Boris Tadić (2004 – 2012) has been accused by many of helping their effort to break away from the nationalistic past and create an image of a modern, pro-European party, acceptable to the West. One of the major indications that Tadić did pursue such a policy was a decision taken by the coalition government dominated by his Democratic Party to grant the newly founded Serbian Progressive Party budgetary funds proportional to the number of MPs who left the Serbian Radical Party after the 2008 parliamentary election. This decision was taken contrary to election law, since the newly created party had not participated in the elections and was created a few months after they were held.

Less than four years after it was created, in staunch opposition to the Democratic Party led government, the Serbian Progressive Party rather unexpectedly came to power after winning both the presidential and general elections in 2012 by narrow margins, using both conventional (parliamentary), and unconventional (hunger strikes) instruments of political struggle. Tomislav Nikolić's presidential victory, his subsequent handing over of the party leadership to Aleksandar Vučić, and the creation of a new government coalition dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party, marked the beginning of power consolidation and concentration by Vučić, as well as the rise of authoritarianism in Serbia.

FERTILE GROUND FOR AUTHORITARIANISM

The rise of authoritarianism in Serbia after 2000 overlapped to a great extent with the global democratic recession that began in 2005 and intensified after the global economic crisis of 2008 – 2009. Besides the influence of the economic crisis, there were several distinctive preconditions that contributed to the creation and strengthening of competitive authoritarianism in Serbia, i.e. to the consolidation and concentration of power in Aleksandar Vučić's hands after 2012. The following are some of these preconditions:

Socialist heritage, disintegration of Yugoslavia and transition from authoritarianism to competitive authoritarianism

The Socialist Yugoslavia, especially during President Tito's rule (1945 – 1980), was an authoritarian state where the Communist Party had a dominant role in all aspects of life. Such a system enjoyed wide support from citizens, deriving legitimacy from the relatively high living standard, social and job security, and openness to and respected position in the world. The regimes which have succeeded the Communist Party since the 1990 and break-up of Yugoslavia, particularly that in Serbia, continued to dominate and use the resources inherited from the socialist state, to a great extent with the aim of limiting pluralism and suppressing political opposition in a formal, newly created multi-party system, and enforcing a nationalistic narrative and environment. A hybrid regime, combining state control over the economy with nascent clientelist capitalism, thus dominated Serbia in the 1990s.² The emergence and dominance of such an authoritarian regime in the last decade of the 20th century was also facilitated by the growing insecurity caused by the disintegration of the country and accompanying wars.

Dominant authoritarian political culture

The late 1980s were marked by a crisis of socialist values and a revival of values that had been suppressed during socialism: tradition, nationalism and religiosity. An increasing socio-economic crisis after Tito's death combined with the (re)emerging value system provided fertile ground for the gradual spread and strengthening of a new type of authoritarianism. Such a value system, which was only reinforced in the turbulent and tragic 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union, continued to dominate after the democratic changes that began in 2000. An important 2007 survey registered a general high degree of authoritarianism – strong identification with the nation, traditionalism, patriarchalism and an anti-Western orientation. An absolute majority of respondents also expressed reservations about changes, particularly if they disturbed established domestic patterns of behaviour.³

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 2 Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, 2020
 3 Political culture of voters in Serbia, Institute of Social Sciences, 2009

Incomplete democratic transformation and disappointment with democratic transition

After the overthrow of the Milošević regime in 2000 Serbia experienced a slow democratic consolidation and incomplete democratic reforms. The institutions remained under dominant political influence, and several structures inherited from the old regime, widespread informal practices and networks of influence remained either intact or insufficiently reformed – they simply adjusted to new circumstances. One of the main reasons for this scenario was the prevalence of national and statehood issues in the period of democratic consolidation.⁴

The incomplete democratic transformation, disregard for rule-based practices, and preference for informality increased the appeal of authoritarian practices. President Tadić's informal presidentialism combined with the patronage-based party system, together with emerging "democratic" clientelism, laid the institutional foundations of the authoritarianism that was to be further developed after 2012.⁵ In addition, paired with the growing disappointment with the post-Milošević transition process and the grievances of its losers, they also provided fertile ground for populism based on an emphasis on rising social inequalities, the harmfulness of privatisation, and the idealisation of the socialist system.

Brain drain and accelerated emigration

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 665,000 people left Serbia between 2000 and 2016. The average annual emigration in the period 2006 – 2015 was 37,000 people before rising to 44,000 in 2016. The latest OECD and UN estimate is that up to 49,000 people are leaving Serbia each year.⁶ The emigration rates are high not only among well-educated, but also among lower skilled groups, which may indicate that the main reason for emigration is economic hardship. A particularly worrying trend is that, according to a National Youth Council survey, more than half of young people intend to leave Serbia, citing as some of the main reasons securing a more dignified living and better quality of life. Bearing in mind that relevant surveys continuously show that support for authoritarianism correlates with older age groups and lower education, the emigration of a young, skilful and entrepreneurial population can only lead to the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies. An additional problem is that a significant number of young people see no sense in participating in political processes in Serbia, since they plan to resettle abroad.

Western support for stabilitocracies and widening geopolitical manoeuvring field for Western Balkan governments

Faced with increasing geopolitical competition in Southeast Europe, Western governments embraced the stabilitocracy approach towards powerful Western Balkan leaders, prioritising stability over democratic values and turning a blind eye to autocratic practices and growing state capture. Such an approach found its most illustrative expression when the new European Commission, appointed in 2019, labelled itself as geopolitical. The Western Balkan leaders quickly learned the language acceptable to the West and, by paying lip service to the need for reform, regional stability and increased cooperation, secured continued assistance and support for their regimes.

Increased strategic competition in the region caused by the growing influence of non-Western geopolitical actors (Russia, China, Turkey, UAE) provided Western Balkan leaders with an opportunity to play on geopolitical rivalries. It has proved particularly appealing to the strongmen of the region that these actors are benevolent towards autocratic practices as long as they secure their primarily economic interests. This balancing act has been particularly distinguished in the case of Serbia, whose government has been opportunistically swinging between major geopolitical actors having as major goals politico-economic benefits and stability of power. Consequently, the conditionality policy, which was at the core of the EU's enlargement programme, has lost the power of both its carrot and its stick, a development which is apparent in the decreasing alignment of Serbian and EU foreign policy declarations.⁷

4 The Consolidation of Democratic Institutions in Serbia after 2000, D. Pavlović, S. Antonić, 2007

5 Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, 2020

6 <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/mladi-koji-odlaze-treba-se-boriti-sam-u-svetu>

7 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/02/09/serbias-alignment-with-eu-foreign-policy-declarations-continues-to-decrease/>

VUČIĆ'S POWER GRAB PLAYBOOK – STEADY STEPS TOWARDS CONCENTRATING POWER

Most of the instruments that Aleksandar Vučić has been using to consolidate his rule and concentrate power in his hands can be found in what some political scientists, such as Larry Diamond, have labelled the Autocrat's Playbook. Since 2012, when his Serbian Progressive Party came to power, Vučić's rule has gone through four phases, marked by election cycles, as well as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2012–2014 (INITIAL STEPS)

Once he realised that it would be difficult for him and his party to come to and remain in power without Western trust and support, Aleksandar Vučić started the process of reinventing himself by renouncing his unpleasant nationalist past, as well as by presenting himself as a dynamic pro-European reformer, and a pragmatic politician intending to solve long-lasting regional problems that his predecessors had failed to solve, particularly the Kosovo issue. This rebranding campaign began prior to the 2012 elections, and only intensified after he came to power.

After Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party won the general election by a slight margin and their leader Tomislav Nikolić beat Boris Tadić in the Presidential election, Vučić formed a governing coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia and some former coalition partners of Tadić's Democratic Party which had been in power for most of the period since 2000. The main price for attracting the Socialist Party to enter the new coalition was the position of Prime Minister, which was handed to their leader Ivica Dačić, the party's spokesperson in the 1990s. However, at the same time, Vučić assumed the newly created position of First Deputy Prime Minister, which allowed him to become the most powerful political figure in the country.

From the position of First Deputy Prime Minister, he took the following steps which contributed to the consolidation of his power:

- **provided a semblance of an uncompromising fight against corruption and crime.** This endeavour was typified by the arrests of the leading Serbian tycoon, the owner of Delta Holding Miroslav Mišković, and allegedly the biggest drug lord Dragoslav Kosmajac. By doing this, Vučić was playing on strong negative popular sentiments against those who had amassed great fortunes both in the 1990s, when the majority of the population became impoverished, and after 2000 when the privatisation process, which initially caused a significant increase in unemployment, took place. These moves increased Vučić's popularity and significantly contributed to his party's decisive victory in the 2014 early election.
- **involved non-party affiliated experts in government.** Faced with the lack of competent cadres in his party and the ingrained popular distrust of political parties, Vučić decided to turn this to his advantage by presenting himself as someone whose priority was not party, but public interest, by including "the best and brightest" in the government regardless of their political affiliation. Moreover, he allocated crucial portfolios, like Finance and Economy, to these experts.
- **took over power in Belgrade without elections.** In the second half of 2013, Vučić orchestrated the dissolution of the governing coalition led by the Democratic Party and the creation of a Provisional Authority in the Serbian capital dominated by his Progressives. This scenario allowed the SNS to exert power for six months in Belgrade and prepare for an early election which they won by a comfortable margin in March 2014. Bearing in mind that approximately 40% of Serbia's GDP is created in the capital, coming to power in Belgrade was not only an important symbolic event, but also a practical one, which contributed to the further consolidation of Vučić's and his party's power.
- **started exerting influence over the most popular media outlets.** Vučić has always dedicated particular attention to media influence on public opinion, as well as propaganda techniques. Therefore, it came as no surprise that immediately after coming to power, he laid the groundwork for a system of influencing or hindering the most popular media, including undermining the independence of public TV stations.⁸ Consequently, these media outlets began to show a heavier political bent and regularly became involved in political disputes and the discrediting of political opponents. Tabloids took a distinctive role in discrediting opposition leaders. Such government behaviour provoked reactions both from Brussels and the European Federation of Journalists, who requested that the government secure free access to information and emphasised the crucial importance of the freedom of the media for the EU integration process.⁹
- **continued subsidising foreign direct investment.** The SNS-led government continued with the previous government's

8 BiEPAG, Background Paper, Media Freedom in the Western Balkans, 2015

9 <https://www.dw.com/sr/poruka-brisela-sloboda-medija-odraz-demokratije/a-17680748>

policy of providing lavish subsidies and other benefits to foreign investors. This controversial policy increased FDI which translated into numerous jobs created, but was also met with local entrepreneurs' disapproval on the grounds of creating unfair competition. Besides the expected positive economic effects of such a policy, another important government expectation was that subsidies would translate into the political support of the countries these investors came from.

- **began to create a new patronage-based economic system.** Clientelism in Serbia has deep historical roots. In the past, it was developed as a way of compensating for the lack of a formal institutional network. After the breakdown of the socialist system, clientelism became an instrument of converting public resources into private capital for the purpose of strengthening the political elite.¹⁰ It did not take long before the SNS-controlled government began appointing people of trust, close to Vučić, to head the most important publicly owned companies. One of the most illustrative examples was the appointment of Vučić's best man Nikola Petrović as CEO of Elektromreža Srbije, a power transmission company.

The intrusion of political factors into economic processes led to the creation of the rent-seeking system accompanied by corruption in its most detrimental form.¹¹ Anyone coming to office in a political system lacking division of power, checks and balances and an independent judiciary in an overly interventionist economy with a high public spending share, thus with government control over huge resources, in conjunction with low per capita income, is tempted to use this power to their political and personal benefit.

- **took the first major steps towards the normalisation of relations with Kosovo.** By signing the Brussels Agreement on normalising relations between Serbia and Kosovo, which was negotiated and concluded under the auspices of the European Union in April 2013, the Serbian government secured further Western support as a strong contributor to regional reconciliation and stability. In the following years, the Serbian and Kosovan governments signed several agreements related to the practical issues of the normalisation process, including the Agreement on Economic Normalisation, better known as the Washington Agreement, concluded under the auspices of the Trump administration in September 2020. The recurrent problems with all the signed agreements have been delays in their implementation by both sides. The Serbian government's procrastination with implementation has been motivated by the Serbian public's overwhelming rejection of the recognition of Kosovo's independence, as well as by the belief that time can be bought due to the Western powers' perception that the Vučić regime, having nationalistic

credentials and a strong grip on power, is indispensable for bringing the normalisation process to its conclusion.

2014-2017 (CONFIRMED LEGITIMACY)

Less than two years after coming to power, even though his party was dominant in the government coalition, Aleksandar Vučić decided to profit from his growing popularity, shortened the parliament's term and called for early elections. An overwhelming victory for his party in March 2014 (almost 50% of the votes and close to 2/3 of seats), proved Vučić right, and gave him the desired unquestionable legitimacy to become Prime Minister (according to the Constitution the most powerful position in the country), and further cement his power.

Consequently, shortly after becoming Prime Minister, Vučić took the following steps in consolidating his power:

- **consolidation of public finances.** The government began with financial consolidation only after the Serbian Progressive Party secured an absolute majority in Parliament. In October 2014, strict fiscal consolidation measures were introduced, aimed at reducing the budget deficit by decreasing public sector wages and those pensions which were above average, as well as by reducing aid to state-owned enterprises. In 2014, the share of pension expenditure amounted to 13% of GDP. The fiscal austerity measures were welcomed by international financial institutions, which increased the Serbian Government's international standing. At the same time, by leaving intact pensions that were below the average, Vučić's regime consolidated the support of one of his major power bases – retired people with low pensions.
- **avoiding public sector reform.** The financial consolidation, which affected retired people the most, wasn't accompanied by public sector reform. To the contrary, the regime intensified party employment in the public sector, local governments and agencies and continued to subsidise inefficient publicly owned companies. The German Agency for International Cooperation's (GIZ) data on discrimination in the labour market, presented in early 2018, show that more than 90% of employees and unemployed, as well as 100% of employers, believe that people in Serbia can more easily find a job if they are members of a political party.¹² With an estimated 700,000 members, the SNS has become the biggest party in Europe and has thus assumed more of an employment bureau role than a classical political party.

