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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

2025 Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Serbia

Accompanying the document

**Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the
European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions**

2025 Rule of Law Report The rule of law situation in the European Union

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ABSTRACT

Serbia continued the implementation of the constitutional reform to strengthen judicial independence. Political pressure on the judiciary and the prosecution services remained high, with little or no follow-up by the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Councils, the Government or Parliament. The transparency of the High Judicial Council needs to be further strengthened. Challenges remain to fill the considerable number of vacant judge and prosecutor positions, and the Constitutional Court annulled for the first time an appointment procedure in line with the new appeal procedure. An IT solution for the new prosecutorial case management system was finalised and is being implemented, while a new uniform and centralised case management system for courts is still lacking. On efficiency the overall picture continues to be positive for civil, commercial, and criminal cases, while serious challenges in the handling of administrative cases and constitutional complaints remain.

The National Anti-Corruption Strategy for the period of 2024-2028 was adopted in July 2024. Following the canopy collapse at Novi Sad railway station in November 2024, which prompted widespread public protests, authorities launched investigations into alleged corruption linked to the tragic incident which are yet to be completed. The Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime still has shortcomings, such as the insufficient regulation of its role and mandate in the legal framework. This risks inconsistent action in corruption investigations of the different specialised bodies. Establishing a robust track record of investigations, indictments, and final convictions in high-level corruption cases, including the seizure and confiscation of criminal assets, remains a challenge. The Anti-Corruption Council remained active in exposing and analysing cases of systemic corruption with limited follow-up by other institutions. The verification of asset declarations and conflict of interests continue to present weaknesses. The limited scope of the Law on lobbying undermines its effectiveness in practice and the Law on financing of political activities has several weaknesses. Challenges exist for whistleblowers exposing corruption. Exemptions to the Law on public procurement continued to be widely used to circumvent its application, and oversight mechanisms are insufficient.

Serbia adopted new media legislation in June 2025 to align further with the EU acquis and European standards. Serious concerns remain on the independence of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), and the delay and shortcomings in the selection procedure of a new REM Council undermine public trust in the process. The Press Council continues to effectively monitor print media's compliance with the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics. Issues of editorial autonomy and pluralism of public service media have become an increasing concern. Measures to increase transparency in ownership structures and public funding of the media sector have only been partially implemented. Journalists continue to face either frequent refusals by public bodies to disclose information of public importance or no response at all. The safety of journalists has become a source of increasing concern.

Parliament's effectiveness and oversight function continued to be hampered by the low frequency of sessions and the lack of genuine political debate. The process of public consultations still needs further strengthening. The fact that four vacant positions at the Constitutional Court remained unfilled is a concern. The three independent bodies working in the area of fundamental rights keep facing resource constraints and the follow-up to their recommendations remains inconsistent. Civil society organisations face increasing pressure. The impact of the Strategy and the Action Plan for creating a stimulating environment for the development of civil society has yet to be demonstrated.

I. JUSTICE SYSTEM¹

Independence

The level of perceived judicial independence in Serbia continues to be low among both the general public and companies. Overall, 30% of the general population and 36% of companies perceive the level of independence of courts and judges to be ‘fairly or very good’ in 2025². The perceived judicial independence among the general public has decreased in comparison with 2024 (36%), while among companies it has slightly increased in comparison with 2024 (34%)³.

The implementation of the constitutional reform to strengthen judicial independence continued. The adoption of the by-laws implementing the constitutional amendments is almost completed, with thirty-six out of thirty-seven planned by-laws adopted⁴. Only one by-law on the Rules of Court remains to be adopted⁵. The draft amendments to the Law on the Judicial Academy⁶ are yet to consider the recommendations of the December 2024 Venice Commission opinion, notably as regards the protection of the Academy from possible undue influence, in particular by removing the *ex officio* membership of the Minister of Justice in the Academy’s management board, and its recommendation to entrust the exclusive responsibility for entry into the judicial and prosecutorial professions to the Academy. The latter is important to ensure adequate pre-service training and a uniform examination process for all candidates⁷.

Political pressure on the judiciary and the prosecution services remained high, with little or no follow-up by the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Councils, the Government or Parliament. Government and public officials at the highest level, including the President, and members of Parliament continued to make undue public comments on ongoing investigations and court proceedings, including as regards the work of individual prosecutors and judges. These comments included criticism of judicial decisions and threats with removal addressed to judges and prosecutors⁸. While the associations of judges and prosecutors defended judges and prosecutors in some of these instances⁹, the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council have so far remained largely passive. In 2024, five new requests for protection from undue influence were submitted to the High Judicial Council and ten requests were submitted to the High

¹ An overview of the institutional framework for all four pillars can be found [here](#).

² Flash Eurobarometer 554 and 555 (2025). The level of perceived judicial independence is categorised as follows: very low (below 30% of respondents perceive judicial independence as fairly good and very good); low (between 30-39%), average (between 40-59%), high (between 60-75%), very high (above 75%).

³ Flash Eurobarometer 554 and 555 (2025); Flash Eurobarometer 540 and 541 (2024).

⁴ The details of the implementing laws were to be specified through the adoption of 37 by-laws by May 2024.

⁵ The outstanding by-law needs to be jointly adopted by the High Judicial Council and the Ministry of Justice. Serbian Government (2025), written input, p. 99.

⁶ The Government decided not to amend the Law on Seats and Territorial Jurisdiction of Courts.

⁷ Venice Commission (2024), p. 10.

⁸ On 22 March 2025, following the release from detention of protestors arrested for throwing eggs at SNS officials at a protest in Nis, the President stated that policemen and prosecutors who do not want to protect law and order will be exchanged. In response, over 500 prosecutors and judges signed a public statement denouncing the President’s comments and the ‘enslavement and humiliation of the judiciary’. N1 (2025b); Insajder (2025).

⁹ Judges Association of Serbia (2025); Association of Prosecutors of Serbia (2025).

Prosecutorial Council, which found undue influence had been exerted in certain cases¹⁰. Additionally, the Government and the Parliament have so far not acted in cases of undue public comments by their respective members, although such comments appear to be in contradiction with their code of conduct.

There are concerns with regard to prosecutorial autonomy, and the effectiveness and confidentiality of criminal investigations are hampered by shortcomings in law and practice. The launch of major initiatives by the prosecution, including an anti-corruption operation¹¹ and the search of the offices of four NGOs¹², which both took place in February, followed public statements made by high level public officials. This raised concerns with regard to prosecutorial autonomy, including by numerous stakeholders¹³. Furthermore, public comments made by officials continue to raise concerns about leakage of information by institutions involved in criminal proceedings, since some of these comments contained information from ongoing cases which was not in the public domain¹⁴. Several shortcomings in law and practice contribute to the risk of information leaks and hamper the effectiveness of investigations. In particular, the legal framework mandates the Security Information Agency to initiate criminal proceedings for certain types of offences with international elements and the Criminal Procedure Code provides that, in addition to the police, special investigative measures are carried out by the Security Information Agency and the Military Security Agency¹⁵. However, in practice, the police cannot intercept communications without the support of the Security Intelligence Agency¹⁶. In addition, the police still lacks sufficient operational autonomy from the Ministry of Interior¹⁷.

