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From Peace to Preparedness

Conscription as a Once-Again Fashionable Idea in the EU and Serbia

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been a significant trigger for the resurgence of mandatory military service in Europe. As a result of the invasion, the EU has found itself in a position of heightened concern for its own security. Beyond considering how to best support Ukraine, the Union has also been preparing for the worst-case scenario of aggression progressing and extending beyond Ukraine to an EU member state. This overarching strategic thinking has led to a rise in military capacities among member states, sparking a new wave of militarisation in Europe. Consequently, the idea of conscription—mandatory military service for all eligible male citizens—is resurfacing, despite its abandonment in the early 2000s, based on the belief that future wars would not require extensive ground forces. Renewed proposals for conscription **sprung up** in several EU member states and, perhaps unexpectedly, in **Serbia**, an EU candidate country.

This insight aims to shed light on conscription as part of a broader remilitarisation trend among EU member states and analyse how it fits within the EU's framework of resilience and strategic autonomy. In the second part, the paper compares Serbia's intention to reintroduce conscription with the intentions of its EU counterparts, investigating whether Serbia's move is part of the same remilitarisation trend or driven by purely national motives. Given the country's thorny path towards EU membership due to insufficient rule of law standards, foreign policy alignment, and unresolved issues with Kosovo, the paper particularly examines whether the reintroduction of conscription might have any detrimental effect on regional dynamics and Serbia's EU aspirations.



Conscription as part of the remilitarisation trend in EU member states

The founding treaties do not explicitly list security and defence as the Union's competencies. However, since the start of the war in Ukraine, they have become overarching topics, surpassing the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and influencing all other EU policies. For instance, the Enlargement Policy has **gained** renewed importance due to the new geopolitical landscape and security concerns. Similarly, within the Energy Policy, significant efforts have been **made** to reduce (and eventually eliminate) dependence on Russian energy sources through enhanced diversification. The new **2024-2029 Strategic Agenda** highlights the necessity of defence capabilities for maintaining Europe as a safe, free, and democratic space.¹ Furthermore, discussions are underway about the next Commission possibly **appointing** a Commissioner with a dedicated defence portfolio, reflecting its increasing prioritisation. This emphasis on security and defence drags the EU closer to the "hard power-oriented" global players, and it is likely to have a transformative impact on how its member states perceive their own role in safeguarding Europe's future.

One of the first spillover effects of the broader securitisation of EU policy debates is the increasing willingness of member states to redefine their military capabilities. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) **database**, total military expenditure among member states has risen by approximately 10% compared to 2022, with only three countries—Greece, Italy, and Romania—choosing not to increase their military budgets. The most significant increases are observed in Central European and Baltic countries, with Poland notably boosting its military budget from 2.23% to 3.83% of its GDP. The increased military budgets across Europe are directed towards securing cutting-edge military hardware, as illustrated by France **purchasing** 42 Rafale jets for more than €5.5 billion and the German Bundestag's **authorisation** of €650 million for developing a supersonic naval cruise missile. At the same time, Baltic countries and Poland are rapidly **replacing** the old Soviet-style equipment with new gear made by NATO allies. The collaboration between member states' defence industries has also been **bolstered** by the EU through the European Defence Fund (EDF), which has allocated over €1 billion in 2024 for joint research and development projects. Furthermore, between January and May this year, all EU member states that are also NATO members **participated** in the largest military deployment in Europe since 1988, involving over 90,000 troops and over 1,100 armoured vehicles. Consequently, as the defence sector strengthens, there is a growing need to enhance capacity building among existing personnel and to increase the number of recruits trained for specific roles.

¹ Josep Borrell, the outgoing High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, aptly encapsulated this sentiment: "Everyone, including myself, always prefers butter to cannons, but without adequate cannons, we may soon find ourselves without butter as well."