Speaking of subsidies, according to the State Audit Institution's (SAI) report for 2015 – 2017, local governments in Serbia alone subsidised public companies with about €487 million in that period. The SAI's findings indicate that

10 SeCons, Briefing on party patronage and clientelism in Serbia, 2016, <https://www.secons.net/files/publications/35Briefing%20on%20Party%20Patronage%20and%20Clientelism%20in%20Serbia.pdf>

11 Institut za društvene nauke, Centar za ekonomska istraživanja, *Preduzetništvo vs. rentijerstvo*, 2018.

12 <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/being-politically-affiliated-the-easiest-way-to-find-a-job-in-serbia/>

subsidies from local budgets were given without adequate control, leading to the conclusion that the money had not been used efficiently.¹³ In 2016, Serbia spent 2.2 percent of GDP on state aid: triple the EU28 average.

- **increasing subsidies to foreign investors.** Serbia's government intensified a controversial policy of giving subsidies to foreign investors. An illustrative example of lavish subsidies was the Chinese company Mei Ta Europe to which, in September 2015, the government pledged to give some €27,000 for every job created, a 14-acre site for free and a tax waiver. In addition, the Serbian authorities agreed to renounce its share of ownership in the company, give it a three-year utility costs exemption, build infrastructure connections and financially support employee training.¹⁴
- **launching large infrastructure and transportation projects.** By announcing, implementing and starting significant infrastructure and transportation projects, with a crucial role for foreign investors, Vučić intended to create an image of Serbia as an attractive, fast growing investment destination – using his words, “an economic tiger in the region.” Three of these projects stand out in this three-year period: the Belgrade Waterfront, a €3 billion development project funded by the UAE-based Eagle Hills group in the most exclusive area of the Serbian capital on the Sava riverfront; transforming Yugoslav Airlines into Air Serbia with Etihad Airways investment; and a high-speed railway between Belgrade and Budapest, considered one of the most important European projects within the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Serbia, Hungary and China signed a memorandum of understanding in 2014, during the Belgrade summit of the China-led 16+1 initiative, while the design details were settled in 2015.
- **tightening control over the security apparatus, and limiting the independence of the judiciary and Prosecutor's Office.** By appointing his close associate, former Minister of Defence and high-ranking SNS official, Bratislav Gašić as head the Security Information Agency (BIA) in May 2017, Vučić intended to tighten his grip on the security services and further instrumentalise them to his political advantage. At the same time, a parallel line of command was created at the Ministry of the Interior, headed by SNS Vice-President Nebojša Stefanović, through close associates of Dijana Hrkalović, State Secretary at the Ministry. Under their auspices the Ministry took control over some football hooligan groups and organised criminal gangs with the aim of using them for para-political confrontations with political opponents. In addition, the SNS regime also started limiting the independence of the State Public Prosecutor, who has not reacted to various cases involving public officials' misconduct. For such oblivious and passive behaviour, Jelena Dolovac was rewarded with a third term as Public Prosecutor in 2021. Various international reports, including the International Commission of

Jurists, have concluded that a culture of dependency on the Executive is present in the Serbian judiciary, particularly pointing to direct and indirect political influence on appointment, selection and dismissal procedures, the lack of effective procedures of evaluation of the work of judges and prosecutors, as well as a strong hierarchical system in the prosecution service that undermines internal independence and risks undermining the independence of investigations and prosecutions.¹⁵

The process of limiting the independence of the judiciary took particularly significant form in the marginalisation and political instrumentalisation of the Constitutional Court which has continued in subsequent periods. The Court has been filled with ill-qualified and regime-friendly judges, which has resulted in the sidelining of its most important prerogative – the protection of constitutionality and legality. The continuous submissiveness of the Court has been expressed both in the rejection of numerous requests to review the constitutionality of controversial government decisions, and in rulings in line with the regime's interests, such as those related to cutting pensions, or refusing to ban three extreme right political organisations, believed to be under government control.

- **continued broadening of the SNS dominated election coalition.** The SNS continued to provide the appearance of internal pluralism and ideological diversity by perpetually accepting into their coalition ranks small parties and personalities who had previously left different opposition parties, particularly those that were part of the former regime. In this way, they have created an interest network that formally ideologically covers most of the political spectrum – from the central right to the far left – leading to the conclusion that ideology is of minimal importance. Although the SNS has had a comfortable majority in all the elections since 2014, it has always taken the Socialist Party as its main coalition partner in order to be able to share responsibility with them.
- **decreasing freedom of expression and rising clientelism in media.** According to the Freedom House Nations in Transit and Reporters Without Borders annual reports, Serbia was among the countries with the largest drop regarding media freedom in 2016: it dropped by four points, and 13 positions respectively compared to 2015. Freedom House particularly emphasised Vučić's propensity for attacking and discrediting independent media through the pro-government tabloids, especially *Informer*, as well as groundlessly accusing critical journalists of connections with the mafia or collaboration with foreign intelligence services. In addition, the report also pointed out an increased government campaign of discrediting media, and purging staff in several media outlets, particularly in public TV station, as well as Radio Television of Vojvodina, after the Serbian Progressive Party won the provincial elections.

13 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29663318.html>

14 <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/04/04/benefits-of-serbia-s-lavish-investor-subsidies-queried-04-01-2016/>

15 Serbia's Judges and Prosecutors: The Long Road to Independent Self-Governance, International Commission of Jurists, 2015

The aforementioned relevant international reports confirmed a deteriorating freedom of expression situation in Serbia: regular pressure and influence on editorial policy exerted by powerful people close to the regime; an ongoing limitation and marginalisation of public dialogue on the most important issues; the elimination of voices critical of the government from mainstream media; and tabloid-orchestrated negative campaigns against those considered a threat to Vučić and his party. The findings of these reports were also echoed by the results of the clientelism index survey for 2015 and 2016 presented by the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina and the Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights (YUCOM). According to these reports, following a significant deterioration on the clientelism index scale for 2015, Serbia continued to stagnate. The Clientelism Index is based on measuring political influence on the media and legislative and regulatory institutions, transparency of ownership, media financing, media freedom and respect for rights. Bearing in mind the small number of media outlets in Serbia that are economically viable, a particularly important media financing problem and an instrument of pressure and influence, is related to advertising. On the one hand, publicly owned companies, which are the largest advertisers, have stopped advertising in media critical of the government. On the other hand, a non-transparent influence on the media is facilitated by the fact that it is impossible to determine amounts spent on advertising, since this issue is not regulated by the Law on Advertising.

An illustrative example of an unacceptable government influence on media is the case of the national news agency, Tanjug, which is still operational despite the legally binding decision to close it on 31 October, 2015. To a great extent, the state-owned agency has been used as a government propaganda tool.

Last but not least, an important factor contributing to the deteriorating situation with the media is the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), established by the Law on Electronic Media, which has not been fulfilling the role of an independent regulatory agency which should contribute to the preservation, protection and development of freedom of opinion and expression. Instead, REM has been politically instrumentalised, and has not only avoided using its legal means to punish various violations of the Law by the pro-regime media, but has also refrained from publishing official documents aiming at ensuring transparency in the monitoring process.