The transparency of the High Judicial Council needs to be further strengthened. While the rules of procedure of the High Judicial Council stipulate that its sessions are audio-visually recorded and that the recording is to be made public within 24 hours after the holding of the session¹⁸, the sessions are currently not recorded due to the lack of technical capabilities¹⁹. Conversely, sessions of the High Prosecutorial Council are recorded and livestreamed²⁰. While the launch of websites for both Councils in 2024

¹⁰ The High Judicial Council found two cases of undue influence. The High Prosecutorial Council found five cases of undue influence and communicated this via one general press statement. High Prosecutorial Council (2025). No other cases of undue influence were found.

¹¹ 153 individuals were arrested in February 2025 as part of anti-corruption operations. For further details see pillar II.

¹² In February 2025, at the initiative of the Special Anti-Corruption Department of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, four civil society organisation premises were searched by police. For further details see pillar IV.

¹³ Country visit Serbia.

¹⁴ In a TV broadcast on 9 March, the President directly referenced information obtained during the investigation. CRTA (2025).

¹⁵ Article 12 of the Law on the Security Intelligence Agency provides for certain competences with regard to criminal offences. The Criminal Procedure Code foresees the execution of all special evidentiary actions also for the Security Information Agency and Military Security Agency in Articles. 168, 173, 176, 180 and 185

¹⁶ Country visit Serbia.

¹⁷ Stakeholders shared concerns that as a result the police is prone to follow instructions from their hierarchy even though the law foresees the prosecution in the lead of investigations. Several stakeholders therefore proposed to establish a "prosecutorial police" within the specialised prosecution services. Country visit Serbia.

¹⁸ Article 29 of the Rules of Procedure of the High Judicial Council.

¹⁹ Serbian Government (2025), written input, p. 98.

²⁰ During the country visit, the High Judicial Council expressed its intention to follow the same process as the High Prosecutorial Council and livestream its sessions. Country visit Serbia.

increased transparency, some challenges remain on access to information and to ensure the systematic publication of documents²¹.

Challenges remain to fill the considerable number of vacant positions for judges and prosecutors and the Constitutional Court annulled for the first time an appointment procedure in line with the new appeal procedure. As of May 2025, out of 899 positions for prosecutors, 139 were vacant. The election of basic public prosecutors was delayed several times because of lack of *quorum* of the High Prosecutorial Council due to the absence of the Minister of Justice and some of the lay members²². In February 2025, the Council elected 51 basic public prosecutors at its fourth attempt. In September 2024, the Constitutional Court annulled for the first time an appointment procedure for prosecutors for the Belgrade Higher Prosecution Office based on the finding that the High Prosecutorial Council had breached the rules regarding the testing of the candidates. Until this point in time, the Constitutional Court had dismissed all appeals in the new procedure against appointment decisions for judges and prosecutors through inadmissibility decisions²³. As of May 2025, out of 3 117 positions for judges, 394 were vacant. To date, the Constitutional Court has dismissed 27 of the 33 appeals filed in 2024 through inadmissibility decisions. From January to May 2025, the High Judicial Council passed decisions on the appointment of 90 judges and announced a public competition to fill judge vacancies in 93 courts²⁴.

Quality

An IT solution for the new prosecutorial case management system was finalised and is being implemented, while a new uniform and centralised case management system for courts is still lacking. Development of the IT solution for the new case management system for prosecution offices (SAPO) was finalised in 2024. Its implementation began in 2025 with a staggered approach across prosecution offices aiming for completion at the end of 2025²⁵. The new uniform and centralised case management system for courts is still stalled due to a contractual dispute²⁶. While implementation of the ICT strategy is ongoing, it suffers from a lack of coordination and monitoring mechanisms which the Government plans to rectify with the formal adoption of a new strategy. While the number of cases for which legal aid has been granted has slightly increased between 2022-2023, there are shortcomings regarding the capacity of local self-government entities dealing with these requests and the lack of awareness of citizens about the existence of legal aid²⁷.

The implementation of the Human Resources Strategy is delayed, and shortcomings remain regarding the quality of judicial training. Due to the delay in the implementation of the Human Resources Strategy, the Ministry of Justice plans to amend

²¹ Centre for Judicial Research (2025).

²² Sessions of the High Prosecutorial Council to elect new prosecutors were therefore postponed on 24 December 2024, 24 January and 28 January 2025.

²³ The Constitutional Court found the assessment of the candidates included a special test for prosecutors for cybercrime, which was outside the scope of the selection procedure. Country Visit Serbia, Constitutional Court.

²⁴ Serbian Government (2025a), pp. 2f.; Serbian Government (2025), written input, pp. 100 f.

²⁵ Country visit Serbia.

²⁶ 2024 Rule of Law Report, Serbia, p. 5. The Ministry of Justice explained that alternatives are currently being explored. Country visit Serbia.

²⁷ The number of cases for which legal aid has been granted rose from 0.06 per inhabitant in 2022 to 0.10 in 2023. CEPEJ (2024), p. 29; ENNHRI (2024), p. 10; 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 42.

it and the accompanying Action Plan in the course of 2025²⁸. There is still room for improvement as regards the Judicial Academy's capacity, internal expertise, transparency of the initial testing process and the quality of the mentoring system²⁹. Serbia is yet to introduce a system of quality control to improve the quality of judicial training.

Efficiency

The overall picture continues to be positive for civil, commercial, and criminal cases, while serious challenges remain in the handling of administrative cases and constitutional complaints. For civil and commercial cases, the clearance rate in 2023 fell for first instance cases and the disposition time improved, while for second instance cases the clearance rate improved and the disposition time increased³⁰. For criminal cases the situation remained stable overall with a slight decrease in the clearance rate for first and second instance cases, and stable indicators on the disposition time³¹. However, the negative development on administrative cases continued and remains a challenge. Their clearance rate fell from 39% in 2022 to 35% in 2023 and the disposition time increased from 1 528 days in 2022 to 2 095 days in 2023. The number of pending first instance administrative cases also increased by 45.8% in 2023³². As of May 2025, a total of 43 711 cases were pending before the Constitutional Court, of which 99% are constitutional complaints³³.

II. ANTI-CORRUPTION FRAMEWORK

The perception among experts, citizens and business executives is that the level of corruption in the public sector remained high. In the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International, Serbia scores 35/100 and ranks 105th globally³⁴. This perception has remained relatively stable over the past five years, while it is the lowest score recorded for Serbia³⁵. The 2025 Special Eurobarometer on Corruption shows that 85% of respondents consider corruption widespread in their country (EU average 69%) and 31% of respondents feel personally affected by corruption in their daily lives (EU average 30%). As regards businesses, 84% of companies consider that corruption is widespread (EU average 63%) and 53% consider that corruption is a problem when doing business (EU average 35%). Furthermore, 26% of respondents find that there are enough successful prosecutions to deter people from corrupt practices (EU

²⁸ Serbian Government (2025), written input, p. 116.

