

Reinventing Engagement Through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

National publication

TOWARDS TRUST AND REFORM: CITIZEN-DRIVEN POLICY PROPOSALS FOR STRENGTHENING RULE OF LAW, EU INTEGRATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN SERBIA

Country: Serbia

Author: Miloš Pavković, Chief Strategist & Researcher

Organisation: European Policy Centre (CEP)



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INTRODUCTION

The REACH project – Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations – seeks to strengthen democratic culture by promoting meaningful citizen engagement in debates on key European policy issues. Against the backdrop of declining trust in representative institutions and limited participatory mechanisms, REACH fosters inclusive deliberation on three interconnected themes: the rule of law, the environment, and EU integration. The project runs from July 2024 to December 2025 and is funded by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). It is implemented by a consortium of eight organisations: the European Policy Centre (CEP) as project coordinator, European Policy Centre (EPC, Brussels), Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), Foreign Policy Initiative BH (FPI BH), Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), Notre Europe – Institut Jacques Delors (NE IJD), Association for Civil Society Development SMART, and Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). By creating space for citizens, including youth and traditionally underrepresented groups, to reflect on and express their views, REACH aims to inform national and EU-level policy debates and contribute to a more participatory and future-oriented European project.

Consultative process held in Serbia in 2024 and 2025 included three local citizen consultations – in Belgrade (October 2024), Novi Sad (November 2024) and Niš (November 2024), as well as a national consultation event held in Belgrade (April 2025). Local consultations in three cities gathered more than 90 people, while the national consultative event put together 12 citizen delegates and 17 experts in the three aforementioned areas. All four events showcased a high level of interest and knowledge in political processes among ordinary citizens. This encouraging trend is reflected in high-quality debates among citizens, ease in identifying key problems when it comes to the rule of law, EU integration and environment, and constructive teamwork in searching for solutions and developing policy proposals. Youth participants were the most vocal in Novi Sad, all the while in Niš, elderly citizens dominated the debate. While people in Belgrade were mostly Eurosceptic, the common denominator for all citizens was the fact that they recognised the rule of law as the central point in the triangle with the EU integration and environment. More concretely, they pinpointed corruption as a sub-area of the rule of law that requires more attention and a new policy response in order to improve the general state of play. It is important to take into account the local context, as during the consultative process, the biggest student and civic protest¹ erupted across Serbia, which has inevitably affected the local and national consultations.

The debates organised by the European Policy Centre (CEP) help reveal key political trends, citizens' concerns and recommendations for different stakeholders, including local self-government units, national government and even the EU. Some of the issues include inadequate implementation of laws, political pressure on the judiciary, low public trust, unqualified political appointments, widespread corruption, and legal uncertainty, as part of the rule of law thematic area. When it comes to the EU integration, citizens questioned the political will for actual accession to the EU, adding concerns of a lack of reform process and unfair treatment of the Kosovo dispute as key stumbling blocks. Finally, when it comes to the environment, inadequate waste management infrastructure, polluted drinking water, and a lack of cultural attitudes are some of the topics that came up during the debates.

FROM LOCAL TO NATIONAL CONSULTATIONS – KEY INSIGHTS

As previously mentioned, CEP organised four consultative events in Serbia. Three local citizen consultations in 2024: Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš, and national citizen consultations in Belgrade (April 2025). Local events gathered 91 citizens in total, with the aim of stimulating discussions around three pre-set topics: the rule of law, EU integration and environment. With the support of facilitators and experts in these three areas, citizens were tasked to map key challenges burdening the three thematic areas, as well as to explore their mutual connection. Local consultations resulted in creating a list of more than 20 trade-offs and synergies among three thematic areas that were further discussed at the national citizen consultation event. The national event gathered 12 citizen delegates from three local consultative events, and 17 experts,

¹ Following the collapse of the Novi Sad Central Railway Station canopy, in which 16 people lost their lives, large protests erupted firstly in Novi Sad and then quickly spread across the country sparking the biggest civic protest in modern Serbian history. See more at: Strahinja Subotić, [Serbia's civic awakening: the 2024-2025 student protests in focus](#), Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), June 2025.

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relevant stakeholders in areas of the rule of law, EU integration and environment. Those were representatives of academia, civil society, independent experts and state institutions. The aim of the national event was to enhance and deepen discussion on topics identified at the local consultative events, and with the support of experts, to develop 10 concrete policy proposals in three thematic areas.

Methodology for organising consultative events was developed and provided by the European Policy Centre (EPC) expert Corina Stratulat. Ms Stratulat has proven experience in the European Citizens' Consultations project, adjusting the methodology for this particular project (REACH) and regional and national contexts. The methodological bedrock was the citizens' assembly model, whereby at all levels of the consultative process, a diverse group of citizens discussed key issues within three thematic areas on equal footing, identifying them and searching for solutions based on consensus with the support of facilitators and experts. This methodological framework not only stimulated quality debates and teamwork, but also produced relevant recommendations for addressing identified problems within the thematic areas of rule of law, EU integration and environment. The recruitment of citizens was done by a professional recruitment agency with the aim of securing a representative sample, i.e. a sample that represents "Serbia in miniature."² Thus, the groups of citizens who participated in consultations in each city included balanced representation of both genders, youth, minorities, etc.