*Table 1: Military Expenditure by Country in Constant (2022)
Million US Dollars and as a Percentage of GDP, 2021-2023*

Country	Expenditure					
	2021		2022		2023	
	Total	% GDP	Total	% GDP	Total	% GDP
Austria	4051.2	0.87	3612.7	0.77	3981,1	0.84
Belgium	6081.7	1.04	6890.2	1.18	7245,2	1.21
Bulgaria	1308.0	1.52	1436.9	1.59	1721,4	1.85
Croatia	1340.3	1.97	1282.1	1.79	1290,5	1.78
Cyprus	522.3	1.84	532.5	1.82	506.4	1.82
Czechia	4206.9	1.40	4005.4	1.38	4328.6	1.52
Denmark	5049.1	1.30	5475.0	1.37	7624.6	1.95
Estonia	794.9	2.03	818.3	2.16	1052.9	2.87
Finland	3650.5	1.29	4446.4	1.57	6847.4	2.42
France	53011.7	1.91	53638.7	1.93	57124.7	2.06
Germany	53715.8	1.32	56153.1	1.38	61187.4	1.52
Greece	8093.7	3.87	8745.4	4.02	7227.5	3.23
Hungary	2248.6	1.32	3256.8	1.84	3884.7	2.13
Ireland	1215.5	0.25	1164.3	0.22	1175.0	0.22
Italy	34867.4	1.68	34691.9	1.69	32634.8	1.61
Latvia	858.8	2.09	856.1	2.09	926.1	2.27
Lithuania	1391.2	1.96	1734.4	2.45	1924.4	2.72
Luxembourg	381.4	0.47	509.9	0.63	625.2	0.75
Malta	83.0	0.49	78.3	0.43	103.6	0.56
Netherlands	14083.7	1.40	13632.4	1.35	15560.1	1.53
Poland	15153.7	2.24	15341.3	2.23	26778.8	3.83
Portugal	3723.4	1.52	3566.6	1.40	3904.2	1.52
Romania	5348.2	1.85	5188.0	1.72	4944.7	1.61
Slovakia	2071.0	1.74	2085.7	1.81	2337.1	2.02
Slovenia	738.3	1.23	775.2	1.29	822.8	1.34
Spain	18840.9	1.35	20306.6	1.43	22293.2	1.51
Sweden	6968.6	1.19	7722.5	1.31	8620.0	1.47

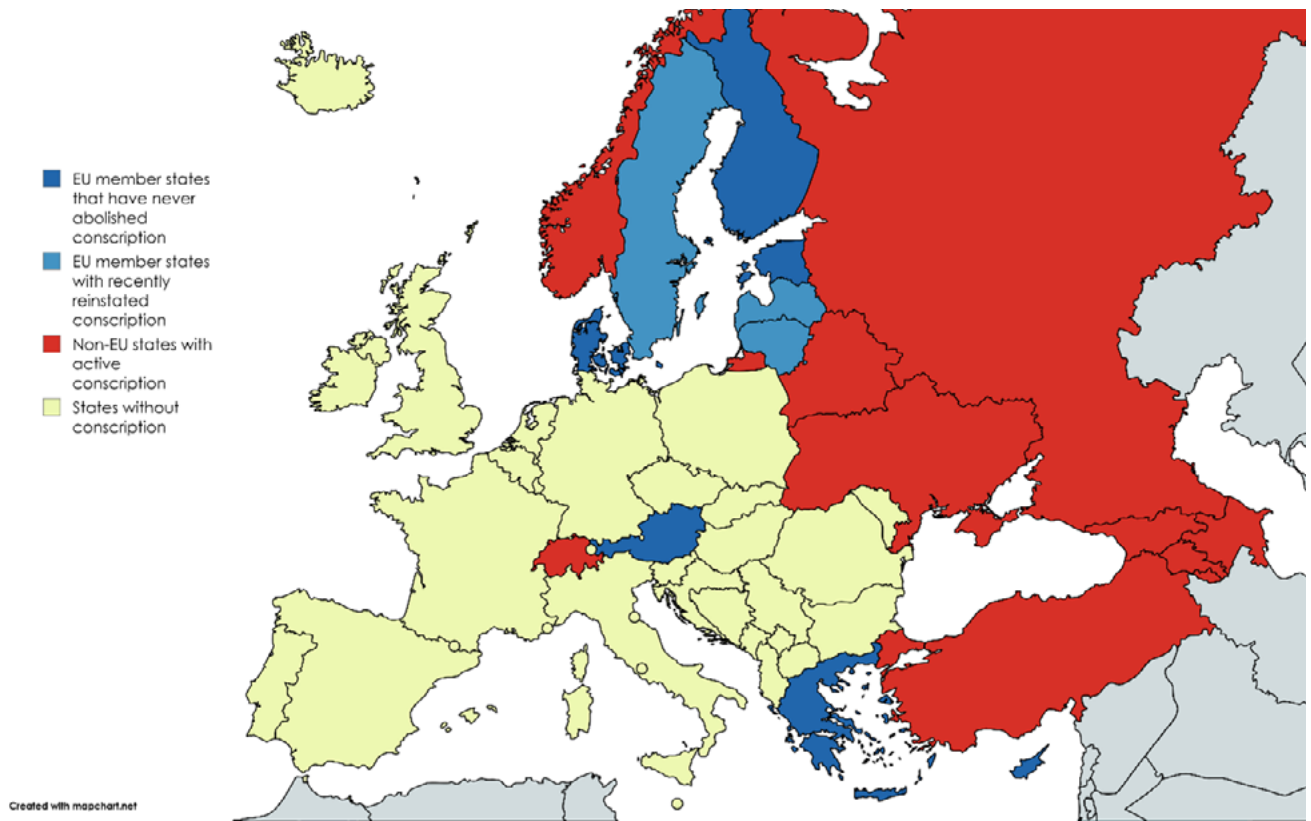
Source: *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*