²⁹ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 30.

³⁰ While the clearance rate fell from 178% to 140%, for first instance cases and the disposition time slightly improved from 299 days to 278 days between 2022 and 2023, for second instance cases the clearance rate improved from 94 % in 2022 to 97% in 2023, while the disposition time increased from 326 to 351 days. CEPEJ (2024), pp. 17-21.

³¹ For first instance criminal cases the clearance rate fell from 106% in 2022 to 103% in 2023 and for second instance cases from 100% in 2022 to 99% in 2023. Disposition time changed from 220 to 219 days in first instance between 2022 and 2023 and from 34 to 36 days in second instance. CEPEJ (2024), pp. 17-21.

³² CEPEJ (2024), p. 18.

³³ Constitutional Court (2025), written input received after the country visit.

³⁴ Transparency International (2025). The level of perceived corruption is categorised as follows: low (the perception among experts and business executives of public sector corruption scores above 79); relatively low (scores between 79-60), relatively high (scores between 59-50), high (scores below 50).

³⁵ In 2020, the score was 38, while in 2024 the score decreased to 35. The score significantly increases/decreases when it changes more than five points; improves/deteriorates (changes between 4-5 points); is relatively stable (changes from 1-3 points) in the last five years.

average 36%), while 47% of companies believe that people and businesses caught for bribing a senior official are appropriately punished (EU average 33%)³⁶.

The National Anti-Corruption Strategy for the period of 2024-2028 was adopted in July 2024. Following the adoption of a National Anti-Corruption Strategy in July 2024, an accompanying action plan (2024-2025) was adopted in December³⁷. The new Strategy includes measures recommended by the Commission, namely to counter corruption in sectors vulnerable to corruption, including health, taxes, customs, education, local self-government, privatisation, public procurement and police and features both prevention and repression objectives³⁸. However, the activities included in the Action Plan are to some extent narrower in terms of addressing the corruption problems and challenges identified in the Strategy and does not comprehensively address the GRECO recommendations of the 4th and 5th evaluation rounds³⁹. While the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption is tasked with monitoring its implementation⁴⁰, 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. The legal framework to fight corruption remains broadly in place and most forms of corruption are criminalised⁴¹. Illicit enrichment is still not criminalised. Serbia is not a signatory party to the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention⁴².

Following the canopy collapse at Novi Sad railway station, which prompted widespread public protests, authorities launched investigations into alleged corruption linked to the tragic incident which are yet to be completed. The tragic incident, in which 16 people were killed in November 2024, prompted widespread public protests over corruption and the perceived lack of accountability and transparency in Government infrastructure and construction projects. In December, the Higher Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad filed indictments against 13 public officials⁴³ on charges for endangering public safety, including the former Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, who subsequently resigned from his post. Parallel investigations into related corruption crimes caused risks of uncoordinated proceedings at the outset, due to the divided competences between the four specialised Anti-Corruption Departments and the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime⁴⁴. Initially, both the Higher Prosecution Office in Novi Sad and the Higher Prosecution Office in Belgrade started

³⁶ Data from Special Eurobarometer 561 (2025) and Flash Eurobarometer 558 (2025).

³⁷ Serbian Government (2024a,b).

³⁸ 2024 Rule of Law Report, Serbia, p. 8.

³⁹ Serbia states its intention to address all GRECO recommendations of the 4th and 5th evaluation rounds in the Action Plan for 2026-2028. Serbian Government (2025a), p. 5.

⁴⁰ Serbian Government (2025), written input, p. 157.

⁴¹ 2024 Rule of Law Report, Serbia, p. 8.

⁴² OECD (2024).

⁴³ Amongst whom the acting director of Serbian Railways Infrastructure at the time of the incident, the acting assistant construction minister, and the general director of Serbian Railways Infrastructure at the time when Novi Sad station was being rebuilt. Other indictees are representatives of construction design companies, construction contractors, and technical and expert supervisors who are charged with a criminal offence against public safety. BIRN (2024).

⁴⁴ Serbia has four specialised Anti-Corruption Departments within the Higher Prosecution Offices in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Nis and Kraljevo competent for corruption cases not exceeding a value of RSD 200 million and a Public Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime which is the main body in charge for corruption cases exceeding this value (Art. 3 of the Law on the Organisation and Competence of State Authorities in the Suppression of Organised Crime, Terrorism and Corruption). Stakeholders during the country visit underlined that the divided competences lead to challenges with regard to coordination and consistency of corruption related offences in Serbia. Country visit Serbia.

separate corruption related investigations⁴⁵, which were later transferred by the Supreme Public Prosecutor to the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime. The transfer allowed for investigations by one prosecutorial entity and this investigation is still ongoing⁴⁶. In March 2025, the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) also launched an investigation related to the reconstruction of the railway station⁴⁷.

Shortcomings in law and practice remain for the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime, which has jurisdiction over high-level corruption cases. The role and mandate of the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime regarding the overall coordination of corruption related investigations, including by the special departments of the Higher Public Prosecutors' offices, is insufficiently regulated in the law. This risks hindering consistency of action in corruption investigations of the different specialised bodies, resulting in a lack of effectiveness in practice. Moreover, insufficient transparency in the prosecution service and weak oversight of dismissed corruption cases and delays continued to affect public trust and accountability⁴⁸. Staff shortages at the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime persist, with only 19 of 25 posts being currently filled⁴⁹. The High Prosecutorial Council annulled a public competition⁵⁰ for the selection of new public prosecutors in November⁵¹. Insufficient human resources are limiting the capacity of the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime to process and investigate complex organised crime and high-level corruption cases. While two financial forensic experts were hired in the Special Departments for Suppression of Corruption in the Higher Public Prosecution Office in Belgrade and Novi Sad, positions in Kraljevo and Niš remain vacant⁵². The specialised organised crime unit in the police investigating high-level corruption offences lacks sufficient staff⁵³.

Investigations launched in the context of a new anti-corruption operation raise concerns over the systematic fight against corruption free from political interference. In February 2025, 153 individuals were arrested as part of anti-corruption operations, while certain arrests related to long-standing cases without any recent developments⁵⁴. Among those detained were state officials, directors of public enterprises, representatives of local governments and directors of health centres⁵⁵. Overall, challenges remain in establishing a robust track record of investigations, indictments and final convictions in high-level corruption cases, including the seizure

⁴⁵ N1 (2025a).

⁴⁶ Country visit Serbia.

⁴⁷ Serbian Monitor (2025).

⁴⁸ 2024 Rule of Law Report, Serbia, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁹ Country visit Serbia. Of the 19 public prosecutors, nine have been elected to their position, whilst ten are temporality assigned. The total number of posts is insufficient considering that Serbia has a prosecution-led pre-investigation and investigation system. Moreover, the current premises of the Public Prosecutor's Office are not sufficient to accommodate new staff.