Citizen Insights Across Cities: Rule of Law, EU Integration, and the Environment

In Belgrade, during local consultations citizens stressed the urgent need to strengthen the rule of law in Serbia, citing **inadequate enforcement of laws, political pressure on the judiciary, low public trust, unqualified appointments, corruption, and legal uncertainty**. They called for comprehensive judicial reforms, transparent processes, merit-based appointments, and continuous legal education, proposing measures from public awareness campaigns to stronger EU engagement, independent monitoring bodies, and political education on the rule of law. Views on EU integration were mixed, with **frustration over the slow accession process** and obstacles such as the **unresolved Kosovo issue, governance weaknesses, corruption, and concerns about cultural identity**. Scepticism arose from perceived EU "double standards", fears of member-state vetoes, and doubts about the benefits of membership, though many acknowledged economic advantages and the need for cooperation with the EU. Citizens agreed that internal reforms in governance, media freedom, and rule of law were necessary regardless of accession. On the environment, participants identified **harmful cultural attitudes, inadequate infrastructure, and weak enforcement** as core challenges, urging environmental education from childhood, stricter penalties for polluters, better waste management, recycling plants, and wastewater facilities in every municipality. They highlighted the dangers of untreated wastewater entering the Danube, called for renewable energy adoption, eco-tourism, eco-villages, relocation of industrial zones, and stronger coordination between institutions. NGOs and environmental activists were viewed as essential partners, while a long-term governmental strategy balancing economic growth with sustainability was deemed vital. Citizens emphasised that effective environmental protection also hinges on the rule of law, with stricter legal regulations, anti-corruption measures, and learning from best practices both in EU and non-EU countries.

Citizens in Novi Sad stressed the rule of law as essential for Serbia, particularly after the deadly collapse of the city's railway station canopy, which they saw as emblematic of systemic governance failures. They described a **decline in judicial independence, weak law enforcement, corruption, politicised appointments, and infiltration of organised crime into public institutions**, all of which undermine trust. While some proposed radical measures such as replacing all judges and prosecutors, more feasible suggestions included creating judicial police, enforcing harsher anti-corruption penalties, and

² "Representative sample" in this case should not be mixed with the representative sample usually employed for public opinion polls, which require engaging a much higher number of people (around 1200), but representative in the sense that people participating in consultative events faithfully represent the socio-economic characteristics of their local community.

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implementing merit-based appointments. Education for both the public and legal professionals was seen as a long-term solution, alongside stronger EU pressure, through instruments like IPA funds and the Growth Plan, to push reforms, even suggesting blocking funds to compel change. On EU integration, participants doubted the government's **political will**, arguing it benefits from the status quo and misuses EU funds, while the **EU's slow pace and insufficient pressure** were also criticised. **Concerns over brain drain** reinforced perceptions of an imbalanced relationship, with Serbia providing resources but seeing limited gains. In the environmental sphere, citizens emphasised education, personal responsibility, and expert-led governance to address problems like **poor waste management, polluted water, untreated sewage, and outdated infrastructure**. They opposed harmful projects such as the "Jadar" lithium mine, urged stricter regulations, better enforcement, afforestation, and expansion of green urban spaces. Renewable energy development, improved public transport, and private-sector incentives for sustainable initiatives were identified as priorities, with Vojvodina's wind parks highlighted as a successful model. Civil society was seen as an underutilised but vital partner in environmental governance.

In Niš, citizens stressed the complexity of measuring the rule of law, but the fatal Novi Sad railway station collapse intensified **concerns over corruption, political interference in the judiciary, inadequate appointments, costly and inaccessible justice, and misuse of prosecutors against dissidents**. They criticised poor legal education, low-quality private universities, high fees from notaries and enforcement officers, and media glorification of criminals. Proposed reforms included reviewing judges' performance, publishing statistics, annual reporting, shifting to panels of three judges, and merit-based recruitment. They called for depoliticising the High Prosecutorial Council, strengthening anti-corruption through education, empowering the Agency for Prevention of Corruption, and creating a Special Prosecutor for Fighting Corruption and Organised Crime. Citizens urged the EU to enforce monitoring, set compliance deadlines, and establish an independent oversight body. On EU integration, the **Kosovo issue dominated**, with demands for transparency, cultural heritage protection, and fair treatment compared to Ukraine when it comes to territorial integrity. Some proposed simultaneous membership for Serbia and Kosovo to reduce tensions, while reforms in the rule of law, anti-corruption, and education were seen as essential for joining the EU. Citizens criticised **inadequate public awareness campaigns, media polarisation, and low EU visibility** outside Belgrade, urging greater EU engagement. Declining support stemmed from perceived EU shortcomings during the pandemic and migrant crisis, and competition from BRICS and China, though many still valued economic benefits and programmes like Erasmus. On the environment, citizens prioritised education from schools to families, stronger governance led by experts, consistent enforcement, and incentives like bottle reclamation. Unique concerns such as **light pollution** joined broader issues of **air pollution, deforestation, and recycling**. They highlighted **poor waste management**, proposed a national recycling centre, **wastewater treatment**, afforestation, urban green architecture, and renewable energy development, including geothermal potential in Niš. Practical measures included tree planting to offset development and the transparent use of ecological tariffs.

Across all topics, participants identified the rule of law as a central point in three interrelated thematic areas. They linked progress in environmental protection and EU integration to strengthening the rule of law, viewing governance reform as the foundation for addressing Serbia's systemic challenges. Environmental protection was linked to EU accession, with anti-corruption as a prerequisite, and calls for more relatable EU outreach. Citizens were well aware that without major steps in reforming and improving the rule of law, the accession of Serbia to the EU wouldn't materialise. The rule of law was systematically present across all three areas in all three cities of local consultations. It was a dominant theme, particularly in Novi Sad, where the horrific accident at the Central Railway Station sparked citizens' attention and turned it to the judiciary. In Belgrade and Niš, the rule of law also dominated the dialogue, setting it as a bedrock for all other reforms and as the decisive test of Serbia's readiness and credibility on its path toward EU membership.

