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*Student Protests in Serbia:
Pinpointing its Key Characteristics
and Tracking EU's Response*

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STUDENT PROTESTS IN SERBIA: PINPOINTING ITS KEY CHARACTERISTICS AND TRACKING EU'S RESPONSE¹

Abstract

The student-led protests in Serbia, sparked by the tragic collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy on November 1, 2024, have evolved into a nationwide movement against government malpractice, systemic corruption, and weak institutional oversight. Initially focused on demanding accountability for the disaster, the protests quickly expanded to encompass broader societal frustrations, drawing in farmers, labour unions, and civil society organisations. Universities and schools also joined, partially or fully suspending classes in defiance of government orders. In such a context, the paper analyses the key characteristics of the protests, while investigating the data on the public opinion on the protests. The idea is to grasp how the protests managed to maintain momentum despite the government's attempt to subdue and delegitimise them. Although the Prime Minister resigned on January 28, 2025, the political crisis remains unresolved, and protests continue, representing the biggest challenge to the ruling regime since 2012.

The paper also tracks the EU's response to these developments. In particular, it relies on the content and discourse analysis of the speeches on the political crisis of the officials from the European Commission and the European Parliament. Going forward, the paper argues that a key opportunity for the EU lies in leveraging financial assistance through the Reform and Growth Facility, conditioning further access to funds on governance reforms and adherence to rule-of-law principles. Meanwhile, the EU Council decisions on Serbia's accession process, particularly regarding Cluster 3, could serve as additional leverage. Finally, the European Parliament is expected to remain the most vocal critic, particularly as it will adopt a Report on Serbia in May 2025. As protests persist, the paper concludes that the EU's handling of this crisis, in line with its competencies and diplomatic limitations, will serve as a crucial test of its commitment to democratic values and enlargement policy integrity.

Introduction – The Emergence of a Political Crisis in Serbia

On November 1, 2024, the canopy of Novi Sad's central railway station collapsed, claiming 15 lives. Initially marked by daily moments of silence, the tragedy soon gave way to protests that have expanded throughout the country. Students led the charge, taking to the streets to demand accountability. While the immediate focus was on the canopy disaster, the broader outrage stemmed from long-standing grievances about government malpractice, weak oversight, and systemic corruption. In fact, public frustration escalated rapidly when evidence of human error and mismanagement surfaced, revealing that the tragedy could have been avoided. Accordingly, what began as localised demonstrations quickly grew into a nationwide movement, drawing in farmers, labour unions, and civil society organisations. Moreover, universities and many elementary and high schools started partially or fully suspending classes in support of protests, defying government orders to start the new semester. Instead of recognising the legitimacy of the demands and engaging in genuine dialogue, the ruling elite

¹ The views expressed in this work are his own and do not express in any way whatsoever the opinion of European Policy Centre (CEP-Belgrade).

has kept portraying the protests as “an attempt of a coloured revolution”, further polarising society².

Although the government, after a series of blunders and aggravating missteps, has nominally agreed to meet the student demands, widespread distrust remains regarding its true intentions. Just hours after the ruling elites unveiled their plan to address the protesters' demands — bringing together the president, prime minister, and Assembly speaker as a show of unity — armed men wielding baseball bats emerged from the Novi Sad office of the ruling party and attacked a group of demonstrators. One protester was hospitalised with a dislocated jaw, prompting Prime Minister and ruling party president Miloš Vučević to announce his resignation on January 28, 2025. However, it is clear that his resignation has not resolved the underlying crisis. The protests reached their peak on March 15, 2025, with an estimated 300,000 people taking to the streets of Belgrade. At one point, during a moment of silence for victims, the demonstrations were interrupted by what witnesses described as an unnatural, jet-like sound—leading to later suspicions that the government had used some sort of "sonic cannon". With this incident added to their list of grievances, the ongoing protests continue to shape Serbia's socio-political landscape.

What Makes these Protests Stand Out?