⁵⁰ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 99/23 of 10 November 2023.

⁵¹ During the country visit, the High Prosecutorial Council explained that the decision to annul the competition was due to missing security checks of the selected candidates in contravention of the Law on organisation and competence of state authorities in suppression of organised crime, terrorism and corruption.

⁵² Serbian Government (2025), written input, p. 176.

⁵³ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 34.

⁵⁴ In a TV interview on 10 February President Vucic stated that the fight against corruption will happen soon. RTV Pink Official (2025). Three days later the arrests of the new anti-corruption campaign started. See also Transparency Serbia (2025).

⁵⁵ Ministry of Interior (2025).

and confiscation of criminal assets⁵⁶. In this context, stakeholders highlighted as a remaining concern the reluctance on the side of the prosecution and the police to pursue investigations against corruption suspects close to political and economic power⁵⁷.

The verification and enforcement of asset declarations and conflict of interests continue to present weaknesses. The Law on prevention of corruption, which prescribes the duty for public officials to file asset declarations and to report conflicts of interest, still needs to be amended to broaden the definition of public official in line with GRECO recommendations⁵⁸. The advance publishing of the annual verification plan by the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, informing which category of public officials will be subject to substantive checks in the respective year, risks limiting its effectiveness in practice. The human and technical resources of the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption are still too limited to carry out its corruption prevention tasks in a comprehensive and effective manner. This is also demonstrated by the fact that, according to the annual verification plan for 2024, the Agency carries out substantive checks for the asset-declarations of around 290 public officials representing less than 1% of all asset-declarations in the public sector⁵⁹. Sanctions for non-compliance are uncommon and are predominantly for misdemeanour offences⁶⁰.

The Anti-Corruption Council remained active in exposing and analysing cases of systemic corruption, with limited follow-up by other institutions. The Government does not systematically consult the Anti-Corruption Council on draft legislation, and it does not follow up on the reports and recommendations produced by the Council. The Council continues to carry out its work in exposing and analysing cases of systemic corruption. However, it still lacks financial and human resources and no steps were taken to address the significant number of vacancies⁶¹. Limited action is taken by the prosecution offices to investigate cases exposed by the Council⁶².

The limited scope of the Law on lobbying undermines its effectiveness in practice and the Law on financing of political activities has several weaknesses. While it is positive that lobbying is regulated by law, its scope is still limited to formal, written contacts between interest representatives and persons in top executive functions and excludes any other forms of interaction. Furthermore, neither the lobbying records nor the required annual activity report from lobbyists are made public. GRECO

⁵⁶ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, pp. 9 and 47. 2024 Rule of Law Report, Serbia, p. 9.

⁵⁷ Country visit Serbia.

⁵⁸ The current definition of the term “public official” does not include certain individuals with potentially high-influence, such as advisors to the president, prime minister and heads of cabinets. See also GRECO (2022), pp. 4,21; 2024 Rule of Law Report, Serbia, pp. 11 and 13.

⁵⁹ Fewer than 20 people currently work in the asset declaration department, of which only five conduct deep verifications. According to the national register, around 30 000 public officials exist in Serbia. Country visit Serbia, Agency for Prevention of Corruption.

⁶⁰ In 2024, the Agency only reported one criminal offence to the Public Prosecutor’s Office. Country visit Serbia, Agency for Prevention of Corruption.

⁶¹ Presently the Council has six members out of 11. While the Rules of Procedure of the Council entail safeguards aimed at promoting its independence, such as that appointments by the Government must be based on proposals of candidates by the Anti-Corruption Council, two members were appointed in 2017 without proposal by the Council. Against this background, the Anti-Corruption Council has expressed concern that adoption of new Rules of procedure, as foreseen by the anti-corruption action plan 2024-2025, could effectively undermine its independence. Country visit Serbia.

⁶² Limited action is taken by the prosecution offices to investigate corruption cases. The Council cited the long-pending issue of police autonomy from the Ministry of the Interior, which undermines the authority of the prosecution. Country visit Serbia, Anti-Corruption Council.

recommended to address both points⁶³. Amendments to the Law on financing of political activities are yet to be adopted to address outstanding ODIHR recommendations, such as the absence of a campaign expenditure limit, lack of rules on campaigning by third parties, and the effectiveness of the oversight mechanism⁶⁴.

Challenges exist for whistleblowers exposing corruption. Serbia has a dedicated Law on the protection of whistleblowers in place, which is yet to be aligned with the EU *acquis*. In particular, the law does not include all types of disclosures and persons, such as former employees, and it does not explicitly protect whistleblowers if their disclosure is not grounded⁶⁵. Furthermore, there is room for improvement to strengthen support mechanisms for whistleblowers including the provision of legal aid. In practice, challenges remain with regard to oversight and the enforcement of whistleblowers' protection against any form of retaliation. Oversight duties are shared between several ministries with no overall supervision mechanism of the effective follow-up of whistleblower reports. Consequently, enforcement is lacking in practice, including in prominent cases⁶⁶.

Exemptions to the Law on public procurement continued to be widely used, thereby circumventing its application, and oversight mechanisms are insufficient. While the Law on public procurement provides for basic principles in the public procurement system, in 2023, the value of procurement exempted from application of the law nearly reached the value of concluded public procurement contracts that were carried out through regular proceedings, thereby undermining the effectiveness of the law⁶⁷. Challenges persist in ensuring that exemptions from the Law on public procurement are in line with the EU *acquis*, in particular in the context of intergovernmental agreements⁶⁸. The oversight of public procurement procedures presents weaknesses which risks allowing violations to go unchecked and can lead to impunity⁶⁹. Although the Criminal Code provides for a specific offense for abuse in public procurement⁷⁰, convictions are rare. The State Audit Institution found irregularities in 21.2% of the total value of public procurement contracts inspected in 2024⁷¹. Other areas of particular risk to corruption include State-owned enterprises, concessions, bankruptcy proceedings and public-private partnerships and the health sector⁷².

III. MEDIA PLURALISM AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Serbia adopted new media legislation in June 2025 to align further with the EU *acquis* and European standards. The amendments to the Law on Electronic Media and the Law on Public Information and Media continue the legislative alignment which was initiated in 2023 when the laws were first amended. The drafting process lacked transparent and inclusive consultations and did not respect the legal obligation of holding

⁶³ GRECO (2022), pp. 18 f., paras 64-68. Serbia plans to amend the Law on lobbying by the end of 2025. Serbian Government (2025), written input, p. 154.

⁶⁴ OSCE/ODIHR (2024), pp. 15 ff.; Venice Commission, OSCE/ODIHR (2022), pp. 22 ff.

⁶⁵ 2024 Rule of Law Report, Serbia, pp. 13-14.

⁶⁶ Transparency International (2024), pp. 47-48.