- **periodic fuelling of tensions in the region and creating an image of regional stability guarantor.** With the aim of reconfirming his “protector of the nation” credentials and the maintaining support of nationalist voters, Vučić has periodically created or embraced existing tensions in the region to his political advantage. The two most notable examples in this period involved Croatia and Kosovo. The first case was related to the consequences of the 2015 refugee crisis which provoked a high level of disagreement between Serbia and Croatia over the transit of refugees, which ended in mutually introduced sanctions. The second high tension crisis was provoked by the Serbian authority's intent in January 2017 to send a train painted with a giant Serbian flag and bearing the words “Kosovo is Serbia” in 21 different languages, including Albanian, to a Serb-run part of the town of Kosovska Mitrovica in north Kosovo. In such situations, besides reaffirming his nationalistic credentials, Vučić also intended to project abroad the image of a responsible statesman and guarantor of regional stability by contributing to lowering tensions and peacefully resolving conflicts, many of which he was an architect of. In line with that, Vučić attended the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre and, a few months later, in November 2015, the Serbian Government decided to donate €5 million to this town in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- **creating an atmosphere of a state of emergency.** In this three-year period, inspired by Vučić's frequent public statements portraying himself as a martyr, sacrificing everything for the benefit of Serbia, pro-government media regularly set out to create an impression not only of continuing conspiracies directed at illegally overthrowing Vučić, but also that his life was under threat. Consequently, stories that aimed to confirm such intentions received wide media coverage. The most prominent case of such behaviour in 2015 was the warning that a coup d'état would take place if Vučić travelled to China in November that year. The warning was issued by the Editor-in-Chief of the most popular daily tabloid *Informer* on the most-watched TV station in Serbia, TV Pink: the two strongest pro-government propaganda tools. The second case occurred in October 2016, when a large cache of weapons was found close to Vučić's family house on the outskirts of Belgrade. Neither case, just like many others that preceded and followed, resulted in any legal conclusion.
- **weakening the opposition and presenting them as an uncredible or dangerous alternative.** Despite the continuous efforts to weaken, split and marginalise the political opposition, particularly the previously ruling Democratic Party, the 2016 election brought several unpleasant surprises for Vučić. Due to the unexpected entry of several opposition lists into Parliament, including two new political organizations who entered the National Assembly for the first time (the then socio-liberal and pro-EU Enough is Enough, and clerical and traditionalist Dveri), the number of SNS-led coalition MPs decreased, but the absolute majority was preserved. At the same time, the re-entry of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party into Parliament, led by the recently released convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj, as the strongest opposition party, was supposed to create an image of Vučić and his allies as the only guarantors of internal and regional stability, moderation and Serbia's European path, as well as to serve as a warning of who might represent the strongest political alternative.
- **unlevel electoral playing field.** Prominent Serbian and international organisations dealing with the electoral process have constantly reported on unfair electoral conditions, i.e.

the predominant position of Vučić and his party. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) reports on the early 2016 parliamentary election and 2017 Presidential election pointed out several distortions of the electoral process: biased media coverage; the lack of financial and editorial independence of public broadcasters; the absence of an effective mechanism for monitoring media conduct during the campaign; the undue advantage of incumbency; the blurred distinction between state and party activities; the accuracy of voter lists; pressure exerted on voters, particularly employees of state or state-affiliated institutions, etc.

- **securing associates' loyalty.** Vučić has set about securing the loyalty both of his own and his coalition parties' members (especially high-ranking) not only by granting them important government-related positions, and other privileges, but also by protecting them from the just outrage of the public and not letting them down even when they have made serious mistakes, violated the law and damaged the regime's reputation considerably. An illustrative example is the case of the Defence Minister Bratislav Gašić who was forced to resign over his sexist insult directed to a female journalist. His statement that he likes female journalists who "get down on their knees easily" sparked anger, particularly among media professionals. However, a little over a year later, Gašić was appointed Director of the Security Information Agency (BIA).
- **politically pacifying and marginalising the sitting President Tomislav Nikolić.** Vučić eliminated the possible threat of splitting his party and diminishing the share of votes in the upcoming Presidential election after making a deal with the sitting President and former SNS leader Tomislav Nikolić on pulling out of his candidacy for a second term. The price for reaching the deal was relatively low for Vučić: continued occupancy of the Presidential villa and the position of head of the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China for Nikolić.
- **tolerating attacks on the civil sector.** Even though Vučić and the Serbian authorities restrained themselves from attacking the civil sector, the extreme right groups' attacks on prominent NGOs and their leaders were met by weak or no reaction from the regime. It created the impression that, even if the SNS was not directly behind such assaults, the authorities at least tolerated them. Such an approach was particularly visible when, in 2014, an extremely nationalistic organisation Naši (Ours) published a list of 30 public figures, labelling them traitors and the greatest haters of the Serb people, including a significant number of leaders of the most prominent civil sector organisations. In 2017, the leader of this far right group was acquitted for publishing the "Traitor" list.¹⁶

2017-2020 (TAKING FULL CONTROL)

The third phase of Aleksandar Vučić's rule began on 31 May, 2017 when he was sworn in as the new President after being elected in the first round of the April election. Even though, according to the Constitution, the President's powers are mostly ceremonial, Vučić decided to assume the head of state position in order to draw additional legitimacy from being directly elected, particularly in the first round. Having established different strong and efficient instruments for rule, he was aware that the centre of power would shift with him no matter what position he formally held.

This phase was mainly marked by the long-lasting weekly anti-government protests "1 of 5 million" triggered by the 23 November, 2018, attack on an opposition leader, Borko Stefanović, who was assaulted by a group of hooded men and beaten up before an opposition gathering in Kruševac, one of the major cities in central Serbia. Stefanović was hospitalised after receiving severe head injuries caused by the metal crowbar he was hit with. The attack was just an immediate cause for organising the protests around Serbia, but the underlying reason was citizens' deeply ingrained frustration with the regime's increasingly authoritarian nature.

In this period, Vučić tightened his grip on power in the following ways:

- **continued the weakening of Parliament.** The ruling coalition used their overwhelming majority in Parliament to curb legislative debate, particularly by the extensive use of urgent procedures (frequently without holding the required public hearings), and practices of filibustering, as well as by undermining Parliament's oversight of the executive. These ruling coalition parliamentary malpractices found particular place in the European Commission Progress Reports for 2019 and 2020. An illustration of the dominant position of the government over Parliament was also the fact that approximately 90% of the legislative initiatives that were discussed in the plenary sessions came from the executive.
- **installing an openly gay technocrat as Prime Minister.** Vučić chose Ana Brnabić, Minister of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, to be his successor as Prime Minister. This move brought him two major benefits. First, by appointing a person without political clout to the formally most powerful position in the country, he made her entirely dependent on his support and thus prevented any potential challenge in the future. Second, having a female, openly gay Prime Minister brought significant positive attention in world's leading media, presenting Serbia and its regime as highly progressive, with the aim of securing the continuation of Western governments' political support.
- **consolidating power in Belgrade after a decisive SNS victory in the 2018 elections.** In the 2018 elections in the capital, on the back of electoral promises on capital infra-

16 <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/11/07/serbian-right-extremist-acquitted-for-publishing-traitors-list-11-07-2017/>

structure, such as building a metro system and beginning the construction of the Belgrade Waterfront, the SNS and its coalition partners resisted the challenge of the mostly united opposition, and maintained an absolute majority in the City Assembly. This allowed the regime to continue using vast local resources, particularly for financing problematic infrastructure projects that were well received by their supporters.