Navigating Trade-Offs and Synergies: Lessons from National Consultations



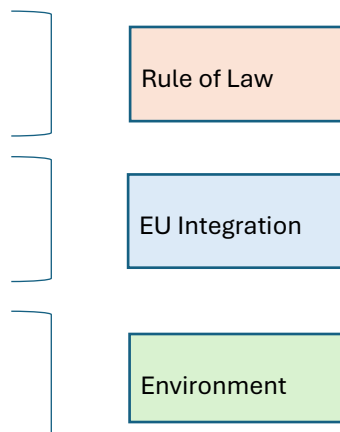
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National consultations aimed to build upon ideas developed and discussed during local events. Representatives of the European Policy Centre (CEP) presented the Input Paper, which contained a summary and the results of three local citizen consultations. As part of the Input Paper, participants were introduced to all trade-offs and synergies, i.e. topics and identified problems within three thematic areas. Participants were presented with a list of more than 20 trade-offs and synergies, whereby they had to vote for 10 of them with the highest priority, in order to filter them and shorten the list. This part of the consultations proved challenging, as it was hard to reach a unanimous decision, which was the aim of the facilitators. Following an open debate, participants at national consultations strived for unanimity but decided to employ a qualified majority voting method (2/3 majority) when unanimity could not be reached for deciding on 10 trade-offs and synergies and recommendations developed. Participants agreed that some of the trade-offs and synergies are mutually connected and that could therefore be covered by one broader recommendation. This made it easier to shorten the list from more than 20 to 12 policy areas. Experts and citizens, with the support of facilitators, classified key trade-offs and synergies in the following areas:

1. Dysfunctional institutions, including selective law enforcement
2. Widespread corruption, organised crime, and nepotism
3. Political influence on the judiciary
4. Distrust in institutions
5. Serbia's internal reforms on path to EU accession
6. Unanimity in the EU enlargement policy
7. EU double standards
8. Kosovo open question
9. Protections of nature
10. Critical raw materials
11. Waste management
12. Recycling infrastructure



Across three groups in Serbia's national citizens' consultations, participants identified pressing challenges in environmental protection, the rule of law, and EU integration, proposing solutions to address distrust in institutions, strengthen democracy, and advance reforms. As a result, they have developed 33 concrete policy proposals in total. Citizens called for broader public participation in decision-making, from local-level direct democracy to institutionalised environmental oversight. Electoral reform was seen as vital for increasing accountability and representation, alongside public pressure to ensure independent judicial and prosecutorial work. A recurring demand was for structural judicial reforms, including vetting judges and prosecutors, establishing a judicial police, and creating a special anti-corruption prosecution. Participants urged digitalising the judiciary to improve access to justice. In EU-related discussions, there was emphasis on improving transparency in allocating and spending EU IPA funds, enhancing EU communication in Serbia, and even setting a target accession date to combat public disillusionment. Recommendations also targeted youth and minority engagement, particularly between Serbia and Kosovo. Environmental proposals included expanding recycling infrastructure, creating a dedicated environmental fund, boosting subsidies for energy efficiency, conducting further research on critical materials before exploitation, and introducing incentives and penalties to drive environmental responsibility. Finally, as part of the environmental discussion, citizens called for the adoption of national spatial and development plans through inclusive processes.

Furthermore, discussions revealed deep scepticism about Serbia's judicial and governance reforms, seen as cosmetic and politically controlled despite formal constitutional changes adopted in 2022. Selective law enforcement and executive dominance over the parliament were identified as core governance failures, with calls for fruitful parliamentary debates, merit-based ministerial appointments, and citizen involvement in oversight over the key institutions. Foreign policy,

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especially the Kosovo dialogue, was criticised for secrecy and manipulation, with demands for referenda on key national issues and safeguards against foreign corporate control of strategic assets. Participants viewed Serbia's "on the European path" status as a pretext for stagnation, urging the EU to take a firmer stance against "stabilitocracy."³ Environmental concerns were urgent and emotive, highlighting unregulated pesticide use, unsafe water, untreated wastewater, and inadequate waste management. Citizens accused the government of prioritising EU rhetoric over real public health threats, while Chapter 27 funds were seen as poorly monitored. Calls for stronger domestic investment, environmental education, and more effective use of EU funds reflected a belief that, without genuine reform, both the EU accession process and environmental protection efforts will continue to fail public expectations.

PRESENTING TEN POLICY PROPOSALS

Following the consultative events, citizens, in cooperation with experts, were able to develop twelve concrete policy proposals (four per each thematic area). The policy proposals are aimed at the Government of Serbia, different ministries, the National Assembly of Serbia, and different EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, High Representative, etc.). These twelve proposals represent the result of comprehensive consultation efforts and the voting process. Their aim is to guide future policymaking and targeted institutions, influencing them to better align with citizens' needs and aspirations. The policy proposals are elaborated in the following sections.

#	Policy Proposal	Addressed To	Area
1	Adopt the Vetting Law and establish a system of vetting judges and prosecutors	Government of Serbia, Ministry of Justice, EU	Rule of law
2	Establish judicial police	Government of Serbia, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Internal Affairs	Rule of law
3	Establish a special prosecution for fighting corruption from the existing Department for the fight against corruption	Government of Serbia, Ministry of Justice	Rule of law
4	Reform the electoral system to strengthen direct democracy at the local level and participatory democracy at all levels	National Assembly of Serbia, Government of Serbia, Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government	Rule of law
5	Increase transparency and communication by the EU in Serbia	EU, European Commission, EU High Representative, European Parliament, European Council, Council of the EU	EU integration/enlargement
6	Increase transparency in allocation and spending of IPA and New Growth Plan funds	EU, European Commission	EU integration/enlargement
7	Provide a target accession date for Serbia	EU, European Council, European Commission	EU integration/enlargement

³ A stabilitocracy is a regime that includes considerable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance, yet enjoys external legitimacy by offering some supposed stability. See more at: Florian Bieber, *What is a stabilitocracy?*, BIEPAG, 2017, available at: <https://www.biepag.eu/blog/what-is-a-stabilitocracy>

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8	Include Western Balkan projection in the next MFF	EU, European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, Council of the EU	EU integration/enlargement
9	Further develop recycling infrastructure	Government of Serbia, Ministry of Environmental Protection, local government units	Environment
10	Adopt the Spatial Plan and Development Plan through broad public dialogue	National Assembly of Serbia, Government of Serbia, Ministry for Environmental Protection	Environment
11	Conduct additional research on critical materials	Government of Serbia, Ministry of Environmental Protection	Environment
12	Introduce a mechanism of rewards and punishments within the environmental protection system	Government of Serbia, Ministry of Environmental Protection	Environment