Born from mistrust *vis-à-vis* the government, while learning from mistakes from past protests, four key characteristics have made these protests particularly notable:

- 1) *Tenacity and ingenuity* – This were best demonstrated when students organised protests on New Year's Eve, blocked key intersections in Belgrade for 24 hours, and staged several day marches from Belgrade to other cities. Citizens across Serbia joined in, holding intersection and route blockades, as well as peaceful sit-ins, culminating in a general strike on January 24. At the time of writing this paper, students have even blocked the entrance to the Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) for 22 hours, due to their bias in reporting.
- 2) *Plenary decision-making* – Despite ongoing protests for months, no single individual or small group has emerged as the movement's leader. Instead, students continue to make decisions collectively through plenary sessions. By engaging in direct democracy, students have managed to maintain a peaceful yet effective approach. In doing so, they have deprived the regime of its ability to conduct smear campaigns against potential protest leaders, as it had done in the past.
- 3) *Catch-all protests* – Atypical for Serbian standards, these protests encompass a wide spectrum of social groups. From students and factory workers to agricultural labourers and urban residents, the expressed public discontent bridges the gap between larger cities and rural communities, as well as between younger and older generations. Notable examples include workers from *Kolubara* coal factory or even a group of journalists from RTS.
- 4) *Secondary role of the opposition* – Unlike previous protests, these demonstrations are not affiliated with any political party. While opposition parties have previously managed to organize large-scale protests, none have reached this level of scale or influence. Aware that they still struggle to convince citizens lend them their support —

² Maja Stojanovic. (2025, February 20). In the midst of mass protests, Serbian officials are recycling the narrative of a “colour revolution”, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/02/20/in-the-midst-of-mass-protests-serbian-officials-are-recycling-the-narrative-of-a-colour-revolution/>

due to media manipulation, smear campaigns, and an uneven playing field, as they argue — the opposition has voluntarily chosen to take a back seat, assuming a supportive role this time around.

Although Serbia has a rich history of protests, particularly against the ruling regime, none has managed to acquire such an overwhelming majority — as shown by the opinion survey conducted by CRTA³. Once students began spearheading the protests, their four key demands gained dominant support among the public (see Table 1). Although there were concerns that the protests might subside during the students' winter break and holiday period, overall support has remained steady over time – even rising from 61% in December 2024 to 64% in February 2025. Among those who support the protests, 97% of opposition-leaning individuals back them, while a staggering 76% of those who are “undecided” about political parties also express support. Interestingly, the number of protest supporters who traditionally lean toward the ruling party doubled from 11% to 20% in just two months. Despite President Vučić usual dominance over Serbia’s socio-political landscape, he now finds himself in second place. The data indicate that 58% of the respondents trust students over Vučić, while 33% favour Vučić over the students⁴. Furthermore, student-led protest enjoys greater support across all regions of Serbia and socio-economic groups—except among those older than 65 and individuals with only an elementary school education. Therefore, it is safe to argue that these protests represent the biggest challenge to the ruling regime, which has been in power since 2012.

Table 1. The level of support for student demands in Serbia

Student demands	% of support
The release of documents related to the reconstruction of Novi Sad railway station	84%
The dropping of charges against detained protesters	57%
The prosecution of those who attacked peaceful demonstrators	81%
Increased university funding	78%

The EU’s Response

Given the scale and scope of the protests, citizens and civil society have started to wonder how the EU will position itself *vis-à-vis* the crisis. The first to take a stance were political groups in the European Parliament, between January 28 and 29, 2025. According to the Social Democrats⁵, under the current circumstances, without full respect for European values and rules, “there can be no progress for Serbia on its path towards the EU” nor the opening of new clusters in the accession negotiations. The Liberals⁶ then warned that without safeguarding the

³ CRTA. (2025, February 19). Serbian citizens’ massive support for students’ demands and protests, CRTA. <https://crtars/en/massive-support-for-serbian-students-demands-protests/>

⁴ See CRTA 2025.

⁵ S&D Group [@TheProgressives] (2025, January 28). *We stand in solidarity with RS students demanding justice & accountability for the lives lost in the Novi Sad train...* [Tweet]. X. <https://x.com/TheProgressives/status/1884148975936364788>

⁶ Goleanu, L. (2025, January 29). *Serbia: Justice and accountability must prevail* [Press release]. Renew Europe. <https://www.reneweuropengroup.eu/news/2025-01-29/serbia-justice-and-accountability-must-prevail>

rule of law and ensuring a truly enabling environment for civil society and the media “Serbia's path towards a European future is seriously in danger”. Finally, the Greens⁷ concluded that these mass “protests represent an outcry for justice” in a country ravaged by corruption, media restrictions and repression against political opponents. In short, the Europarliamentarians seized the opportunity to amplify students’ demands within the EU, increasing pressure for the issue to gain more traction in EU policymaking circles.