- **increased attacks on independent journalist and tightening control over media.** In this period the situation relating to the freedom of expression worsened so much that in October 2018 a coalition of five Serbian media associations sent a letter to the international community expressing their concerns about the situation.¹⁷ The letter particularly pointed to the increasing pressure on media: mounting threats; increased surveillance; administrative harassment; attacks against property; as well as abuses by the judiciary. The association singled out administrative pressures aimed at suppressing media independence and endangering their very existence, mostly at the local level, through draconian penalties on media critical of the Government, issued by politically controlled inspections. The most illustrative were the cases of the weekly *Vranjske*, as well as the journals *Kikindske* and *Južne Vesti*. The 2018 European Commission Progress Report confirmed these allegations, clearly denouncing the threats, intimidation and violence against journalists in Serbia. Less than two months after the letter was sent, the house of Milan Jovanović, a journalist critical of the local government in one of Belgrade's suburban municipalities, was burnt to the ground. To make matters worse, the journalist was sleeping in the house when the arson happened, and he escaped almost certain death only thanks to his wife. In addition, just a couple of weeks later, unidentified men tried to break into the apartment he was forced to move to. This case still awaits legal closure.

Serbian media associations also concluded that during the SNS regime the media network increasingly became the subject of a disruptive state monopoly hindering any possibility of creating a healthier publishing environment. They pointed to both the shady and arbitrary redistribution of public funds to government media, and the illegal financing of some of the most influential publishers at state level. A problem that particularly escalated in this period was the use of public funds to purchase private media and place them under government control. The most drastic case was the purchase by the Kopernikus Corporation – a company with links to the SNS – of two TV stations with national frequencies (Prva and O2) after it had sold its own cable operator to Telekom Serbia, the state-owned telecommunications company, for almost €200 million. Experts also alleged that Telekom Serbia overpaid in buying Kopernikus. In this manner, according to media associations, a failed privatisation process contributed to the

consolidation of a party media system controlled by the ruling SNS, a system which regularly violates the Serbian Journalists' Code.

- In this period, fake news also grew in intensity: in 2018 alone more than 700 fake news stories were published on the front pages of the pro-regime newspapers.¹⁸ Moreover, five TV stations with national outreach have been utilised as the Vučić regime's propaganda tool, impeding any possibility of presenting opposing views and ideas to the Serbian public. The most illustrative example of such an approach is the fact that, since 2012, Vučić has not participated in a single political debate, including during pre-election periods.
- **increased political instrumentalisation of hooligans and criminal groups.** In Serbia there is a legacy of government tolerance towards the hooligans and criminal groups they are frequently linked to, as well as their political instrumentalisation. In the 1990s, during the wars that accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia, hooligans filled the ranks of paramilitary forces, particularly the "Tigers" militia, whose leader was Željko Ražnatović Arkan, a notorious criminal with strong ties to the security forces, and a leader of the largest group of FC Red Star supporters. In the aftermath of the Slobodan Milošević regime, the hooligans also took a leading role in violent protests against the arrest of war criminals, LGBT rights and Kosovo's independence. However, since the Serbian Progressive Party came to power, the relationship between the state apparatus and hooligan groups has been elevated to a whole new level. It took the form of a working arrangement according to which hooligans were allowed to conduct their frequently illicit businesses without major disruptions in exchange for their cooperative attitude towards authorities, especially in exerting pressure on political opponents. As an illustration of this new cosy relationship, analysts particularly point to the alleged connections of a notorious football fan group the Janissaries (Janjičari) not only with private security agencies, but also with state officials including the Serbian government Secretary General.¹⁹ According to Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) findings, some members of the Janissaries acted as security guards in front of the Serbian Parliament confronting citizens who demonstrated against Vučić during the President's swearing-in ceremony. In addition, Vučić's son Danilo has frequently been spotted in the company of this group's leaders.

Such tolerant behaviour towards criminal groups by the government was epitomised in Vučić's 2016 statement implying that the state was practically powerless to defeat the violent football supporter groups, prompting both the EU and the United States to repeatedly urge authorities to step up their fight against the criminal underworld. At the same time, the Overseas Security Advisory Council sin-

17 <https://safejournalists.net/serbian-media-coalition-alerts-international-community/>

18 <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/etika/vise-od-700-lazi-na-naslovnim-stranama-tri-tabloida-u-2018-godini/>

19 <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/22/foul-play-serbias-football-hooligans-get-down-to-business/>

gled out large numbers of “sports fan clubs” as frequently having very strong ties not only to criminal, right-wing, and ultranationalist organisations, but also to Serbia’s political structures.

- **projecting an image of military might.** Bearing in mind the consistently high popularity of the army in the polls, Vučić decided to further invest in the creation of an image of restored Serbian military might in accordance with the proclaimed security policy of neutrality. Accordingly, the 2019 budget for the army was 50% larger than that of 2018, encompassing modernising and equipping the military. By way of catering to strong pro-Russian feelings, Vučić also arranged the acquisition of 6 used MIG-29 fighters in 2017 which were presented as a Russian donation, but were in fact paid for. The purchase also fitted into the intention of creating an impression that Serbia is a dominant regional military power.
- **securing the loyalty of the Serbian Orthodox Church.** Taking into account that the Serbian Orthodox Church is traditionally one of the most respected institutions in the country, and its possible resistance to an agreed solution to the highly sensitive Kosovo issue, Vučić increased his efforts to create closer ties with the Church hierarchy, particularly with the Patriarch. In order to secure their loyalty and strengthen his legitimacy, he both increased government donations to the Church, and provided its leaders with the opportunity to conduct various lucrative businesses. Among the donations, a €43 million investment in the Saint Sava Temple in Belgrade (the biggest Orthodox Church in the Balkans) in the period 2017 – 2020 stands out. By way of returning these favours, Patriarch Irinej presented Vučić with the Church’s highest award for his service and his “great deeds” for Serbia and Kosovo in October 2019. In addition, Vučić regularly received Patriarch Irinej’s support in politically sensitive moments, for example during the long-lasting weekly “1 of 5 million” anti-government protests.
- **postponing judicial and constitutional reform.** According to the Serbian Constitution, Parliament has a major role in the election of judicial office holders. Such a model, as the Venice Commission stated in 2007, was “a recipe for the politicisation of the judiciary” providing a huge temptation for the governing majority to exert pressure on judges and prosecutors. This pressure was present in the period before 2012, but it significantly increased after the SNS came to power, particularly since 2014 when the party secured an absolute parliamentary majority. By way of reacting to such developments, as a precondition for European integration, the EU requested an amendment of the Constitution aimed at securing the depoliticisation, increased autonomy and independence of the judiciary. Responding to this request, in 2016 the Serbian Government, despite not having the constitutional authority to do so, proposed a constitutional amendment, planning to complete the constitutional reform in 2017, after its confirmation in a

referendum. However, the process has been stalled since November 2018 after legal experts, some European partners and the opposition labelled the proposed constitutional amendment as a serious step backwards that would only lead to the parliamentary majority’s complete control over the judiciary.

Besides the aforementioned ways of keeping pressure on the judiciary, one of the most frequent instruments of exercising influence on them that intensified in this period were public comments on court decisions by high officials, despite existing codes on permitted limits in commenting on judicial decisions and procedures.

- **intensified attacks on the civil sector and creating a parallel version under the regime’s control.** In this period pressures on the civil sector evolved from the Government tolerating attacks on civic leaders by marginal far-right groups into open accusations both by some officials and the tabloids under the regime’s control of being foreign agents and anti-Serbian traitors who threaten national security by seeking “security-sensitive information”. This deteriorating situation was confirmed in the 2019 European Commission report on Serbia, which stated that CSOs and human rights defenders operated in “an environment not open to criticism, with the authorities making negative statements, echoed by the media, on civil society in general and on the funding of certain associations in particular. Harsh criticism against human rights defenders has continued in tabloid newspapers”. Such worrying developments resulted in the creation of the Three Freedoms platform in April 2019, joined by 20 Serbian NGOs aiming to combat attacks and fake news about their activities, as well as to increase influence on the authorities on topics related to the civil sector.