⁶⁷ Transparency Serbia (2024).

⁶⁸ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 43.

⁶⁹ Transparency Serbia (2024).

⁷⁰ Article 228 Criminal Code.

⁷¹ In 105 of the audited entities, it was determined that the procurement of goods, services and works was not carried out in accordance with the aforementioned law in 923 cases, corresponding to an amount of 108.22 billion dinars. State Audit Institution (2025), p. 25.

⁷² See Anti-Corruption Council (2025).

a public debate⁷³. Following the provisions of 2023 that allow state-owned companies to be media owners⁷⁴, additional safeguards to protect media pluralism and editorial independence have been introduced and will need to be monitored in practice. Meanwhile, TV channels seen as critical of the authorities were removed in April 2025 from a cable offer following the purchase of such cable by Telekom Srbija whose majority stakeholder is the state⁷⁵.

Serious concerns remain on the independence of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), and the delay and shortcomings in the selection procedure of a new REM Council undermine public trust in the process. In 2024, REM issued five measures, namely: two reprimands, one warning and two temporary bans on broadcasting advertising messages, while sanctions were not imposed on broadcasters frequently violating rules, such as reality shows prone to violence⁷⁶. In November 2024, the parliamentary committee for culture and information – not yet the Parliament in plenary – gave consent to the new statute of the REM Council which contains provisions on the secrecy of certain documents adopted by the Council, thus hindering transparency⁷⁷. REM published the full report on media monitoring 14 months after the 2023 parliamentary elections⁷⁸. The competition for the allocation of the fifth frequency for national broadcasting, launched in 2022, has still not been finalised without justified reason for the delay⁷⁹. REM has also not been effective in countering foreign information manipulation and interference, notably in the context of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine⁸⁰. On the contrary, in October 2024 REM awarded a cable license to RT Balkans which has since then launched its TV programme in Serbian language, broadcast via the majority state-owned Telekom cable operator. The Parliament has not elected a new REM Council by the deadline of 4 November 2024 as per the Law on Electronic Media and, as a result, Serbia has been without the decision-making body of the media regulator since. The Committee for Culture and Information of the Parliament published the call for nominations of REM Council members only on 25 November. Following a number of reported irregularities that remained unaddressed by the Committee, 7 out of 18 candidates withdrew their candidacies on 28 January 2025, leaving 5 out of 9 categories of authorised proponents⁸¹ with no or only one candidate. On 28 April, following a two-week student blockade of the public broadcaster RTS, the Committee

⁷³ The Serbian authorities conducted a 48-hour consultation of media associations at the end of the process.

⁷⁴ Reversing the previous prohibition in Serbian legislation.

⁷⁵ Total TV cable which serves the diaspora. Media Freedom Rapid Response (2025).

⁷⁶ 2025 Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) p. 17.

⁷⁷ Parliament of Serbia (2024).

⁷⁸ REM (2025). The report notes that the ruling party election list was by far the most represented in all categories of analysed election content on all commercial media service providers with national coverage.

⁷⁹ According to REM, the procedure was interrupted and will continue after the decision of the Administrative Court on the lawsuit against the decision on the award of four national licenses. This, however, would not prevent a fifth license from being allocated.

⁸⁰ Russia Today’s (RT) international channel in the English language was not banned by REM and is still broadcast in Serbia on cable TV.

⁸¹ The Law on electronic media defines nine categories of “authorised proponents” which should each propose two candidates for members of the REM Council: 1) the Protector of Citizens, the Equality Commissioner, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection; 2) universities; 3) associations of electronic media publishers; 4) associations of journalists; 5) associations of film, performing and theatre artists and associations of composers; 6) associations with the aim to achieve freedom of expression, 7) associations with the aim to protect children, 8) national councils of national minorities; 9) churches and religious communities.

decided to annul the procedure, and published on 8 May a new call for candidates which ran until 23 May. The review of candidacies is ongoing. The overall delay and the unaddressed shortcomings in the former procedure raise doubts on the commitment to safeguard the nomination process against political influence and to thus increase REM's independence. Public trust is thus undermined.

The Press Council continues to effectively monitor print media's compliance with the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics. In 2024, the Press Council received 88 complaints (125 in 2023) and found in almost all cases that several points of the Code of Ethics were violated⁸². Some media outlets that violated the Code of Ethics continued to receive public co-financing, while the Law on Public Information and Media prescribes the extent to which the respective media outlets adhere to ethical standards as one of the criteria for receiving co-funding⁸³.

Issues of editorial autonomy and pluralism of public service media have become an increasing concern. The Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) 2025 found that the 'independence of public service media' indicator worsened in 2024 and considered it a high-risk area (70%)⁸⁴. Amendments to the Law on Public Broadcasting Services were adopted in June 2025 to make the public broadcasters more institutionally and functionally independent⁸⁵. It remains to be seen whether the amount of the public broadcasting service fee set in this law is sufficient to cover the needs of the public broadcasters and that the latter no longer need to rely on complementary State funding, which would prevent full financial independence. Concerns remain over issues of editorial autonomy, limited pluralism and biased reporting in favour of the government⁸⁶, as demonstrated by aggregated data. Stakeholders report that in 2024, the ruling majority was covered in 94% of airtime in the central RTS news broadcasts, compared with 6% for opposition parties. Both public broadcasters have been criticised by some of their employees, as well as by civil society and media associations⁸⁷, for their lack of reporting of the student protests following the tragic incident at the Novi Sad railway station⁸⁸.

Measures to increase transparency in ownership structures and public funding of the media sector have only been partially implemented. Political and economic influence on the media remains a source of concern. The MPM 2025 considered the 'political independence of media' indicator a very high-risk (92%)⁸⁹. Due to a large number of registered media combined with a limited advertising market, especially at local level, media often strongly depend on public co-funding. Despite the 2023 law, which had improved the transparency provisions of such calls by laying down binding

⁸² 6 complaints were resolved through mediation, 15 complaints were rejected because they did not meet the formal requirement and the Press Council decided in only 4 cases that the Code of Journalism was not violated. Press Council (2024).

⁸³ For example, the City of Vranje awarded the majority of its public co-financing to Vranjska Plus and Radio Television Vranje which repeatedly violated the Journalists' Code of Ethics in 2024. NUNS (2025).

⁸⁴ Compared with a medium risk of 63% in 2023. 2025 Media Pluralism Monitor, pp. 26 and 31.

⁸⁵ A general act will need to be adopted within six months of adoption of the law to regulate further the procedure of election, scope of work, and termination of the new position within RTS of the Commissioner for the Protection of the Rights of Listeners, Viewers and Readers.

⁸⁶ 2024 Enlargement, Report, Serbia, p. 39.

⁸⁷ Country visit Serbia, media associations.

⁸⁸ In March and April 2025, students blocked RTS and RTV main buildings, demanding the public broadcasters to adapt their editorial policy in line with public interest.