The introduction of mandatory military service for the civilian population is becoming an increasingly popular solution for addressing personnel shortages, though it remains novel and daring in the context of some EU member states. As of now, a third of EU countries—Cyprus, Greece, Austria, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark—have conscription already in place. Three of these countries have reinstated conscription in recent years: Lithuania reintroduced it in 2015 as a precautionary measure following the Russian occupation of Crimea, Sweden did so in 2016 due to anticipated security challenges, and Latvia in 2023 in response to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The debate over mandatory military service is ongoing in other EU

countries too, including Germany, Italy, and Croatia.² Beyond the EU, this debate reflects a broader European trend, with discussions also occurring in the United Kingdom. Given the shifting perceptions brought about by the war in Ukraine, it is likely that more member states will reconsider their stance on conscription in the coming years, but a uniform approach remains a distant prospect.

² German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius has described the suspension of conscription in 2011 as “a mistake,” and his cabinet has proposed a new conscription model set to begin in 2025. In Italy, Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini’s League party recently submitted a bill to the Chamber of Deputies proposing a mandatory six-month period of military or civilian service for all young people aged 18 to 26. Similarly, Croatia’s Ministry of Defence has recommended that the government reinstate military conscription and reintroduce military training into the secondary school curriculum.

Map 1: Conscription Status Across Europe



Critics argue that mandatory military service constitutes an overly costly labour policy, imposing significant burdens on the armed forces and the labour market. The military faces bureaucratic challenges, such as ensuring adequate personnel for the draft process, training, and accommodation for conscripts. Meanwhile, on the labour market side, conscription disrupts professional education and delays human capital accumulation.

With increased interest, a new discourse has emerged, highlighting conscription as a means to deliver cross-society benefits that extend beyond the security domain. Advocates point to several EU member states—Austria, Denmark, Finland, Lithuania, and Sweden—that have already integrated the doctrine of total defence, which synthesises military and civilian efforts to fortify national security. This paradigm not only aims to enhance defensive capabilities but also seeks to close the gap between citizens and the state, thereby cultivating social cohesion and a collective sense of duty. Moreover, the conscription frameworks in Denmark and Lithuania are particularly noteworthy for their focus on providing soldiers with educational opportunities and career support alongside broader benefits such as personal

growth, skill acquisition, and experiential learning. In their context, conscription is intended to substantially enhance the general population’s preparedness for times of crisis and thus strengthen the countries’ resilience. This boost would not only bolster the collective military strength of European nations but also serve as a deterrent to potential adversaries.