POLICY PROPOSAL 1: ADOPT THE VETTING LAW AND ESTABLISH A SYSTEM OF VETTING JUDGES AND PROSECUTORS

One of the key issues within the rule of law thematic area recognised by citizens was the election and work of judges and prosecutors. Citizens discussed how to address the problem of officials who are often seen as politically compromised and lacking the integrity or expertise required for their roles. Building upon this, participants pointed out the lack of trust in the main judicial institutions. To address this issue, participants agreed that some kind of vetting process of judges and prosecutors is necessary. They referred to the Vetting Law⁴ adopted in Albania in 2016, which allowed re-evaluation of judges by the Independent Commission. The Commission conducted checks on the moral character, professional performance, and wealth of judges and prosecutors in Albania, with other bodies responsible for monitoring the process and handling appeals.⁵ In the citizens's opinion, a similar model should be applied in Serbia with the support and involvement of the EU, whose role should focus on overseeing and supporting the work of an independent commission.

The main responsibility for implementing Proposal 1 would be on the Ministry of Justice of Serbia. However, other bodies need to be involved, such as the High Prosecutorial Council (HPC) and the High Judicial Council (HJC) and the National Assembly, as well as EU bodies, in the first place European Commission. They need to operationalise the work of the future independent commission, secure its legal basis, as well as smooth operation and financing. Every member of the judiciary and prosecution would need to pass the vetting process by this commission to stay in the system. The greatest challenge for implementing this policy proposal is the lack of trust in the current government, the ongoing political crisis, and the method for electing members of the independent commission. Existing and documented political pressures in the work of the judiciary make the current institutional set-up unfit to start such a reform and deliver concrete results. In order to overcome these challenges, the EU needs to step up, use the existing tools at its disposal, such as the Commission's annual country report (used for monitoring progress across 35 negotiating chapters), the Rule of Law Report, and the general framework of the accession process, to steer this reform.

⁴ Law on the Transitional Re-evaluation of Judges and Prosecutors in the Republic of Albania, Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, no. 84/16, available at: [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF\(2016\)062-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF(2016)062-e)

⁵ See more on this reform in Albania at: Andrea Mazellu, "Albanian Justice Reform in the Framework of EU Accession Process", *Regional L. Rev.* (2022): 71, available at: <https://rlr.iup.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/04-Mazellu-Mitllari.pdf>

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POLICY PROPOSAL 2: ESTABLISH JUDICIAL POLICE

Inefficiency of the judiciary and excessive influence of the executive branch prompted participants to recommend establishing the judicial police to mitigate these issues. Experts and citizens agreed that the Romanian example under the chief prosecutor Laura Kovesi is the model Serbia should look at. Judicial police would end the dependence of the judiciary on the Ministry of Interior to execute warrants, thereby increasing efficiency and limiting the influence of the government on prosecution. In Romania, this reform significantly strengthened the independence of prosecutors and enabled more effective action against high-level corruption. In Serbia, a similar model could be tailored to the local institutional framework by ensuring coordination with existing prosecutorial offices while safeguarding against political capture.

At present, Serbia's judiciary faces structural and political obstacles that hinder the rule of law and undermine public trust. A central challenge is that the Ministry of Interior continues to control the execution of judicial decisions, leaving courts and prosecutors vulnerable to delays, selective enforcement, or political interference. Establishing a judicial police would require not only a robust legal framework but also significant resources, training, and safeguards to prevent politicisation of this new institution. To overcome these challenges, Serbia could build on EU best practices and ensure that recruitment and oversight of the judicial police remain fully independent from the executive. International monitoring and civil society engagement in the design and implementation phases could help guarantee transparency, while phased introduction, starting with pilot projects in higher courts, would mitigate risks and demonstrate early successes to strengthen legitimacy.

POLICY PROPOSAL 3: ESTABLISH A SPECIAL PROSECUTION FOR FIGHTING CORRUPTION FROM THE EXISTING DEPARTMENT FOR THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION

Widespread corruption, a phenomenon recognised in Serbia by both citizens, policy experts and international institutions, cannot be tackled by existing weak institutions. Therefore, a very important recommendation was that a new institution needs to be established within the existing judicial system – a special prosecution for fighting corruption. Coupled with the judicial police and with prosecutors who passed the vetting process, this prosecution could effectively deal with grand corruption. Comparative practice shows that similar bodies, such as the Special Prosecutor's Office in North Macedonia or Croatia's USKOK (Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organised Crime), have achieved significant progress in pursuing high-level corruption when backed by strong mandates and political independence. In Serbia, this approach could be adapted by transforming, restructuring and expanding the powers of the existing Department for the Fight against Corruption, while introducing stricter safeguards to ensure prosecutorial autonomy.

Currently, Serbia's anti-corruption framework suffers from fragmentation, insufficient independence, and political interference that prevent meaningful investigations into cases involving powerful actors. Existing departments often lack resources, specialised training, and the authority to act decisively in complex financial investigations. Recently announced and launched wave of fight against corruption failed to build citizen trust despite the high number of arrested⁶ of people, among them active politicians. This can be attributed to the persistent political influence, as arrests were announced directly by the President of Serbia⁷, leaving citizens with the conclusion that these arrests are part of a political show rather than a step in a genuine anti-corruption effort. Establishing a special prosecution would require legislative reform, transparent selection of vetted prosecutors, and mechanisms for accountability that prevent political misuse of the institution itself. To overcome these challenges, Serbia should ensure that the special prosecution enjoys budgetary

⁶ Insajder, *MUP: U akciji borbe protiv korupcije od početka godine uhapšeno 657 osoba, pričinjena šteta 5,7 milijardi dinara*, 30. June 2025, available at: <https://www.insajder.net/prenosimo/mup-u-akciji-borbe-protiv-korupcije-od-pocetka-godine-uhapseno-657-osoba-pricinjena-steta-5-7-milijardi-dinara>

⁷ RTS, *Vučić: U borbi protiv korupcije neće biti zaštićene ni stranke*, 20. January 2025, available at: <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/5631984/vucic-u-borbi-protiv-korupcije-nece-bit-zasticene-ni-stranke.html>

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independence, has access to advanced investigative tools, and cooperates closely with the future judicial police. EU integration conditionality and monitoring could play a crucial role in shielding the institution from political pressures, while a phased rollout starting with high-profile corruption cases would both test the system and send a strong message of political will.