⁸⁹ 2025 Media Pluralism Monitor, p. 27.

criteria to comply with the Code of Ethics, as monitored by the Press Council, the calls published in 2024 significantly reduced public funding in a few municipalities. The remaining public funding is awarded through less transparent processes, such as the procurement of information services and advertising⁹⁰. The Ministry of Information and Telecommunication increased the 2025 budget for public co-financing of media content at the national level by 27%⁹¹. In January 2025, Serbia established a Unified Information System on public co-financing of media, as required by the Law on Public Information and Media. Media associations expressed criticism over its functioning as well as over the changes introduced in the by-laws on public co-financing⁹². As regards other sources of public funding, including advertising, the objective of the media strategy⁹³ to present them in the media register in a transparent, comprehensive and user-friendly manner remains to be fully implemented. Legal provisions on supervisory inspections of the media register have yet to start being implemented⁹⁴. Similarly, the media sector privatisation process and measures to make public procurement in the media sector more transparent, as planned by the media strategy, remain to be completed⁹⁵.

Journalists continue to face either frequent refusals by public bodies to disclose information of public importance or no response at all. Serbia has signed but not ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents⁹⁶. The fact that the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance cannot directly enforce the execution of its decisions by coercive action remains one of the main obstacles to the exercise of free access to information⁹⁷. In 2024, the rate of execution of the Commissioner's decisions was 77.98% (74.8% in 2023)⁹⁸. According to the 2024 Commissioner's report, the percentage of unexecuted Commissioner's decisions on complaints by journalists is higher than for other complainants (31.94% of their requests go unanswered), and the authorities often refuse to disclose information on the unjustified ground that the requests come from journalists.

The safety of journalists has become a source of increasing concern. Cases of threats, intimidation, hate speech and physical violence against journalists, including female journalists, continue to be registered. Journalists at the local level are particularly vulnerable to such attacks. The MPM 2025 found that the 'journalistic profession, standards and protection' indicator worsened in 2024 and considered it a high-risk area (68%)⁹⁹. Recurrent statements by high-level officials on the daily and investigative work of journalists have a chilling effect on freedom of expression¹⁰⁰. Journalists have faced increasing pressure and attacks in the context of student and citizen protests taking place

⁹⁰ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 39.

⁹¹ New calls were also launched in self-government units by the deadline of March 2025 and, for some, after that deadline.

⁹² Country visit Serbia, media associations.

⁹³ Adopted by the Government on 30 January 2020.

⁹⁴ The 2025 Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) also found that "*there is no effective legal instrument that would force the media registers to update their databases more often, nor that would compel the media to send their reports and information to the competent authorities. Also, these registers fail to reveal ultimate ownership for each media, since many owners are listed as subsidiary companies*", p. 21.

⁹⁵ 2024 Rule of Law Report, Serbia, p. 17.

⁹⁶ [The Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents](#) (CETS No. 205), also known as the Tromsø Convention, entered into force on 1 December 2020.

⁹⁷ 2024 Rule of Law Report, Serbia, p. 18.

⁹⁸ Commissioner for information of public importance and personal data protection (2025).

⁹⁹ Compared with 61% in 2023. 2025 Media Pluralism Monitor, pp. 12 and 15.

¹⁰⁰ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 38.

since the tragic incident in Novi Sad¹⁰¹. Civil society reported in December 2024 and March 2025 that the Serbian authorities used spyware to unlawfully target journalists, environmental activists and other individuals¹⁰². Human rights defenders that were reportedly targeted by spyware attacks did not file a formal complaint due to the lack of trust in the process¹⁰³. Several foreign journalists, including from EU Member States, were denied entry to Serbia prior to protests that took place on 15 March 2025. Since July 2024, the Council of Europe Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists reports 20 alerts¹⁰⁴. The Media Freedom Rapid Response project reports 113 alerts since July 2024, consisting of 23 ‘physical assaults’, 25 ‘attack to property’, 73 ‘verbal attacks’, 8 ‘legal incidents’, and 23 ‘interferences’¹⁰⁵. Serbian journalists’ associations recorded a slight decrease in the total number of registered attacks in 2024 (166, compared with 182 in 2023); however, just in the first three months of 2025, there were already 90 registered attacks and pressures, some of which took place in the presence of the police¹⁰⁶. In addition, few of the reported cases result in final convictions¹⁰⁷. Death threats and attacks against property of journalists and media associations in Novi Sad were noted in February 2025. Several media associations suspended their membership of the Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists reportedly due to the inefficiency of the competent authorities in processing attacks against journalists or to general criticism of the authorities’ failure to meet basic democratic standards and rule of law principles. No progress has been made in the prosecution of the three murders of journalists of 1994, 1999 and 2001, one of which has in the meantime reached the statute of limitation¹⁰⁸. Cases of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) increasingly hinder the work of investigative media and civil society organisations. Serbia still needs to align with the EU *acquis*, including by covering the early dismissal of manifestly unfounded claims and remedies against abusive court proceedings¹⁰⁹. In this regard, courts have not followed consistently the case law of the European Court of Human Rights¹¹⁰.

IV. OTHER INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES RELATED TO CHECKS AND BALANCES

Parliament’s effectiveness and oversight function continued to be hampered by the low frequency of sessions and the lack of genuine political debate. Since its constitutive session of 6 February 2024, nine plenary sessions were held. During these

¹⁰¹ A columnist was detained in April 2024 for his statement allegedly “causing panic and disorder”: Safe Journalists Network (2025). For further information see pillar IV.

¹⁰² Amnesty International (2024 and 2025).

¹⁰³ Country visit Serbia, civil society organisations. One case was formally reported to the Supreme Public Prosecution Office and is at a pre-investigation stage.

¹⁰⁴ Including five with a state reply. The alerts consist in nine attacks on ‘physical safety and integrity of journalists’, two ‘detention and imprisonment of journalists’, and six ‘harassment and intimidation of journalists’. Three other alerts relate to instances when journalists reporting on protests were denied entry to Serbia in March 2025; Serbian media denigrated in a manipulated video broadcast on three TV stations with national coverage in July 2024, leading to numerous death threats; and the lack of adequate protection under defamation and insult laws and the need to adopt effective legal safeguards against SLAPPs. In accordance with data at the disposal of the Supreme Public Prosecution Office, in 2024 and 2025 until 31 May 2025, 96 cases brought by prosecution services resulted in 1 conviction, 1 other sanction and 21 rejections while 73 cases are ongoing.

¹⁰⁵ European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, Media Freedom Rapid Response – Serbia.

¹⁰⁶ Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (2024).

¹⁰⁷ Country visit Serbia, media associations.

¹⁰⁸ As referred to in Chapter 23 interim benchmark. Council of the European Union (2024), p. 28.

¹⁰⁹ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 38.