However, a parallel discourse emerges that underscores the drawbacks of conscription, highlighting concerns that extend beyond its benefits. Critics argue that mandatory military service constitutes an overly costly labour policy, imposing significant burdens on the armed forces and the labour market. The military faces bureaucratic challenges, such as ensuring adequate personnel for the draft process, training, and accommodation for conscripts. Meanwhile, on the labour market side, conscription disrupts professional education and delays human capital accumulation. Moreover, the evolving nature of global conflicts and the increasing emphasis on technological warfare highlight how conscription may fall short of meeting contemporary security challenges, as a professional army is better suited to the sophisticated demands of modern warfare, requiring specialised skills and advanced training that conscription may not adequately provide. Given these concrete downsides, it will take more time for member states to deliberate whether the traditional model of conscription can meet the evolving needs of contemporary armies.

The complex public sentiments surrounding military resurgence pose yet another significant challenge to policymakers when considering the draft reinstatement. According to Gallup International's **public survey**, only 32% of EU citizens have registered a willingness to fight for their country in the event of war, reflecting potential issues with conscripts' motivation and overall policy effectiveness. Similarly, 59% of Germans aged 18 to 29 **oppose** compulsory military service. Yet, these reservations about personal participation do not mean the European youth is ignorant of the potential future conflicts. In fact, 58% of Europeans aged 16 to 38 **express** anxiety about a potential war in Europe within the next five years, 62% support increased military spending, and 47% support the creation of a unified European army, viewing it as a means to ensure peace across the continent. In other words, while there is significant support for enhanced security measures driven by conflict apprehension, younger generations remain increasingly reluctant to engage in military efforts. Consequently, policymakers will face considerable challenges persuading European youth, raised in the peaceful post-Cold War spirit, to bear arms. Overlooking the youth's sentiments, apprehensions, and value system when crafting conscription policies could lead to widespread public dissatisfaction and a surge in protests against its reimplementation.

Finally, member states are likely to evaluate the pros and cons within their own national contexts, making a unified EU stance on conscription improbable. Notably, the EU's 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda has not directly mentioned conscription but does **reference** a "whole-of-society approach" to strengthening the EU's "resilience, preparedness, crisis prevention, and response capacities." While broad, this approach could be interpreted as a light endorsement of conscription if member states deem it necessary. For instance, Baltic countries, facing heightened security threats due to their proximity to Russia, underscore the necessity for citizens to possess basic military skills. In contrast, Southwestern member states with a lesser perception of immediate danger are less inclined to allocate resources toward conscription. Regardless of whether conscription finally becomes more prevalent, the Union's strategic focus on enhancing its own security, as outlined in the Strategic Agenda, indicates a growing need to involve citizens and civil society in defence efforts, aligning with the democratic practice of civilian oversight of security forces.

Conscription's Comeback in Serbia: Why and Cui Bono?

Although mandatory military service in Serbia was abolished in 2011, its reinstatement is now back on the state's agenda. In 2018, only seven years after the abolition, then-Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin **labelled** the abolition a "mistake" made by the previous political leadership and suggested that reintroduction might be beneficial. The topic **resurfaced** sporadically in the media in the following years. In May, the incumbent Prime Minister Miloš Vučević **unveiled** the new government's programme in his exposé, announcing the intention to materialise these ideas. Here's an improved version of the passage. The situation became clearer in September when President Aleksandar Vučić publicly **backed** the idea, expressing his hope that the Government would adopt the measure. He also outlined plans for the proposed military service, which would span 75 days, stressing the need for Serbia's army to become increasingly stronger and more resilient "in a world where everyone expects to win, crush, and destroy the other side." While the topic had previously been raised, often to divert attention from more urgent issues, its formal inclusion in the government's programme, combined with the President's endorsement, now makes its implementation almost certain.