POLICY PROPOSAL 4: REFORM THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM TO STRENGTHEN DIRECT DEMOCRACY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AT ALL LEVELS

Weak accountability of institutions was a recurring theme, while citizens often referred to the example of the National Assembly, describing it as being under the full control of the executive. The parliament plenary sessions have become very rare, the opposition is silenced by limiting their participation, and the rules of procedure are often violated. Consequently, facing such constraints, this institution is rendered ineffective in overseeing independent state bodies. Moreover, though parliament is required to debate reports from watchdog agencies, in practice, these discussions are symbolic at best. Participants suggested introducing mandatory, meaningful discussions on such reports, with citizen involvement, to expose hidden systemic failures. The problem of weak institutions must be understood in the broader context of the student protests that have been ongoing since December 2024, sparked by the judiciary's ineffective handling of the Novi Sad Railway Station case. Yet, citizens emphasised that the root of this weakness lies in the state of democracy itself, with the current functioning of the national parliament serving as a clear illustration.

Citizens highlighted the need to engage in reforming the electoral system. Although different proposals surfaced, the consensus was that the existing model favours strong parties, encourages further centralisation of power, and depersonalises the process in the eyes of citizens. Therefore, some kind of mixed electoral system which would include open lists with preferential voting or electing one part of deputies in majority and the other in a proportional electoral system, could satisfy the citizens' needs. In order to address government accountability, during government formation, citizens suggested adopting a clear rulebook for ministerial appointments to reduce political opportunism and ensure basic competency. This reform should be implemented at the national, as well as at the local level. However, direct citizen participation can be better exercised at the local level, focusing on petitions and initiatives, referenda, public consultations, participatory budgeting, and citizens' forums. For most of these existing forms of participation, both a more proactive and educated citizenry and more engaged local governments are necessary.

The key institution identified for implementing Policy Proposal 4 is the National Assembly, as this proposal requires substantial legislative changes. The Government of Serbia, with the leading role of the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Governance, would need to engage in reforming the electoral system, keeping in mind that the process should stay open for wider public: citizens, policy experts, and academia. Having an inclusive process where active participation of all interested parties is encouraged and their views and recommendations are taken into account is a necessary prerequisite for a successful electoral reform. However, what is challenging with this proposal is the lack of political will for such reform among the political elite, as political parties enjoy the benefits of the existing electoral system. Reluctance to finalise the Voter Registry reform⁸ for more than a year, despite the fact that it was adopted in Serbia's Reform Agenda,⁹ speaks volumes about how unpopular reforms of this type are with the government and how reluctant to pursue them

⁸ The government of Serbia created in 2024 the Working Group for Improving Electoral Process, which was presided by Nemanja Nenadić (Transparency International Serbia) – a civil society representative. However, representatives of ruling parties and opposition could not reach an agreement how to proceed with the reform of Voter Register, and in 2025 the opposition has left the Working Group.

⁹ Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, *Instrument za reformu i rast za Zapadni Balkan: Reformska agenda Republike Srbije*, 2024, available at:

https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/reformska_agenda_rs_2024_2027.pdf

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politicians generally are. Therefore, in order to overcome this significant challenge, a strong push from citizens (bottom-up) with the support of civil society, academia, experts, and ideally some political parties, can successfully drive this reform.

POLICY PROPOSAL 5: INCREASE TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNICATION BY THE EU IN SERBIA

The joint observation of citizens and experts is that the popularity of the EU has been decreasing in Serbia recently, as many public opinion polls confirm, all the while support for Serbia's EU accession is lowest in the region.¹⁰ In order to reverse this negative trend, the EU needs to change its communication strategy in Serbia. The communication was done mainly through the EU Delegation in Serbia (DEU) and three Europe Houses, in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš. Thus, the efforts of DEU need to be complemented with key EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, Council, etc.) directly engaging in Serbia. More visits by EU officials with more direct engagement and open communication are necessary for improving the EU's standing in Serbia. However, the focus of high-level visits should be on other branches of government besides the executive, civil society, university, etc. In that regard, citizens and experts asked for more transparency, in the sense that criticism, especially in the rule of law area and EU integration, should be publicly stated, instead of delivering the message behind closed doors, which was the practice so far. This will also convey a positive message to the political leadership in the country and influence it to adopt more positive rhetoric when it comes to the EU.

A key challenge for implementing this proposal lies in overcoming the deeply entrenched scepticism toward the EU among Serbian citizens, which is not only the result of insufficient communication but also shaped by domestic political narratives, regional relations and geopolitics. While greater visibility of EU institutions and officials could improve perceptions, such efforts may be undermined if Serbian political elites continue to use Eurosceptic rhetoric for domestic gain. Additionally, coordinating consistent and tailored communication across multiple EU institutions, while ensuring messages resonate with diverse audiences in Serbia, is complicated given the institutional autonomy and different political interests within key EU institutions. At the same time, the EU would need to abandon its 'business as usual' approach with Serbia and showcase its long-term commitment to integrating Serbia by being ready to take a more critical stance when needed. Finally, all this needs to be implemented by the EU simultaneously keeping the ability to counter misinformation and competing influences, particularly from other international actors active in the region. However, the EU has proven resilient in the past, and with the right approach, a cross-institutional strategy for enlargement and Serbia as well, and a clear goal on integrating Serbia as a fully-fledged member state, this policy proposal can be implemented and yield significant results.