¹¹⁰ Country visit Serbia, media associations.

sessions the lack of genuine political debate that would focus on the subject-matters of the legislative proposals continued. Some plenary sessions were called with a short notice of only 24 hours, despite rules limiting this to in exceptional circumstances¹¹¹. This resulted in limited possibilities for Members of Parliament to propose changes to the agenda or table amendments to the adopted laws or proposed bills, which were nearly all tabled by the Government. In addition, public scrutiny and involvement in the legislative process were limited. The practice of amalgamating large numbers of, often unrelated, agenda and legislative items into a single item on the agenda also continued, making detailed scrutiny and debate difficult. In November 2024, 68 items, including the 2025 budget, were dealt with as one discussion point and adopted without any debate. Parliamentary oversight of the executive is weak. Only two sessions with questions to the Prime Minister and the Government, which should take place monthly when Parliament is in session¹¹², were held in 2024, none in 2025. Moreover, debates in the Parliament are marked by tensions with reports of derogatory language and occasional incidents, disruptions, including violence, and boycotts¹¹³. The rules of procedure and the Code of Conduct to penalise offences by parliamentarians are not systematically applied¹¹⁴.

The exercise of presidential powers is intensively debated in the public discourse.

Against the background that the Constitution foresees relatively limited presidential powers, mainly the right to propose a Prime Minister, express state unity, represent the country at home and abroad and to promulgate the laws of the Parliament¹¹⁵, the actual exercise of presidential powers is intensively debated in the public discourse. In this context civil society and other stakeholders expressed concerns that the political debate and the decision-making is in practice steered by the President in a way which is not foreseen by the Constitution¹¹⁶.

The process of public consultations still needs further strengthening. The percentage of public consultations on draft laws has increased slightly from 52.9% in 2023 to 58.3% in 2024¹¹⁷. In the same period the percentage of public consultations on by-laws for which public consultations is mandatory has slightly decreased from 31% in 2023 to 29.7% in 2024¹¹⁸. While public consultations in these areas need to be strengthened, they were conducted for all draft policy planning documents in 2024. Despite the legal obligation to provide information on the results of public consultations¹¹⁹, reports on the results of public consultations are not systematically published. Civil society organisations continued to report that the time given for public consultations is not sufficient, and that their comments on draft laws of public interest were rarely taken into account¹²⁰. There is still no central body in charge of the quality control of public consultations.

¹¹¹ Rules of Procedure of the Parliament, Article 86(1).

¹¹² Rules of Procedure of the Parliament, Article 205.

¹¹³ Most recently, on 4 March several MPs were injured following a parliamentary session which was seriously disrupted by opposition members throwing smoke grenades and flares. The Guardian (2025); The European External Action Service (2025); 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 24.

¹¹⁴ Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 4.

¹¹⁵ Constitution of Serbia, Articles 101, 109, 110 and 111. See also Venice Commission, OSCE/ODIHR (2022), para 152.

¹¹⁶ Country visit Serbia. Freedom House (2024). See also Venice Commission, OSCE/ODIHR (2022), para 152.

¹¹⁷ Laws that ratify international agreements are not included in the calculation.

¹¹⁸ Statistics provided by Serbian Government (2025a), p. 22.

¹¹⁹ Law on the planning system.

¹²⁰ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 25.

Over half of the companies surveyed in Serbia express confidence in the effectiveness of investment protection. 57% of companies are very or fairly confident that investments are protected by law and courts¹²¹. 32% perceive the level of independence of the public procurement review body (Republic Commission for Protection of Rights in Public Procurement Procedures) as very or fairly good¹²². 33% perceive the level of independence of the national competition authority (Commission for Protection of Competition) as very or fairly good¹²³.

The fact that four positions at the Constitutional Court remain vacant is a concern. The High Judicial Council, the High Prosecutorial Council and the President have still not made their nominations to the respective appointment bodies for the four positions which have been vacant for a considerable amount of time¹²⁴. The High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council plan to adopt a joint Rulebook on the nomination procedure before proceeding with their nominations¹²⁵. The efficiency of the Constitutional Court is already negatively impacted by the vacant positions. Moreover, seven of the remaining eleven judges are due to retire at the end of the year¹²⁶, which would lead to the Constitutional Court losing its quorum¹²⁷. No steps were taken to introduce a qualified majority with an anti-deadlock mechanism for the election of some of the judges of the Constitutional Court by Parliament, as recommended by the Venice Commission¹²⁸.

On 1 January 2025, Serbia had 20 leading judgments of the European Court of Human Rights pending implementation, an increase of 6 compared to the previous year¹²⁹. At that time, Serbia's rate of leading judgments from the past 10 years that had been implemented was at 62% (compared to 73% in 2024; 38% remaining pending), and the average time that the judgments had been pending implementation was 5 years and 7 months (compared to 7 years in 2024)¹³⁰. The oldest group of leading judgments, pending implementation for 17 years, concern instances where the applicants' right to a fair trial was violated due to excessive length civil, family-related and commercial judicial proceedings¹³¹. As regards the respect of payment deadlines, on 31 December 2024 there were 16 cases in total awaiting confirmation of payments (compared to 52 in 2023)¹³². On 16 June 2025, the number of leading judgments pending implementation had increased to 21¹³³.

¹²¹ Flash Eurobarometer 555 (2025). Only 15% and 17% of the surveyed investors respectively perceive the frequent changes in legislation or concerns about the quality of the law-making process and the quality, efficiency or independence of justice as a reason for the lack of confidence in investment protection.

¹²² Flash Eurobarometer 555 (2025).

¹²³ Flash Eurobarometer 555 (2025).

¹²⁴ Two positions are vacant since 2019, one since 2022 and another one since 2023.

¹²⁵ Country visit Serbia.

¹²⁶ Country visit Serbia, Constitutional Court.

¹²⁷ According to the jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court the prescribed quorum of 8 judges and the requirement of 8 positive votes for a plenary decision are not reduced in case of vacancies.

¹²⁸ Venice Commission (2023), p. 3.

¹²⁹ For an explanation of the supervision process, see the [website](#) of the Council of Europe.

¹³⁰ All figures calculated by the European Implementation Network (EIN) and based on the number of cases that are considered pending at the annual cut-off date of 1 January 2025. EIN (2025), written input, p. 2.

¹³¹ Judgment of the ECtHR, 3150/05, *Jevremonic v. Serbia*, pending implementation since 2007.

¹³² Council of Europe (2025), p. 157.

¹³³ Data according to the online database of the Council of Europe (HUDOC).

The three independent bodies working in the area of fundamental rights keep facing resource constraints and the follow-up to their recommendations remains inconsistent. The Ombudsperson is the national human rights institution (NHRI) accredited with A-Status¹³⁴. Some recruitments have taken place in the offices of the Ombudsperson, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, but the number of filled posts is still below their staffing plans¹³⁵. Staff turnover in the Office of the Ombudsperson continues to hamper its efficiency¹³⁶. There continues to be no systematic follow-up on the recommendations of the independent bodies¹³⁷. Stakeholders considered that the independent bodies needed to be more vocal in denouncing violations of fundamental rights, for example, they considered that there was little public reaction by the Ombudsperson to human rights violations during the protests following the tragic incident at the Novi Sad railway station¹³⁸.