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The reintroduction of conscription comes against the backdrop of significant advancements in the SAF over the past decade. According to the *Global Firepower Index*, Serbia boasts the most robust military in the Western Balkans and also ranks ahead of fifteen EU member states.³ Since 2014, Serbia has **doubled** its military budget from €0.94 billion to €1.84 billion in 2023, with the GDP share rising from 1.94% to 2.85% in the same period. The country has **embarked** on a substantial arms procurement programme, acquiring military hardware from different partners, thereby fostering and exploiting its multivector foreign policy.⁴ For instance, although Serbia has ceased procuring weapons from Russia—such as the MiG-29 jets **acquired** before the war in Ukraine—it continues to purchase arms from various geopolitical powers. From China, Serbia has **acquired** the HQ-22 air defence system, while it has **confirmed** the purchase of 12 Rafale jets from France. Concurrently, Serbia's defence industry has **thrived**, supplying arms to participants in numerous global conflicts, notably arming **Ukraine, Israel**, as well as **both Armenia and Azerbaijan**. Given the enhanced capabilities of the army and its growing role within the Serbian economy, it is unsurprising that there is momentum for expanding personnel, potentially also through conscription.

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3 To illustrate, Serbia is ranked 56th globally. Other Western Balkan countries are positioned as follows: Albania at 90th, Bosnia and Herzegovina at 116th, North Macedonia at 110th, Montenegro at 129th, and Kosovo at 135th. Among EU member states, Serbia surpasses several, some of which are Bulgaria at 62nd, Croatia at 66th, Slovakia at 69th, Belgium at 70th, Austria at 71st, and Ireland at 94th.

4 A multivector foreign policy is a diplomatic strategy in which a country seeks to maintain balanced and cooperative relationships with multiple global powers simultaneously rather than aligning exclusively with only one bloc or nation. Serbia exemplifies this approach by fostering strong ties with the European Union, China, Russia, and the United States.

Like the armed forces of many European countries, the SAF also struggle to attract a sufficient number of recruits. According to *estimates* from the Balkan Security Network, in 2021, the Serbian army had approximately 22,500 personnel in its regular ranks. However, Novica Antić, ex-president of the military trade union, **indicated** that there was an annual shortfall of around 10,000 recruits. Voluntary military service has not been very popular among the youth, partly due to the fact that the average salary for a voluntary recruit **amounts** to less than half of the national average. This lack of interest also aligns with the broader European trend of declining engagement among young people in military and armed combat roles. In 2010, during the period when mandatory military service was still in place, about 50% of young men **sought** conscientious objector status, a constitutional provision allowing individuals to refuse service involving weaponry based on religious or other beliefs. Unless authorities can redesign military service to make it more appealing and aligned with the needs of young people, it is highly likely that potential recruits will continue to seek conscientious objector status massively.

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Apart from both the EU states and Serbia turning to conscription as a solution to ensure sufficient military personnel, the underlying security reasons differ significantly between the two. In the EU, the revival of conscription is primarily driven by the fear of the ongoing war in Ukraine escalating and the potential threat of a Russian attack on an EU or NATO member state. Conversely, Serbia faces no immediate security threats; however, the unresolved issues regarding the status of Kosovo continue to exert a significant influence on its strategic considerations. The stalled dialogue with Pristina, coupled with Kosovo's government's growing **reluctance** to compromise and reported human rights **violations** against the Serbian minority in Northern Kosovo, heightens Serbia's sense of insecurity. Additionally, Kosovo's efforts to **strengthen** its military further exacerbate this unease, pushing Serbia to reconsider its defence posture.

Although there is no direct link between conscription's comeback and a potentially deteriorated security environment, turning to conscription suggests that Serbia is preparing not just for current security demands but for potential future scenarios where a well-prepared and resilient army could be crucial.

Instead of explicitly citing the situation in Kosovo as a reason for the return of conscription, Serbian officials, who consistently assure that the current military forces are sufficient for territorial defence, often point to the nation's proclaimed military neutrality as the primary justification. This reasoning suggests that neutrality necessitates citizen involvement in the military system, though such a connection is not directly supported by international law. In fact, international law does not inherently guarantee neutrality for Serbia; this status must be recognised by other states, as per the **1907 Hague Convention**, to have legal standing. As it stands, **Serbia's form of neutrality** is a political declaration rather than a binding legal status under international law. Even if Serbia's neutrality were recognised internationally, it would impose an obligation on Serbia to be capable of defending itself in the event of an attack, but this does not inherently require mandatory military service. The decision to maintain a professional army could still fulfil this requirement. However, the government leverages the concept of military neutrality, despite its lack of firm grounding in international law, as a persuasive argument, since it appears logical that, outside of military alliances, Serbia's defence would fall to its own citizens.