POLICY PROPOSAL 6: INCREASE TRANSPARENCY IN ALLOCATION AND SPENDING OF IPA AND NEW GROWTH PLAN FUNDS

Both citizens and experts acknowledged the significant economic benefits Serbia has derived from the accession process, particularly through access to EU funding and structural support. However, they also raised concerns regarding the allocation and spending of funds under the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) and the Reform and Growth Facility, pointing to insufficient oversight and a lack of transparency in reporting mechanisms. Participants highlighted that opaque processes create room for inefficiency and potential misuse of funds, ultimately undermining the intended developmental impact. They stressed that without clear, accessible, and timely information on how funds are distributed and used, citizens remain sceptical of whether the EU's financial assistance is truly serving the public interest.

¹⁰ See more at: Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju (CeSID), *Javno mnjenje i Evropska unija: Odnos u doba krize*, Izveštaj iz istraživanja javnog mnjenja, 2025, available at: https://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/SMART_CeSID_IZVESTAJ-1.pdf

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A key challenge for implementing this proposal lies in aligning EU transparency efforts with domestic governance practices, which often lack accountability and are prone to political influence. Even if the EU communicates more openly about its allocations, public trust may not significantly improve unless Serbian authorities and local beneficiaries demonstrate the same level of openness in reporting expenditures. Ensuring consistency across all levels, including EU institutions, national government, and local implementers, will require stronger monitoring mechanisms, independent oversight, and active involvement of civil society in tracking IPA funds. Without these safeguards, the risk of political misuse or mismanagement could continue to erode both the perceived and actual benefits of EU financial support in Serbia. Adoption of the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) and new instrument, Global Europe, intended to replace the existing IPA, represents a great opportunity to revise it along the lines of Policy Proposal 6.

POLICY PROPOSAL 7: PROVIDE A TARGET ACCESSION DATE FOR SERBIA

People in Serbia are widely disappointed and disillusioned with the EU accession process. Citizens see it as an everlasting negotiation with too many political conditions, leading a relative majority of people with a conclusion that Serbia might never join the EU.¹¹ Therefore, the most effective step to counter stereotypes and disprove Eurosceptics would be for the EU to commit to a concrete accession date for Serbia - naturally tied to the country's progress in implementing reforms. Since the European Commission has already endorsed Montenegro and Albania's aspirations to join the EU by the end of the current mandate (i.e., by 2029), providing a year for Serbia would serve as a strong incentive for reforms, or at least help identify where accountability lies if the opportunity is missed.

In that sense, the European Commission may propose, and the European Council can endorse in its conclusion, 2030 as the year designated for Serbia to join the EU. Of course, the actual accession will depend on delivering necessary reforms across all six clusters and 35 chapters of accession negotiations, and the accession date can be postponed in the case of stagnation or backsliding. However, in case Serbia's accession is delayed, which is probable given the current stagnating trend, it will be clear that accountability lies with the Serbian government. A clear accession date would give a tangible sense of direction to both citizens and institutions, create a stronger reform momentum, and enhance accountability by making it evident whether delays stem from EU hesitation or domestic inaction. If framed carefully, it could reinvigorate Serbia's accession process and improve the EU's image as a credible and reliable partner.

The main challenge of this proposal lies in the fact that many EU member states remain divided on further enlargement and reluctant to commit to fixed dates, especially in light of Serbia's slow reform record and foreign policy misalignments. Setting a date without credible reform progress could undermine the EU's conditionality principle and expose Brussels to accusations of double standards, while the risk of Serbia missing the deadline could reinforce, rather than dispel, Euroscepticism.

POLICY PROPOSAL 8: INCLUDE WESTERN BALKANS PROJECTION IN THE NEXT MFF

As the current Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) nears its end and negotiations on the next EU budget (2028–2034) are already underway, the upcoming MFF should explicitly reflect the EU's commitment to enlargement. In practical terms, this means earmarking additional funds for the prospective integration of new member states from the Western Balkans. Such a step would send a strong signal that the EU is serious about enlargement, while also providing tangible incentives

¹¹ According to the latest public opinion poll, 47% of Serbia's population believes that accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU will never come to an end. See more at: Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju (CeSID), *Javno mnjenje i Evropska unija: Odnos u doba krize*, Izveštaj iz istraživanja javnog mnjenja, 2025, available at: https://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/SMART_CeSID_IZVESTAJ-1.pdf

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for governments in the region to accelerate reforms and finalise accession negotiations. The European Commission is expected to come up with such a proposal, while cooperation with other EU institutions (European Parliament, European Council, EU Council), including in drafting and adopting the MFF, is necessary.

The main challenge in implementing this proposal is political: several member states remain cautious about enlargement, and convincing them to commit budgetary resources for potential new members before accession is finalised could prove difficult. Budget negotiations are already highly contentious, and allocating funds for countries not yet in the Union risks pushback from net contributors who fear overstressing EU finances. Furthermore, if enlargement stalls or is delayed, pre-allocated resources might appear wasted, potentially fuelling further scepticism inside the EU. Nevertheless, the proposal carries significant strengths. It would anchor enlargement within the EU's financial planning, making the process more credible and predictable for candidate countries. By showing foresight and readiness to integrate Western Balkan states, the EU would not only increase its leverage over reform processes but also counter competing external influences in the region. In this way, projecting Western Balkans membership within the next MFF could strengthen both the EU's strategic credibility and the reform momentum in the region. Finally, early calculations show that the Western Balkan enlargement would cost ordinary EU citizens a cup of coffee on an annual basis.¹² Thus, this should not represent an enormous financial burden to the EU budget, especially compared to additional funds dedicated to Ukraine. With the strong political will for prioritising engagement, the Western Balkan projection in MFF could be easily implemented.