On January 29, 2025, Serbian civil society organisations began demanding for a direct stance by European Commission, through a letter urging the EU to “pay more attention to the events in Serbia and stand in defence of its own values before it is too late”⁸. Stating that there is a “drastic discrepancy” between the European Commission’s analysis on the state of reform in Serbia – as highlighted in the latest Commission Report on Serbia from November 2024⁹ – and the policy the EU is implementing toward Serbia, they argued that the behaviour of the Union’s institutions was “shocking”. The situation escalated on February 4, 2025, when the Program Council of the National Convention on the EU (NKEU) – a collaborative network of more than 700 civil society organisations in Serbia – announced¹⁰ that there were currently “no conditions for further participation” of the NKEU in activities within Serbia’s EU accession process that involve cooperation with political decision-makers. Civil society represents one of the key pillars of democracy and one of the most influential pro-European voices in the current Serbian landscape and the essence of the request was for the Commission to come out with a clear view of the crisis and to stand up for the rule of law in Serbia.

A response to the political situation in Serbia from the European Commission arrived on 5 February, 2025, when the new Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, published an open letter.¹¹ Three key points stand out:

- 1) *Freedom of assembly is a fundamental right*: Kos emphasised that the freedom of peaceful assembly is a fundamental right that must be respected and protected. She condemned incidents against demonstrators, insisted on an urgent and impartial investigation, and stressed that the police must ensure the safety of citizens.
- 2) *The European agenda strengthens the rule of law*. The EU remains committed to supporting Serbia on its path to membership, with an emphasis on key reforms in the fight against corruption, strengthening judicial independence, institutional accountability, media freedom, and improving electoral conditions.
- 3) *EU accession is a whole-of-society project*. Kos stressed that EU integration is not solely the responsibility of the government but a national project that requires the engagement of all — institutions, the opposition, civil society, and citizens. She called for inclusive dialogue among all relevant actors to successfully implement the necessary reforms and solidify Serbia’s European path.

⁷ Greens/EFA in the EU Parliament [@GreensEFA] (2025, January 28). *We stand with the Serbian citizens protesting! These massive protests are an outcry for justice in a country ravaged by...* [Tweet]. X. <https://x.com/TheProgressives/status/1884148975936364788>

⁸ European Western Balkans. (2025a, January 30). Organizacije civilnog društva pozvale EU institucije da reaguju na političku krizu u Srbiji. *European Western Balkans*. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/organizacije-civilnog-drustva-pozvale-eu-institucije-da-reaguju-na-politicku-krizu-u-srbiji/>

⁹ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf

¹⁰ European Western Balkans. (2025b, February 4). Nacionalni konvent neće učestvovati u aktivnostima u okviru procesa evropskih integracija. *European Western Balkans*. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/nacionalni-konvent-neze-ucestvovati-u-aktivnostima-u-okviru-procesa-evropskih-integracija/>

¹¹ Kos, M. (2025a, February 5). *Open letter from Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos in response to letters received on Serbia* [Press release]. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_417

While these three points are relevant in the broader context of Serbia's accession process, Commissioner Kos' letter leaves a general impression of bureaucratic detachment and formality. A critical reading of the text of the letter by civil society reveals that the letter contains no mention of "students" or their demands, while the word "protest" appears only once¹². This kind of statement was perhaps not an ideal start for the new commissioner — at least not from the perspective of Serbian civil society¹³. Soon after, however, Commissioner Kos had a second opportunity to clarify her stance during the European Parliament plenary session on February 12, which was dedicated to *the political crisis in Serbia*¹⁴. This time, while taking the floor, Commissioner Kos adopted a more direct approach, emphasising that the accession process is *reversible*, while highlighting that Serbia's path toward the EU offers solutions to many of the issues at the heart of the protesters' demands¹⁵. This marked an evolution in the Commissioner's willingness to engage with the subject matter in a more substantive and meaningful way.