Along with stepping up attacks on the civil sector, the Government launched a process of creating an entire parallel public scene – founding and supporting not only government organised quasi-nongovernmental organisations (GONGOs), modelled on existing ones, but also web portals, institutes, and pro-regime analysts and commentators who regularly appear in the pro-regime media. Most of them are established as CSOs, intentionally causing confusion since they frequently have names similar to the names of authentic NGOs. The goal of such organisations is to shape public opinion, provide legitimacy for certain government policies and defend office holders from criticism, particularly through delegitimising their critics. The issue of NGOs closely linked to authorities was well analysed in a report on the State of Democracy in Serbia, published by the Centre for Contemporary Politics in 2020.²⁰ At the same time, the narrowing space for the civil sector was also observed by international networks of CSOs, such as CIVICUS, which ranked Serbia among the countries with the most serious obstacles to the free development of NGOs in the Balkans.

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20 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/12-Shadow-Report-State-of-democracy-in-Serbia-2020.pdf>

- **stepping up attacks on the opposition.** Several years of continuous attacks on political opponents by high officials and, particularly, by pro-government tabloids, had created an atmosphere conducive to violence in which the critics of the regime became a legitimate target. The reactions of Vučić and other officials to some statements by opposition leaders had clearly illustrated that there was no serious intention of establishing a dialogue with political opponents, which led to the continuing increase of societal tensions. Such tension hit the roof after the aforementioned bloody November 2018 attack on Borko Stefanović, which led to the long-lasting “1 of 5 Million” protest. Even after that attack, the government continued to accuse the opposition of inciting violence and rejecting dialogue. Such rhetoric, aimed at portraying the opposition as irresponsible and as an enemy, led to an increase in politically motivated violence, committed mostly by supporters of the regime.

While the attack on Stefanović was the most visible, it was only one in a series of incidents. The most frequent victims of the politically motivated violence were local opposition activists in smaller towns. The violence would peak before local elections when intimidation tactics were used on several opposition candidates and voters. Opposition campaign events were frequently disrupted by groups of thugs, travelling in unmarked black cars, who also harassed opposition activists. In some cases, as in a Belgrade suburb, the property of opposition parties was destroyed, and some activists beaten. The perpetrators in such cases were rarely identified or caught.

The Association of Free Councillors, which gathers data from opposition members of the municipal councils on violent acts committed by the authorities, sent a letter to Vučić in 2019, warning him that he had “sown hatred very deeply” by labelling those critical of the regime as traitors, and that it was hard to control those who believed such claims.

The authorities also made extensive use of social networks, particularly Twitter, to constantly attack opposition politicians and others critical of the regime. As a result, in March 2020, Twitter announced a shutdown of accounts targeting Serbian Twitter users: “Twitter reported that this network—consisting of approximately 8,500 accounts and more than 43 million tweets—acted in concert to cheerlead for President Aleksandar Vučić and his party, to attack his opponents, and to boost the popularity and visibility of other content serving these ends.”²¹

- **changing electoral rules in an election year.** Faced with the opposition’s looming threat of an election boycott, the regime, contrary to international commitments and good practices, decided just a few months before the election was to be held to lower the threshold for entering Parlia-

ment from 5% to 3% of the vote. The idea behind this move was to motivate smaller opposition parties, who were still considering the boycott, to participate in the election, and to thereby create an impression of pluralism.

- **strengthening clientelism.** Many examples of a growing patronage network, frequently involving high officials’ relatives, through which Vučić was returning favours and buying the loyalty of his close associates, were revealed in this period. The most serious case was the revelation that in a two year period after Ana Brnabić became Prime Minister the company in which her brother serves as a Director (the Serbian branch of the Polish IT company Aseko) earned €40 million just from deals with government related entities. Another prominent case was that of the Defence Minister’s father, who was involved in mediating weapon sales to Saudi Arabia.²²

In the first half of 2020, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) published a report on the NITES group, where one of the directors was the husband of Justice Minister Nela Kuburović, and brother of Dr Darija Kisić Tepavčević, who was later to become Minister of Social Affairs. According to BIRN, the NITES group was granted 27 contracts with publicly owned companies and Ministries worth approximately €26.8 million between 2013 and 2020. A particularly problematic case in this period was that of Slobodan Tešić, a major SNS donor, who had been a privileged arms dealer despite the fact that in 2017 the US blacklisted him as a human rights abuser and corrupt actor, calling him “one of the biggest arms dealers in the Balkans”. Furthermore, several lucrative infrastructure contracts were also granted to companies linked to Zvonko Veselinović and Milan Radoičić, businessmen from northern Kosovo who had been instrumental in politically organising and maintaining Belgrade’s influence on Kosovo Serbs. In 2019 they were tried in Serbia – but acquitted – for the illegal excavation of gravel and theft of leased lorries. At the same time, Priština suspected them of taking part in the assassination of Oliver Ivanović, a Kosovo Serb opposition political leader, in January 2018.

21 “Fighting Like a Lion for Serbia”: An Analysis of Government-Linked Influence Operations in Serbia, Daniel Bush, Stanford Internet Observatory, 2020 https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/serbia_march_twitter.pdf

22 <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/22/serbian-minister-s-father-mediated-weapon-sales-to-saudis-11-22-2018/>

2020 - (COVID-19 PHASE)

The ongoing, fourth phase of Vučić's rule was marked by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the regular June 2020 parliamentary elections, and the consequences of both. The pandemic caught the government unprepared, as was reflected in the confusing, ad-hoc, rapidly changing measures which were hard to understand and follow. COVID-19 was used as an excuse for the further concentration and unconstitutional taking of power. Such developments prompted 21 MEPs to sign a letter to Oliver Varhelyi, EU Enlargement Commissioner, in April 2020, pointing out the "extremely serious" situation in Serbia in regard to constitutional and human rights.

In the first months after the outbreak of the pandemic, the Vučić regime took the following measures:

- **declared a state of emergency in the absence of a sitting parliament.** Contrary to the Constitution, five days before the epidemic was declared, the government declared an open-ended state of emergency that lasted 45 days. Parliament was prevented from convening on the basis of a Government Decree that forbade gatherings of more than 100 people. The official reason for declaring the state of emergency was to tackle the coronavirus pandemic, but, in reality, the main motive for adopting such a measure was to impede the freedom of expression and movement.
- **instilling fear with the aim of securing citizens' obedience.** At the beginning of the state of emergency, the government deployed the military in the surroundings of hospitals, a measure more compatible with a state of war than a pandemic. At the same time, and without apparent reason, police vehicles began using rotary lights and sirens. Since then, it has become police routine to patrol the Serbian road network with rotary lights on, as if there were imminent danger of some sort of terrorist attack.
- **violation of the right to a fair trial.** According to a government decree, fast-track Skype trials were organised not only for those who violated curfew provisions, but were expended to all cases. Hundreds of citizens who returned to Serbia just before and after the declaration of a state of emergency were detained for violating the required 14-day/28-day self-isolation period, even though they were never properly notified.
- **transferring responsibility by instilling social divisions.** Faced with the worsening pandemic situation, and attempting to avoid their own responsibility, Vučić and some government officials periodically accused different social groups of being responsible for spreading the disease (citizens returning from abroad, retired people, dog owners, parents taking their children outdoors, etc.). In this fashion, the authorities tried to turn citizens against each other and shift blame for the situation to certain groups.
- **attempting to control media and information flow.** Faced with the deteriorating health situation and the obvious weaknesses in the response to the pandemic, the authorities tried to introduce censorship by adopting the short-lived Government decree on the centralisation of information on COVID-19, and forbidding journalists to participate in the Crisis Team's daily press conferences. In this period, some journalists, as well as those who wrote critical comments on social networks, were prosecuted. The decree was withdrawn thanks to the pressure exerted by international organisations, particularly the OSCE, which highlighted that it breached international human rights standards on freedom of expression.
- **reinforcing the portrayal of a saviour image.** From the very beginning of the pandemic, Vučić took a leading role in efforts to tackle the disease. He tried to portray himself as a tireless fighter for citizens' health not only by creating the impression that he personally had secured respirators and other necessary medical equipment, and had contributed to constructing COVID hospitals, but also by having invited Serbian physicians and medical staff residing abroad to return to Serbia and help the efforts to fight the pandemic. The highlight of this campaign was when he personally greeted the Chinese aeroplane and delegation that brought medical equipment to Serbia and kissed the Chinese flag.
- **organising and overwhelmingly winning a parliamentary election during the pandemic.** After declaring victory over the pandemic in early May, the regular parliamentary election – boycotted by the majority of the opposition parties due to the unfair conditions – was held on June 21, after a two-month delay. Despite lowering the threshold, no opposition party that participated in the election, apart from a few MPs representing national minorities, succeeded in winning parliamentary seats. Thus, Vučić's ruling coalition ended up with more than 90% of MPs, resulting in a legislature with no pluralism or accountability.
- **continuing irregularities in the election process.** Despite facing no serious challenge in the election, due to the boycott by the major opposition parties, the authorities continued heavily tilting the election process to their advantage. The irregularity of the process was confirmed by the ODIHR in its Special Election Assessment Mission Final Report, in which the OSCE particularly pointed out the deficiencies of "the legal framework, voter registration, misuse of administrative resources and abuse of office, pressure on voters, campaign finance, the media, the adjudication of election disputes, and the publication of polling station results protocols".²³ As the most flagrant examples of violating the principles of free and fair elections, ODIHR mentioned Vučić's unparalleled public exposure, without clear differentiation of his head of state and party leader roles; pressure on voters, especially public sector employees; the practice of using parallel voter lists to track voters on election day; carousel voting; unofficial voter lists

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23 ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission Final Report, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/3/466026.pdf>

maintained by polling board members; vote buying, and pressure on voters to vote for certain candidates; the unbalanced media scene with most TV channels with national coverage and most newspapers promoting government policies, attacks and pressure on journalists and media outlets; and the passiveness of the regulatory bodies.

Immediately after the election, which failed to provide even a semblance of pluralism in Parliament, Vučić announced that the next election should be held early. This opened space for the initiation of an interparty dialogue process on election conditions facilitated by the European Parliament with the aim of avoiding another boycott and transferring rising societal tensions into Parliament. The dialogue ended on 18 September, 2021 leaving the opposition deeply dissatisfied which could result in another election boycott.

In the period after the election, the governmental response to the pandemic remained an overarching political issue. This response, like some previous measures and policies, acquired some new forms:

- **the race for the vaccines.** Vučić's dominant role in tackling the pandemic continued and turned into a race to acquire vaccines that were in limited supply. Thanks to the close relations Serbia had developed with China, primarily through generously opening the country's door to a heavy Chinese economic presence, the Serbian Government succeeded in securing large numbers of Chinese Sino-pharm vaccines. At the same time, the government also acquired a significant number of Sputnik, Pfizer and Astra Zeneca vaccines. Since many countries, not only in the region but in Europe and worldwide, struggled to acquire any vaccines in this period, the ability to do so created the perception of the success of Vučić's leadership, one that was skilfully nurtured in the pro-regime media.
- **financial support and incentives for vaccination.** Faced with citizens' reluctance to get vaccinated, the government introduced financial incentives in order to increase the vaccination rate. Furthermore, due to the economic consequences of the pandemic, financial support was periodically given both to the whole population, and to particular groups (retired people, entrepreneurs and the unemployed).
- **vaccine diplomacy.** Due to some citizens' reluctance to get vaccinated, after acquiring large quantities of vaccines, the authorities faced the situation that a number of them could expire. Vučić turned this situation into his advantage by allowing citizens from the region to get vaccinated in Serbia, as well as by transferring some to neighbouring countries. This gesture was perceived as very generous and significantly increased Vučić's standing in the region.
- **increasing reliance on nationalism.** Facing rising societal tensions and a deteriorating economic situation, Vučić decided to play the nationalism card more frequently, to both stabilise his base and divert attention from other mounting issues. Two events that stood out in 2021 were the unveiling of the 36m high monument to Stefan Nemanja, the founder of the Serbian medieval dynasty, in Belgrade, and the introduction of a new national holiday on September 15, 2021 – Serbian Unity, Freedom, and National Flag Day – which was celebrated by demonstrating military might and bringing together the most prominent officials and public figures of Serbian origin, like the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik. In the last few years, after overcoming initial distrust, Vučić has developed close relations with Dodik, including granting lucrative infrastructure projects to companies from the Republika Srpska that are allegedly linked to the Bosnian Serb leader and his family.
- **criminalisation of civil society.** The regime's relations with the civil sector have evolved from regular attacks to linking it to criminal circles and accusing some CSOs of being involved in an attempted coup and the attempted murder of Vučić. Accordingly, the Ministry of Finance's Directorate for the Prevention of Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism, created a list of 20 individuals and 37 NGOs, all critical of the government, requesting access to their banking data. The intent behind such behaviour was to create an impression that civil society organisations operate non-transparently, to discredit them, and to marginalise their influence.
- **deteriorating media situation.** In the period 2016 – 2021 Serbia fell 34 places on the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) media freedom ranking list, and currently ranks 93rd. In their 2020 report, RSF stated that Serbia had become "a country where it is often dangerous to be a journalist and where fake news is gaining in visibility and popularity at an alarming rate." This worrying trend continued in 2021 with an increased number of attacks on journalists – in the first half of the year alone the Public Prosecutor presented 46 such cases, while in the whole of 2020 it presented just 56.
- **continued periodic demonstration of the seemingly uncompromising fight against organised crime.** Since 2012, when the SNS came to power, the regime has periodically organised massive police operations against criminal groups with the aim of demonstrating their resolute stance against organised crime. The last cases of such nature were the arrests and indictment of the organised crime group headed by Veljko Belivuk in February and August 2021 respectively. Thirty-one members of the crime group, nicknamed the Janissaries, were charged with associating to commit crimes, five murders, drug and firearms trafficking, a rape and a kidnapping. The Belivuk group case has been particularly sensitive for the authorities since the group has a reputation of having high-ranking political connections. Consequently, Vučić and his highest officials launched a strong and long-term campaign in the pro-regime media seeking to deny the regime's connections with the criminal underworld and reinforcing their image as staunch fighters against organised crime.