POLICY PROPOSAL 9: FURTHER DEVELOP RECYCLING INFRASTRUCTURE

Additional investments and systemic support are needed to improve recycling infrastructure, including expanding capacity, supporting local initiatives, and education. Serbia's recycling system remains underdeveloped, with limited facilities, low collection rates, and insufficient integration of local initiatives into a national framework. Additional investments and systemic support are therefore urgently needed to improve recycling infrastructure. This includes expanding the capacity of existing facilities, building new recycling plants, and developing an efficient waste separation system at the municipal level. Main institutions targeted by this policy proposal are the Ministry of Environmental Protection and local self-government units (i.e. towns and municipalities). At the same time, supporting grassroots initiatives and civil society organisations working in the field of waste management is crucial, as they often fill gaps left by the state. Education and awareness-raising campaigns should also be prioritised, given that public knowledge about recycling practices is low and citizen participation remains inconsistent. Together, these measures would not only help Serbia meet EU environmental standards but also reduce pollution, improve public health, and create new economic opportunities in the green sector.

The key challenge for implementing this proposal lies in Serbia's weak institutional framework and limited political prioritisation of environmental issues, which often translates into insufficient budget allocations and fragmented policies. Moreover, corruption and lack of transparency in public procurement may undermine large-scale infrastructure investments, while entrenched habits and low public awareness hinder citizen participation. However, the proposal also has important strengths. It aligns closely with the EU Green Agenda priorities, meaning that substantial funding and technical assistance would be available to support reforms if Serbia demonstrated political will. Improving recycling infrastructure would also yield visible, tangible results for citizens in their daily lives—cleaner cities, healthier environments, and potential job creation in waste management and the circular economy. If implemented effectively, the proposal could strengthen both Serbia's environmental performance and public trust in the EU accession process.

¹² See more at: Strahinja Subotić and Ana Milinković, *On financial and economic implications of the Staged accession model on the EU budget, and on acceding countries' budgets*, European Policy Centre (CEP), 2023, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/on-financial-and-economic-implications-of-the-staged-accession-model-on-the-eu-budget-and-on-acceding-countries-budgets/>

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POLICY PROPOSAL 10: ADOPT THE SPATIAL PLAN AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN THROUGH A BROAD PUBLIC DIALOGUE

Participants emphasised the importance of adopting key strategic documents, such as the Spatial Plan and the Development Plan of the Republic of Serbia, through an inclusive process that ensures the active involvement of experts, local communities, and civil society. These documents are critical for guiding the country's long-term development, shaping infrastructure priorities, urban planning, environmental protection, and regional growth. To ensure legitimacy and effectiveness, their adoption must not remain a top-down exercise but should actively involve experts, local governments, civil society organisations, and local communities who are directly affected by spatial and development policies. A broad dialogue, organised by the Ministry of Environmental Protection, would allow for the integration of diverse perspectives, reduce the risk of politically motivated decision-making, and increase public trust in state institutions. Such inclusiveness would also help align Serbia's long-term planning with EU standards and principles of participatory governance.

The main challenges in implementing this proposal stem from Serbia's traditionally centralised decision-making culture, where strategic planning often occurs behind closed doors with limited public consultation. However, these centralised practices have been taken to a whole new level, especially in the cases where party interests have a potentially direct benefit (which is more often than not the case). Political elites may resist broader participation, viewing it as a constraint on their control over development priorities, while civil society and local communities often lack the institutional mechanisms to effectively influence the process. Ensuring meaningful dialogue requires both political will and institutional capacity to manage consultations in a transparent and inclusive manner. Thus, the will has to come through bottom-up pressure. Nonetheless, the proposal has significant strengths. A participatory approach would improve the quality and sustainability of the Spatial and Development Plans by incorporating local knowledge and expertise, while also reducing the risk of future conflicts around contested infrastructure or environmental projects. Moreover, it would signal Serbia's commitment to good governance and EU accession values, strengthening both domestic legitimacy and international credibility.

POLICY PROPOSAL 11: CONDUCT ADDITIONAL RESEARCH ON CRITICAL MATERIALS

Citizens and experts recognised that lithium mining and mining in general are one of important issues, and they jointly agreed on one key policy recommendation in this area. Since there is a lot of confusing information, no clear picture of the potential consequences of mining, the recommendation to the government of Serbia is that additional research on critical materials and their potential exploitation is required before permissions are granted. They therefore recommended that the Government of Serbia commission additional, independent, and comprehensive research on critical materials and their potential exploitation before any new mining permissions are granted. Such research should not only examine economic benefits but also assess environmental sustainability, health risks, and the long-term impact on local communities. This research would need to go through a broad dialogue of multiple institutions, such as academic (universities, faculties, institutes), expert (agencies, directorates, etc) and civic (CSOs, think tanks, etc.). Followed by open public, online and televised debates in order to give citizens oversight. Making findings publicly available would be essential to ensuring transparency and building trust among citizens.

The main challenge for implementing this proposal lies in the strong political and economic interests tied to mining projects, which may discourage authorities from commissioning truly independent research or from acting upon its results if they prove unfavourable. There is also a risk that research could be instrumentalised to justify pre-determined outcomes rather than to inform evidence-based decision-making. Furthermore, additional research on the potential negative effects of lithium mining can be costly, as the main argument in favour of mining is that it will bring huge economic opportunities for Serbia and the automobile industry. At the same time, the proposal has notable strengths. It directly responds to public demands for greater transparency and accountability, and it could help depoliticise the debate by grounding it in facts and

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scientific expertise. Independent research would also align Serbia with EU standards on environmental protection and sustainable resource management, while showing citizens that their concerns are taken seriously. If implemented credibly, this approach could reduce tensions, prevent future conflicts, and pave the way for more balanced and informed policymaking in the field of critical materials.