Right afterwards, all political groups got the opportunity to express their official positions on the crisis in Serbia. To understand how and to what extent different groups diverged in their views, this paper relies on discourse analysis. The speeches were categorised as follows: 1) "Strong Support" – fully endorses the protests, viewing them as essential for democracy, rule of law, and anti-corruption efforts, while calling for more active EU engagement. 2) "Moderate Support" – recognises the legitimacy of protests and indirectly refers to the rule of law malpractices while also emphasising the importance of stability and Serbia's sovereignty. 3) "No support" – Either outright denies the protests' relevance or acknowledges them while expressing scepticism about their impact, while also prioritising other political considerations and opposing any EU involvement in Serbia's internal affairs. By systematically evaluating parliamentary speeches, the section identifies patterns in political discourse, highlighting ideological divides on democracy, sovereignty, and EU intervention.

To understand the official stance of political groups, this analysis starts by first considering only the positions of the EU Members of Parliament who spoke on behalf of their groups during the debate (see Table 2). The Social Democrats (S&D), Renew Europe (Liberals), and Greens/European Free Alliance offer strong support, portraying the protests as a legitimate democratic movement and linking their demands to broader rule-of-law reforms essential for Serbia's future EU accession. They condemn government repression and urge the EU to take a firmer stance in defending democracy. Meanwhile, the European People's Party (EPP) and The Left provide moderate support. The EPP recognises the right to protest but emphasises Serbia's sovereignty and the importance of dialogue, while The Left stops short of explicitly endorsing the protests, instead highlighting Serbia's overall democratic decline and criticising the EU's indecisiveness. In contrast, Patriots for Europe (PfE) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), while acknowledging the protests, argue that the government has already taken the necessary steps to address concerns and warn against further isolating Serbia. Finally, Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) takes the strongest opposing stance, outright dismissing the protests as foreign-influenced and illegitimate while rejecting any EU interference. The positioning of these groups — where a strong majority recognises the legitimacy of the protests

¹² Adnan Ćerimagić. (2025, February 10). Marta Kos and the dilemma of Serbian protests, *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/02/10/marta-kos-and-the-dilemma-of-serbian-protests/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ European Parliament. (2025, February 6). *Parliament to discuss political crisis in Serbia*. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/briefing/2025-02-10/4/parliament-to-discuss-political-crisis-in-serbia>

¹⁵ Kos, M. (2025b, February 11). *Check against delivery*. EP Plenary Debate "Council and Commission Statements - Political Crisis in Serbia," Strasbourg, France. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_25_491

and calls for greater EU action — reflects their broader views on democracy, sovereignty, and the EU’s engagement with this candidate country.

Table 2 Positioning as per Political Group Spokespersons

Group	Support Level	Description
S&D (Social Democrats)	Strong Support	Fully supports the protests as a democratic movement, calls for electoral and institutional reforms, criticises government repression, and urges the EU to strengthen democracy in Serbia.
Renew Europe (Liberals)	Strong Support	Strongly supports student-led protests, and urges the EU to demand rule of law and democratic reforms in Serbia.
Greens/European Free Alliance	Strong Support	Portrays protests as a fight for democracy, human rights, and against corruption, urging strong EU support while demanding Serbian authorities enact reforms and take responsibility.
EPP (European People's Party)	Moderate Support	Recognises the right to protest and the need for accountability while emphasising Serbia’s sovereignty and the importance of dialogue.
The Left	Moderate Support	It avoids directly mentioning the protests, but acknowledges Serbia’s overall political instability and democratic decline while criticising the EU’s indecisiveness.
ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists)	No Support	Emphasises that the government has already taken the necessary action while highlighting Serbia’s importance as a strategic partner and warning against isolating the country or pushing it toward Russia and China.
PfE (Patriots for Europe)	No Support	Insists on Serbia’s sovereignty, highlights government responsiveness, and criticises disruptions caused by ongoing demonstrations.
ESN (Europe of Sovereign Nations)	No Support	Dismisses protests as foreign-influenced and denies legitimacy, opposing EU interference.

