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2025 Rule of Law Brief: Serbia

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This is part of an ongoing series analysis analysing rule of law progress made in EU enlargement countries.

EU enlargement has once again become a priority to the EU. This is driven by the current geopolitical situation, in which enlargement can be the antidote to Russian aggression. However, while the European Commission is pushing for enlargement, national capitals seem to be tapping the brakes. Serbia is a case in point. It has been negotiating accession to the EU since 2014, and, twelve years later, 22 negotiating chapters have been opened, of which two are provisionally closed. Momentum, however, has stalled. Persistent shortcomings in the rule of law, limited alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and only partial implementation of obligations in dialogue on normalisation with Kosovo continue to weigh heavily on Serbia's progress. Equally troubling is the country's failure to improve perceptions of corruption and to ensure transparent lobbying practices and robust regulation of revolving doors.

Here's a breakdown of Serbia's progress from the EU's 2025 annual Rule of Law Report.

? Category	Rule of Law 2025	Status
Corruption perceptions?	In the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, Serbia scores 35/100 and ranks 105th globally. This is the lowest score in the past five years.	?
Anti-corruption strategies?	The National Anti-Corruption Strategy for the period of 2024-2028 fails to address GRECO recommendations and has both insufficient budget and ineffective monitoring.	?
Strengthening the capacity of institutions and the legal framework to combat corruption?	The legal framework to fight corruption is broadly in place, difficulties arise in achieving a consistent record of investigations, indictments, and convictions in major corruption cases, there is a lack of follow-up on the Anti-Corruption Council's recommendations.	??

Track record for high level corruption?	The prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime lacks human resources and a proper mandate.	?
Ensuring transparent lobbying and regulating revolving doors?	The scope of the Law on lobbying is limited. No public record of lobbying activities.	??
Asset and interest disclosure?	The Law on Prevention of Corruption needs to be amended to broaden the definition of public official in line with GRECO recommendations. The advance publishing of the annual verification plan by the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption limits its effectiveness. There are limited human and technical resources of the Agency.	??
Whistleblower protection?	A whistleblower law exists but falls short of EU standards, leaving gaps in coverage (e.g., former staff, certain disclosures). Additionally, there is a lack of protection for unfounded reports and omitting guaranteed legal aid.	??
Addressing areas at high risk of corruption?	Public procurement is considered as a high-risk area for corruption (2024 Rule of Law Report). Exemptions to the Law on public procurement continued to be widely used, thereby circumventing its application. Oversight mechanisms are insufficient. In 2023, the value of procurement exempted from application of the Law on Public Procurement nearly reached the value of concluded public procurement contracts that were carried out through regular proceedings.	??

Key: *Green:* Good progress; *Yellow:* Limited progress; *Red:* No progress.

1. Snapshot

Concerns regarding prosecutorial autonomy and the conduct of criminal investigations have intensified. Political pressure and structural deficiencies continue to undermine the independence of the prosecution service. Public interventions by the President and senior government officials in ongoing investigations, particularly those led by the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime (TOK), have become commonplace. These interventions include criticism of judicial decisions, threats of removal, and narratives portraying sensitive investigations as "prosecutorial coups".

Media oversight is also under strain. The independent regulator for electronic media, the Council of Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), has become increasingly opaque and suffers from a lack of autonomy. This is due to a new statute allowing greater document secrecy, combined with irregularities in member appointments. This triggered public protests and contributed to the failure to appoint members to a fully functioning Council.

At the same time, civic space has narrowed. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and demonstrators have faced increased pressure, particularly in the aftermath of the Novi Sad's station canopy, which claimed 16 lives. The tragedy triggered sustained protests and intensified scrutiny of

government accountability.

2. 2024 – 2025 highlights

In July 2024, after five years [without an anti-corruption framework](#), Serbia adopted a National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2024-2028, alongside an accompanying Action Plan for 2024-2025. While this is a relevant step on paper, the real test lies in its implementation. Effective delivery of the current Action Plan, the timely adoption and implementation of the 2026-2028 Action Plan, backed by a coordination mechanism that can track progress and impact, are now essential. It remains important to align its implementation with GRECO recommendations.

Elsewhere, the trajectory has been less positive. The attacks against civil society, demonstrators and journalists in the context of the massive protests since November 2024 are a case in point. As the Novi Sad canopy collapse sparked massive protests, CSOs faced intensified verbal attacks and smear campaigns. Several incidents against demonstrators have been reported, including allegations of excessive force and arbitrary detention.

In January 2025, several foreign civil society activists, including some from EU Member States, were detained and expelled. In February 2025, police searches were conducted at the offices of four CSOs, which were not followed by judicial proceeding and were widely perceived as an act of pressure on civil society. On April 29 of last year, the European Court of Human Rights issued an interim measure regarding the alleged use of a sonic weapon for crowd control at Belgrade demonstrations on March 15. Journalists have likewise reported escalating threats, including alleged use of [spyware targeting journalists](#).

