SERBIA'S DEMOCRATIC BREAKTHROUGH

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TEPSA COMMENTARY
11/2026



Serbia's student-led electoral breakthrough offers a rare chance to reconnect democratic reform with European Union (EU) accession. Yet victory over the incumbent government does not resolve the country's institutional weaknesses or geopolitical dilemmas. The new authorities must deliver credible reforms, Brussels must respond to measurable progress, and civil society must help sustain the public engagement that made change possible.

It took almost two years of student movement protest, set off by the deaths of sixteen people under the collapsed canopy of the Novi Sad railway station in November 2024, to achieve what Serbia's established opposition had failed to do for more than a decade: defeat Aleksandar Vučić. Along the way, the students found a language that travelled far beyond the campuses. *Pumpaj* ('keep pumping') went from an internet joke to a chant heard in every town square; the pro-government tent camp in Pioneers Park was christened *Ćacilend*[1]; and groups of students cycled to Strasbourg and ran a relay to Brussels to deliver letters to European institutions. By March 2025 they could bring an estimated 325 000 people onto the streets of Belgrade. On 25 October, the Student List won 53.7% of the vote and 141 of the 250 seats, ending 14 years of rule by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS); Vučić, who had resigned the presidency in September to lead his party's list, conceded on election night. The Student List brought together public figures who had supported the movement rather than students themselves, with each candidate selected through votes in student assemblies (*plenums*) and vetted through a review process across participating faculties. Whether the breakthrough can also revive Serbia's long-stalled European integration is a separate and harder question.

A European victory without a European campaign

Serbia has just gone through its most significant democratic change since October 2000, yet the EU barely featured in the campaign that produced it. The student movement deliberately avoided divisive questions, including Kosovo, relations with Russia and Serbia's broader geopolitical orientation. Its 11-point programme dealt instead with the judiciary and the prosecution service, lustration, departisation, media capture, transparency, education, housing and healthcare. EU accession was not among its headline commitments. It was a choice that worked. Endorsements came from parties as far apart as the Green–Left Front and the conservative Dveri, and the list drew voters whose views on the EU could hardly differ more. The flip side is that the result gives the new majority no mandate for a fundamental change in Serbia's foreign policy.

Brussels noticed the overlap all the same. Two days after the vote, Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos said that the students had been demanding exactly what the EU demands of Serbia: the rule of law, democracy, free media and the fight against corruption. The students simply used plainer words: institutions should

[1] *Ćaci* comes from a pro-government graffito telling students in blockade to go back to class, which misspelt *đaci* (pupils) as *ćaci*. The irony – regime loyalists lecturing students about school while unable to spell the word for pupils – was not lost on the protesters, who adopted *ćaci* as a mocking label for government supporters, implying they were semi-literate. The camp set up in Pioneers Park in March 2025 by a group calling itself "students who want to study" was duly dubbed *Ćacilend*. Vučić later embraced the term defiantly, declaring that he, too, was a *ćaci*.

do their jobs, public officials should be held accountable, and the law should apply equally to everyone. That matters in a country where accession had shrunk to a technical exercise and where, by the count of Ilija Srdanović, who headed the Student List, support for membership fell by some 20 percentage points under the outgoing government. For once, the values at the core of the accession process have won an election in Serbia, carried by a movement that rarely mentioned the EU.

From democratic expectations to accession progress

The new government will inherit an EU accession process that has been largely stagnant for years. Serbia has not opened a negotiating cluster since December 2021, while concerns over judicial independence, media freedom, corruption and the functioning of democratic institutions have continued to undermine its credibility as a candidate country. Belgrade has also kept its foreign policy alignment selective. It has never joined EU sanctions against Russia, and even in 2025, its best recent year, it aligned with only about two-thirds of the relevant Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) declarations and measures.