- **moderating anti-COVID 19 measures.** After the violent anti-lockdown protests in July 2020, the government have been applying mild anti-pandemic policies. Such an approach has been reinforced by the population giving priority to the economy over health issues, as well as by strong popular scepticism about the seriousness of the pandemic.
- **creating the image of a defender of public interest and prevailing traditional values.** In an attempt to balance his proclaimed pro-EU orientation and openness to foreign investment with growing popular discontent regarding environmentally detrimental projects and legislation contrary to dominant traditional societal values, Vučić opted to postpone some of them by refusing to sign the related controversial legislation, or publicly requesting their withdrawal. By doing so, he intended to position and present himself as a defender of public interest and traditional values, the latter particularly ingrained in the texture of his party voting base. This new tendency became apparent in 2021 in four important cases: refusing to sign the law on same-sex unions; vetoing the Water Law, which had been criticised for introducing no-bid agreements for the lease of public waterside land for construction projects, as well as for floating nightclubs in Belgrade; the decision that the faith of probably the most controversial lithium exploitation 'Jadar' project by Rio Tinto will be decided in a referendum either at the national, or regional level; and finally, the withdrawal of the Draft Law on Internal Affairs, which would have introduced serious privacy infringements and special measures for protecting police officers, as well as the ability of the police force to "draft" into service special units deemed necessary if the need arises, which seems to be a backdoor to legalising criminal, hooligan and para-political organisations by giving them official status.
- **fuelling the perception of a recurring conspiracy against Vučić.** An interview with Saša Janković, former Ombudsman and the strongest opposition Presidential candidate in 2017, published in September 2021, in which he implied that some foreign Ambassadors had worked in cahoots with parts of the opposition to physically eliminate Vučić by provoking a heart attack, was used by the regime to reinforce the ever-present theme in the pro-government media of periodic conspiracies to overthrow and murder the President. Such reporting has been used both to rally support around the President under threat, and to further disqualify the opposition.

CONCLUSION

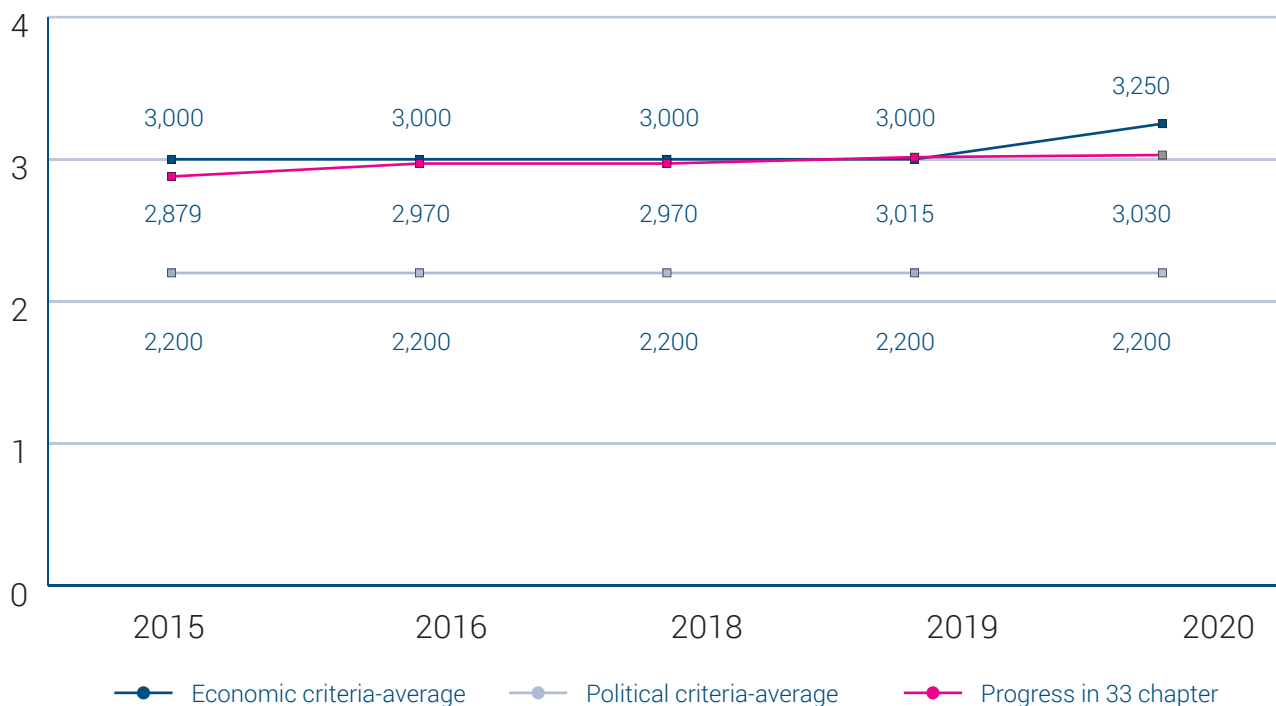
Since coming to power, Aleksandar Vučić has tirelessly conducted politics as if he is in a continuous election campaign, creating an impression of constant change, high energy and commitment to work. Periodic changes in the composition of the Government, the announcements of large investment and infrastructure projects, opening new production facilities, the seemingly relentless fight against corruption and organised crime, as well as frequent early elections, have also contributed to creating this image.

Besides having a decisive influence on the most popular media in Serbia and holding various instruments of power, Vučić's constantly growing authoritarian tendencies have also been facilitated by a weak and fragmented opposition, distrusted by citizens, which could neither efficiently counter detrimental policies, nor offer a coherent and attractive alternative, nor compete with the constant Western powers' tolerance for the regime's undemocratic practices. Last but not least, the skilfully crafted image of a statesman well-respected by world leaders (particularly in Russia and China), supported by a loyal media, combined with the perceived continued EU and Western support for the Serbian regime, have contributed to Vučić's permanent strong standing.

The growing authoritarianism in Serbia has been constantly illustrated and elaborated in the periodic reports of leading world organisations dealing with different issues related to democracy and the rule of law: Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, Transparency International, International Research & Exchanges Board, V-dem, etc. According to the V-dem Liberal Democracy Index, Serbia holds fourth place among the top ten autocratising countries in the world for the period 2009 – 2019. Serbia experienced a particularly sharp decline after 2017, falling from 91st to 117th place in only three years.

Reports published by the aforementioned and other international organisations, monitoring political or economic development, have been used by the European Commission in assessing the progress of candidate countries, including Serbia. In the 2014 – 2020 period, even the EC Progress Reports, which are usually more political, using rather diplomatic and technocratic language with the aim of not discouraging governments from the reform path even when they criticise them, clearly show that Serbia had been experiencing an overall stagnation in the accession process, and particularly lack of progress in political criteria. Due to these factors, in the last two years Serbia has opened no negotiation chapters, and it has opened only 18 and provisionally closed two since January 2014, when the accession negotiations began. Whether such a dire situation will change for the better in forthcoming years will depend both on the EU stance towards the Vučić regime, and the Serbian opposition's ability to create a strong, credible alternative that could represent a serious challenge.

Serbia's progress in preparation for EU membership according to the Copenhagen Criteria²⁴



24 Analysis of the European Union's Enlargement Policy and the Progress Made by the Republic of Serbia in the Accession Negotiation Process in the Period from 2014 to 2020, European Movement in Serbia, March 2021.