Although not stated explicitly, the most likely rationale for reintroducing conscription is its popularity among the ruling party's electorate. Opinion polls consistently show strong public support for reinstating military service, with 74% of the general population **backing** the idea in 2018. Even among the younger demographic (15-30), support for conscription **stood** at 46% in 2022. Additionally, the military enjoys significant public trust. According to the existing **data**, 73% of citizens express complete or partial trust in the SAF, making it the second most trusted institution, just after the firefighting service, among all security and justice entities. This confidence is particularly strong among older generations, with 92% of those aged 65 and older expressing complete or partial confidence as they retain vivid memories of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), where military service was seen as a rite of passage and a crucial social bond in a multiethnic federation. Moreover, conscription plays a key role in upholding traditional masculinity narratives, which have been further reinforced by Russian propaganda **depicting** the West as a corrupt civilisation dominated by "weak men" and queer identities. Even without these drivers behind public support, such favourable opinion can still pose a problem as political elites might be tempted to follow popular sentiment for quick political gains rather than making well-reasoned decisions based on a thorough security and economic analysis.

Balancing Act: Serbia's Military Resurgence and its Impact on EU Integration and Regional Dynamics

Serbia has already demonstrated an awareness of the importance of the EU's strategic autonomy and security cooperation, both within the EU and through bilateral relationships with its member states. This is evident in Serbia's involvement in the "non-military" aspects of strategic autonomy, such as **signing** a Memorandum of Understanding with the EU to establish a strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains, and electric vehicles, against the backdrop of its intention to exploit its extensive lithium reserves. Furthermore, Serbia's commitment to European "hard security" is reflected in its contributions to EU security priorities, including cooperation on **migration management**, participation in **military missions** worldwide, and providing **arms support** to Ukraine. Thus, if managed appropriately, the reintroduction of military service could signal Serbia's intent to contribute a capable military and resilient population to future EU defence frameworks.

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However, Serbia's actions are unlikely to be well-received in the Western Balkans and may be perceived as a threat. The historical legacy of the Serbian army's role in Kosovo during the 1990s, along with the activities of the Serb-dominated JNA and Serb-led paramilitary groups in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, has fostered deep-seated mistrust. This historical context is further complicated by recent responses: following Serbia's announcement of conscription reintroduction, both **Kosovo** and **Croatia** have also announced plans to introduce mandatory military service. Similarly, for Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is noteworthy that the citizens of Republika Srpska, many of whom hold dual citizenship, could be recruited into the Serbian army, which could potentially further detach them from identifying with Bosnia and Herzegovina as a federal state. Moreover, regional critics are likely to view conscription as another tool of the "Serbian world" project, a term introduced by former Serbian Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin, heavily criticised for mirroring the concept of the "Russian world" and seen as Serbia's means to justify interference in neighbouring countries. These factors may lead to negative portrayals of Serbia's actions, potentially damaging its reputation and complicating its EU accession process.

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These concerns may not be unfounded. The reintroduction of military service poses a real risk of adversely affecting public opinion and support for European integration among young men. A significant issue is the potential for rising nationalism and sovereigntism, which could undermine the EU integration efforts. Additionally, the Serbian military's institutional memory—shaped by its one-sided view of the Kosovo conflict and the 1999 NATO intervention—can foster a perception that the "collective West," a term frequently employed by Russian propaganda, is an adversary to Serbia. This perception blurs the distinction between past grievances and present realities, as well as between NATO and the EU. It finds fertile ground in Serbia and may lead to the indoctrination of young recruits, all of which were born after the NATO intervention, thereby reinforcing negative attitudes toward Western institutions. Given these challenges, it is crucial for pro-European civil society to engage proactively in the monitoring and improvement of the new military service policies, should they be introduced, in line with the democratic principle of civilian oversight of security forces. This involvement may help mitigate potential risks and ensure that Serbia's actions remain aligned with its declared strategic goal of EU membership.

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