Media governance has further deteriorated. Serbia failed to meet the legal deadline for appointing the REM Council. Independent candidates and nominated organisations consequently withdrew from the procedure in mid-2025, citing procedural irregularities. The resulting deadlock has significantly weakened regulatory oversight of the media sector.

Legislative developments have also raised alarm. On 28 January 2026, the National Assembly of Serbia adopted a package of amendments to key justice laws under an urgent procedure. The changes took place without meaningful public debate or consultations with judges, prosecutors, the High Judicial Council, EU counterparts, or the Venice Commission, and ignored warnings from professional associations and civil society.

These changes increase the authority of court presidents over individual judges and reintroduce a stricter hierarchical structure within the prosecution service. In practice, it [weakens safeguards for](#)

prosecutorial autonomy at a time when investigations involving high-ranking officials are ongoing. Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos publicly **stated** that limiting judicial independence constitutes “a serious step back on Serbia’s EU path” and called for revision. Transparency Serbia similarly **warned** that reforms would reduce staff at the TOK and limit their effectiveness.

Similarly, Serbia’s civic space has changed. Since the onset of the Novi Sad protests in 2024, which have been ongoing, CSOs, have faced intensified verbal attacks and smear campaigns, including from senior officials and the President. This is particularly the case for CSOs working on rule of law. Concerns regarding the excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and lack of accountability related to protests have been echoed by the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Venice Commission, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Academic freedom has also come under pressure. As students have played a key role in the protests, participating academics faced salary reductions and an aggressive public rhetoric portraying them as “enemies of the state”.

3. Integrity system comparison

Issue	NIS finding	Commission narrative	Blind spot
Political pressure on anti-corruption bodies	“(…) In Serbia, selective decision making can also be noted, for example, in the agency’s avoidance of dealing with corruption allegations against high-level officials, and it’s becoming less visible and less critical of the government actions after 2018”.	“While the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption is tasked with monitoring its implementation, adequate coordination mechanisms, budgetary means, as well as an effective monitoring and evaluation system to track progress and impact should be put in place for its effective implementation”	Complacency of the agency dealing with allegations against the government and high-level officials is not mentioned/acknowledged
Whistleblower protection	“In Serbia, oversight duties are shared between several line-ministries, none of which is in charge of supervising whether cases reported by whistleblowers are properly dealt with”	“In practice, challenges remain with regard to oversight and the enforcement of whistleblowers’ protection against any form of retaliation”	Lack of follow-up on whistleblowing

National Assembly budget	“The parliamentary budget is insufficient for the efficient functioning of the legislature. (...) to carry out the work properly and is not being increased because the ruling majority is opposed, saying it is to save money”	Parliament’s effectiveness and oversight function continued to be hampered by the low frequency of sessions and the lack of genuine political debate.	The issue of the budget is not mentioned
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4. Spotlight issue – fundamental cluster

The independence of REM now stands at the centre of broader rule-of-law concerns. The integrity of the REM Council appointment process has been repeatedly called into question. The procedure is outlined in the 2023 Law on Electronic Media, which requires approval by the National Assembly (Parliament) for all appointments. Yet independent bodies responsible for nominating candidates have alleged numerous violations of legal requirements and manipulation by the government majority during the selection process. These concerns prompted withdrawals from the appointment process in January and June 2025.

A new attempt followed in November 2025, when the National Assembly appointed eight REM Council members but declined to vote on the ninth seat meant to represent national minorities. This move prompted criticism of obstruction and led to the resignation of four of the newly elected members. The European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), together with other CSOs, has warned that the deliberate exclusion of the minority representative constitutes another attempt to retain government influence over REM and to obstruct genuine media reform. The vote violated not only Serbia’s own media law, but also European standards set out in the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), which requires media regulators to be legally, functionally, and financially independent and appointed through fair, transparent and merit-based procedures.

5. Conclusion

The overall rule-of-law trend in Serbia is negative. Severe restrictions on civic space, including intimidation of civil society organisations, journalists and students, are unfolding alongside the further weakening of prosecutorial independence in the wake of the January 2026 amendments. At the same time, repeated irregularities and political obstruction around the REM Council appointment process continue to undermine media oversight. Taken together, these developments point to a broader pattern of backsliding in areas that are central to the fundamentals cluster, and reinforce concerns that reforms are largely superficial: advancing on paper without genuine respect

for the rule of law, accountability or democratic standards. As a result, Serbia is likely to face stronger scrutiny from EU institutions and continued stagnation in the enlargement process. In this context, closer monitoring and assessment are necessary, and the EU's political messaging should reflect the seriousness of the current deterioration.

Sources:

- [European Commission – Enlargement Package 2024 – Serbia Report 2024](#)
- [European Commission – Enlargement Package 2025 – Serbia Report 2025](#)
- [European Commission – Rule of Law Report 2024 – Country Chapter Serbia](#)
- [European Commission – Rule of Law Report 2025 – Country Chapter Serbia](#)
- [Transparency International Serbia – National Integrity System Assessment Serbia 2023](#)

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