Although the speeches of those speaking on behalf of their groups reflect the overall sentiment, it is also important to account for all speeches to gain a better understanding of the nuances. In total, there were 30 speakers (see Table 3). When combining strong and moderate support, an impressive 83% of favourable MEPs is recorded. Among groups with more than two speakers beyond the spokesperson, the S&D and Renew Europe were the most consistent with their official group stance. On the other hand, the EPP showed notable divergence from its official

position. Most EPP members who spoke strongly supported the protests, with one even suggesting “pausing negotiations” regarding accession. This was a significant blow for the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), an affiliate member of the EPP, as the group itself remains divided on the issue. As for the ECR, the situation is mixed. While the group officially stopped short of endorsing the protests — arguing instead that the government has already taken necessary steps to address them — one MEP strongly supported the youth, stating that its actions “will change the course of Serbia for a better future,” while another expressed moderate support. Similar mixed backing comes from non-affiliated Europarliamentarians. The Greens and Patriots each had one additional speaker, both aligning with their official group stance. Finally, the Sovereignists and the Left had no other speakers beyond their spokespersons. In short, it is undeniable that EU MPs stand in solidarity with students in Serbia, with many willing to go beyond their official — and often constrained — group positions to demonstrate their commitment to the cause.

Table 3. Support per Group Europarliamentarians

Group	Total Speakers	Strong Support	Moderate Support	Low or No Support
EPP	7	5	2	
SD	6	6		
Patriots	2			2
ECR	3	1	1	1
Renew	5	4	1	
Greens	2	2		
Left	1		1	
ESN	1			1
NA	3	1	1	1
Total	30	19	6	5
		63%	20%	17%

Conclusions

Students and professors, pupils and teachers, have taken a significant gamble by sacrificing an entire academic year in their fight for democracy. While their movement has already led to the resignation of the Prime Minister, the uncertainty surrounding its long-term outcomes makes this a high-stakes battle.

The protests are set to continue in the coming months, especially as more sectors of society join in, fuelling demonstrations across Serbia. As momentum grows, so too will calls for the EU to take a more active role in compelling the government to uphold basic EU values. While the EU may have a compelling strategic interest in not "shaking the boat" — recognising Serbia’s increasingly important role in migration management, infrastructure connectivity,

critical raw material extraction, and limiting external influence — it must now weigh its options carefully. Failing to engage could alienate pro-European voices in Serbia, while an overly assertive stance in favour of the protesters may escalate tensions with Serbian authorities and further complicate the already slow-moving accession process.

The big question remains how the EU can influence the Government to start upholding the democratic norms in the country, in line with the European Commission’s 2024 and all previous reports on Serbia¹⁶.

This paper argues that all relevant EU institutions have a role to play in addressing the crisis, in line with their current competencies. Namely, the key opportunity lies in leveraging the Reform and Growth Facility¹⁷. As such, the Facility preconditions (article 5) access to the increased funds by upholding and respecting effective democratic mechanisms and the rule of law. It also pinpoints the specific objectives of the Facility (article 3) shall be to further strengthen the fundamentals of the enlargement process, including the rule of law and fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions, including “strengthening the fight against fraud and all forms of corruption”. As the preconditions and specific objectives align with students demands – which have a functional and transparent democratic system based on rule of law – the European Commission should carefully consider conditioning further financial assistance on demonstratable progress in governance reforms.¹⁸ In addition, the EU Council will, in the meantime, have in its hands the fate of Cluster 3 (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth), which Serbia had initially expected to open as early as late January or early February. Finally, the European Parliament, although without an official role in the negotiating process, will have the opportunity to continue raising awareness in May, when its Report on Serbia is expected to be adopted. Overall, as the protests escalate in the following period, the EU's ability to act proactively to protect the integrity of the accession process will face a critical test.

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¹⁶ European Commission. (2024, 30 October). Serbia 2024 Report, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2024_en

¹⁷ European Parliament and EU Council. (2024, 14 May). Regulation (EU) 2024/1449 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L_202401449

¹⁸ The Commission alone determines the fulfillment of preconditions and conditions, as well as whether specific objectives are met, when deciding on granting access to increased funding.