POLICY PROPOSAL 12: INTRODUCE A MECHANISM OF REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS WITHIN THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION SYSTEM

Participants highlighted that Serbia's environmental performance remains below EU standards, with persistent problems such as poor air quality, low energy efficiency, and underdeveloped recycling systems. This recommendation is closely related to energy efficiency and the targets of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, and overall environmental protection and recycling efforts. Namely, in order to stimulate all these activities, the government should introduce tax incentives for businesses and individuals, and strict fines for those who are negligent towards the environment. Such a system would not only encourage positive behaviour but also create a level playing field where environmentally responsible actors are rewarded rather than disadvantaged. Over time, it could help transform the culture of environmental governance in Serbia by linking compliance directly to financial consequences and benefits.

The key challenge in implementing this proposal lies in Serbia's weak enforcement capacity and the lack of institutional independence in environmental oversight. Without robust monitoring mechanisms and transparent criteria, fines could be selectively applied, while tax incentives risk being captured by politically connected businesses rather than driving genuine green investments. Public resistance may also arise if fines are introduced without first ensuring affordable alternatives for households and small businesses. On the other hand, the proposal has significant strengths. It directly ties environmental protection to concrete economic incentives, which can be a powerful motivator for both citizens and companies. Moreover, it is fully aligned with EU climate and energy policies, meaning that Serbia could access EU funding and technical support for implementation. If applied consistently and fairly, the system could deliver visible improvements in air quality, waste management, and energy use, while also strengthening Serbia's credibility in the EU accession process.

CONCLUSIONS

The REACH consultations in Serbia represent a powerful demonstration of the untapped potential of deliberative democracy. Over the course of three local consultations in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, followed by a national deliberative event in Belgrade, ordinary citizens from diverse backgrounds showed that they are both capable of grappling with complex issues and of co-creating meaningful policy proposals. Far from being passive observers of political life, participants engaged with high levels of knowledge, interest, and critical thinking, proving that inclusive deliberation can produce recommendations of direct value to decision-makers at both the national and EU levels. A central lesson of this process is that citizens are not only well informed about the challenges facing Serbia in the areas of the rule of law, EU integration, and environmental governance, but are also adept at articulating practical, actionable solutions. The consultations revealed a nuanced public understanding of the interdependence between these three domains: citizens repeatedly stressed that without the rule of law, neither environmental sustainability nor genuine progress towards EU accession can be achieved.

On the **rule of law**, citizens identified corruption, political interference, and weak institutions as systemic obstacles. Yet their proposals went well beyond surface-level complaints: they called for the vetting of judges and prosecutors, the establishment of judicial police, the creation of a special anti-corruption prosecution, and reforms to the electoral system to deepen accountability. These recommendations demonstrate both realism and ambition – realism in recognising the institutional weaknesses that must be addressed, and ambition in calling for bold reforms inspired by comparative practices in Albania, Romania, North Macedonia, and Croatia. Importantly, citizens framed these reforms not as abstract legal changes, but as essential steps to restoring public trust and safeguarding democracy.

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In discussions on **EU integration**, citizens balanced scepticism with constructive ideas. They criticised the lack of political will among domestic elites and questioned the credibility of the EU's enlargement process, yet they also advanced tangible proposals to reinvigorate accession. These included increasing transparency in the use of EU pre-accession funds, strengthening communication between EU institutions and Serbian citizens, earmarking funds for new members in the next EU budget, and even setting a target accession date to counter disillusionment. Such recommendations highlight that ordinary people are not merely consumers of political narratives. They are capable of engaging with even technical aspects of EU policy and offering pragmatic ways to improve the process.

Environmental concerns mobilised citizens with equal urgency. They called for expanding recycling infrastructure, adopting spatial and development plans through public dialogue, commissioning independent research on critical raw materials such as lithium, and introducing incentives and sanctions to drive sustainable behaviour. These proposals reflect an awareness that environmental protection is inseparable from governance reform and EU standards. Citizens linked concrete local issues such as waste management, water pollution, and mining projects to broader European and global debates, showing that deliberation can bridge local experience with international policy frameworks.

Perhaps the most striking outcome of the REACH consultations is not any single proposal, but the process itself. The methodology rooted in citizens' assemblies and consensus-oriented dialogue enabled ordinary people to deliberate as equals with experts, trade ideas, and make collective choices. The fact that participants successfully co-created twelve concrete, coherent, and context-sensitive policy proposals demonstrates that democratic innovation in Serbia is not only possible but urgently needed. The consultations also underscore the importance of representation and diversity. By ensuring that youth, minorities, elderly citizens, and people from different regions were included, the process gave voice to perspectives that are rarely heard in policymaking. This inclusivity strengthened the legitimacy of the outcomes, while also proving that diverse groups can find common ground when given the space and support to deliberate openly.

The REACH becomes particularly important in the given context of the last nine months in Serbia. In the moment where citizens are organising themselves in town hall meetings and citizens' assemblies due to a lack of institutional resilience and response, it is manifesting on the streets. This blossoming of direct democracy coincides with the implementation of REACH, giving it unique insight into political developments and genuine citizens' concerns and proposals for addressing them. Therefore, the findings from the REACH consultative process capture one of the most significant political developments in modern Serbia and offer concrete solutions to the existing deep-seated political and societal crisis.

Ultimately, the REACH process in Serbia offers three key takeaways. First, it demonstrates that citizens are not indifferent or uninformed: when engaged meaningfully, they show both knowledge and responsibility. Second, it shows that deliberative democracy can generate high-quality policy proposals that complement expert knowledge and provide decision-makers with a grounded understanding of public priorities. Third, it illustrates that trust in institutions and in the EU can be rebuilt not through top-down communication campaigns, but through genuine participation that treats citizens as co-authors of reform. At a moment when democratic trust is fragile and being further eroded by the government's handling of the student and citizen protests, the REACH consultations illuminate a path forward by bringing citizens into the heart of policymaking. In this sense, the twelve proposals developed are more than policy recommendations: they are a proof of concept that deliberative democracy works. They show that ordinary citizens, when empowered, can craft extraordinary ideas for a more just, sustainable, and democratic future.

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