Civil society organisations face increasing pressure and attacks. The space for civil society is rated as ‘obstructed’¹³⁹. Organisations and individuals that criticise the authorities are under increasing pressure¹⁴⁰, in particular those monitoring alleged electoral irregularities and environmental damage, or protesting against lithium mining or the glorification of war criminals. The student and citizens protests which started after the canopy collapse at Novi Sad turned into nation wide mobilisations demanding accountability and a more effective fight against corruption¹⁴¹. Verbal attacks and smear campaigns against CSOs advocating for the rule of law have intensified since the start of the protests and there were constant attempts by high-level officials to delegitimise these protests¹⁴². Campaigns were also waged by tabloids, including in the form of disclosure of CSOs’ activists’ personal data¹⁴³. While freedom of assembly was ensured and the aforementioned protests were allowed to take place, several violent incidents against demonstrators occurred, and the Prime Minister announced his resignation on 28 January 2025 after one student in Novi Sad got severely injured. Only some of the perpetrators of these violent incidents have so far been prosecuted. In January 2025, several foreign civil

¹³⁴ Accreditation by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI).

¹³⁵ For the Ombudsman: 67 staff as of December 2024 compared with 106 in the Action Plan for Chapter 23 (revised in 2020). This is the main document in which Serbia sets out how it will reach the Interim Benchmarks for this chapter. For the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection: 121 staff as of February 2025, compared with 129 in the Action Plan for Chapter 23. For the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality: 44 staff as of December 2024 compared with 60 in the Action Plan for Chapter 23. For a staff increase the independent bodies would need first the consent of the Ministry of Finance, before seeking the approval by the Parliament. According to the information provided by the Parliament, there are currently no pending requests.

¹³⁶ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 36.

¹³⁷ Annual reports are submitted to the Parliament by 15 March of each year, which then adopts conclusions on them. The 2022, 2023 and 2024 annual reports were discussed, after several years of delay, in a plenary session of the Parliament on 16 June 2025. Parliamentary discussions tend to remain general and do not focus on key recommendations.

¹³⁸ Country visit Serbia, civil society organisations.

¹³⁹ CIVICUS (2025a,b). Rating by CIVICUS; ratings are on a five-category scale defined as: open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed and closed. In addition, in March 2025, Serbia was added to the CIVICUS Monitor watchlist “as authorities severely clamp down on civic space and incite violence against tens of thousands of people protesting against government corruption.”

¹⁴⁰ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 25. See also pillar III on Media Pluralism and Media Freedom regarding SLAPPs targeting civil society organisations and media.

¹⁴¹ Pro government protests and rallies also took place.

¹⁴² The protests were often portrayed as a foreign backed “coloured revolution” undermining the legitimacy of the issues raised by the students and citizens. European Western Balkans (2025).

¹⁴³ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 25.

society activists, including from EU Member States, were detained and expelled from Serbia. Some were subsequently banned from entering the country due to representing a “security risk”. In addition, some EU citizens legally residing in Serbia had their residence status removed after expressing support for the protests and were asked to leave the country at short notice. On 25 and 26 February 2025, the police searched the offices of four CSOs at the request of the Special Anti-Corruption Department of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade. In this context, 29 civil society organisations announced in February 2025 their withdrawal from working groups organised by the Government and ministries. On 29 April 2025, the European Court of Human Rights issued an interim measure in the case concerning the alleged use of a sonic weapon for crowd control by the authorities at demonstrations in Belgrade on 15 March and indicated to the Government that it should prevent any use of sound devices for crowd control (other than for communication purposes)¹⁴⁴.

The impact of the Strategy and the Action Plan for creating a stimulating environment for the development of civil society has yet to be demonstrated. While the implementation of the 2022-2030 Strategy and the Action Plan 2025-2026 for creating a stimulating environment for the development of civil society has continued, its impact has still to be demonstrated. Civil society organisations froze their membership in the Council for cooperation and development of civil society in January 2025. This was due to the Council’s lack of institutional reaction to increasing attacks on civil society organisations and human rights defenders¹⁴⁵. The transparency and fairness of public funding to civil society remains to be improved. Key challenges include the lack of transparent criteria for approving support to civil society organisations and for selecting independent experts in evaluation commissions, and insufficient transparency in the reporting on spent funds¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴⁴ While observing 15 minutes silence, loud sounds and airwaves disrupted the demonstration. Up to 4 000 people reported their experiences of the incident, alleging they experienced fear, panic, shock and various physical symptoms. Some allegedly sustained physical injuries due to the panic. The Court noted that the use of such weapons for crowd control was unlawful in Serbia, and the potentially serious health effects that could be caused to a large number of persons. It reiterated that the decision did not mean it had taken any position as to whether use of such weapons had occurred on 15 March 2025: European Court of Human Rights (30 April 2025). Concerns were also expressed by the co-rapporteurs on Serbia of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: Council of Europe (2025b).

¹⁴⁵ Country visit Serbia, civil society organisations.

¹⁴⁶ 2024 Enlargement Report, Serbia, p. 25.

Annex I: List of sources in alphabetical order*

* The list of contributions received in the context of the consultation for the 2025 Rule of Law report can be found at https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2025-rule-law-report-targeted-stakeholder-consultation_en.

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Annex II: Country visit to Serbia

The Commission services held hybrid meetings in March 2025 with:

- A11 Initiative
- Agency for the Prevention of Corruption
- Anti-Corruption Council
- Appellate Court
- Appellate Public Prosecution Office
- Astra
- Association of independent electronic media (ANEM)
- Asylum Protection Center
- ATINA
- Autonomous Women's Center
- Basic Public Prosecution Office
- Belgrade Centre for Human Rights
- BIRN
- BIRODI
- CEPRIS
- Child Rights Centre
- Civic Initiatives
- Commissioner for Personal Data Protection and Access to Information of Public Importance
- Constitutional Court
- CRTA
- High Judicial Council
- High Prosecutorial Council
- Higher Court
- Higher Public Prosecution Office
- Humanitarian Law Foundation
- Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia
- Judges Association of Serbia
- KRIK
- Lawyers' Association of Serbia
- Ministry of European Integration
- Ministry of Interior
- Ministry of Justice
- MODS
- Ombudsman
- Partners Serbia
- Police specialised department for corruption
- Press Council
- Prosecutor Association of Serbia
- Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM)
- Share
- Special Public Prosecution Office for Organized Crime

- Supreme Court
- Supreme Public Prosecution Office
- Transparency Serbia
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- UNS
- YUCOM

* The Commission also met the following organisations in a number of horizontal meetings:

- Amnesty International
- Araminta
- Civil Liberties Union for Europe
- Civil Society Europe
- European Civic Forum
- European Partnership for Democracy
- European Youth Forum,
- International Commission of Jurists
- International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
- JEF Europe
- Philea – Philanthropy Europe Association.
- Transparency International