The immediate priority should therefore be to translate the electoral mandate into credible institutional reforms. 14 years of SNS rule have left extensive networks of political influence across public administration, state-owned enterprises, regulatory bodies and the judiciary. The Student List has promised lustration and the departisation of the public sector, and some appointees will have to go. The risk lies in how this is done: a purge that swaps SNS loyalists for loyalists of the new majority would leave the old system intact under new management. Two early tests are already on the table. One is the judiciary: the 'Mrdić laws' of January 2026, which led the European Commission to halt Growth Plan payments, were corrected in June in a way that met seven of the Venice Commission's nine recommendations, leaving work unfinished. The other is the media regulator, the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media, whose council should be appointed through an open procedure that puts it beyond the reach of any party, including the newly elected.

The same reforms are what stand between Serbia and the next step in accession. Kos has said plainly that Member States blocked Cluster 3 because of backsliding on the fundamentals, despite Serbia having met its technical opening conditions. Srdanović has told her that Chapters 23 and 24 will be the new majority's priority, and real progress there could eventually pave the way for an assessment of the interim benchmarks and allow Serbia to start closing negotiating chapters. The EU's Reform and Growth Facility provides another opportunity. Its performance-based approach links financial support to the implementation of specific reforms, an obvious incentive for a government that needs early results. On paper, Serbia's envelope for 2024–2027 is some EUR 1.58 billion, but every euro beyond pre-financing is released only against reform steps verified by the Commission. On that measure the record is poor: civil society monitoring found that only 6 of the 34 reform steps due by the end of 2025 had been implemented by March 2026. Unblocking the money will be a tempting first headline for the new government. The steps attached to it, from a revised voter register to a functioning media regulator, are reforms Serbia needs whether or not Brussels pays for them.

For Brussels, the challenge will be to respond to genuine progress with equally credible incentives. For years, critics described the EU's approach to Serbia as 'stabilitocracy': tolerance of backsliding in exchange for regional calm. The opposite temptation is now just as real:

rewarding a sympathetic new government on credit. Each concession should follow a measurable result. The real tests will come once the new government is in place: whether the Commission resumes Growth Plan payments only against verified reform steps, and whether Member States agree to open Cluster 3 only once the fundamentals have measurably improved.

The geopolitical questions cannot be postponed forever

Serbia's relations with Russia, its refusal to join EU sanctions and the unresolved normalisation process with Kosovo will remain central to its accession prospects, and none of them disappears with a change of government. Srdanović's first answers nevertheless point to a more predictable partner. He called continued dialogue with Pristina a fundamental part of the students' plan and pledged to honour internationally agreed protocols and the international agreements signed by the outgoing government, while leaving open a review of earlier deals for compliance with the Serbian Constitution. On Russia, he committed to nothing yet, but his insistence that such questions "cannot be decided by one person" marks a clear break with a foreign policy that for years was run from a single office.

That caution reflects the arithmetic of the victory. A coalition stretching from the far left to the far right agrees on institutions and on very little else in foreign policy. Pushing the new authorities towards politically sensitive decisions before they have consolidated democratic institutions risks creating new divisions in a country where almost two in five voters still backed Vučić's list.

Brussels should still hold the line on the requirements themselves. Full alignment with the EU's CFSP remains an expectation of membership, just as progress towards normalisation with Kosovo remains essential. Kos has already warned that advancing will be 'very difficult' for a country that does not align with the EU on strategic interests. What matters now is sequencing. A workable bargain would pair a fixed end point with a realistic timetable: a CFSP alignment rate that rises year on year towards full alignment (sanctions included) by the time of accession. The EU should support early progress in the fundamentals while maintaining an open and consistent dialogue on foreign policy alignment. The new government, for its part, should avoid using domestic political sensitivities as a permanent justification for inaction.

Democratic change may also make these conversations possible for the first time in years. Under SNS, national broadcasters and pro-government tabloids regularly cast the EU as hostile to Serbia; during this campaign, the tabloids also circulated deceitful Artificial Intelligence-generated photographs of Srdanović and other Student List candidates. A media scene without that machinery would allow a more honest debate about Serbia's place in Europe. For years, the same leaders who called membership a strategic goal fed resentment of the Union at home. Srdanović's promise to win back that lost support by telling citizens what membership would actually bring is the right instinct. It will count only if ministers are also prepared to defend the unpopular parts of the accession bargain in public.

Keeping the democratic energy alive

The movement that produced this result now has its own adjustment to make. The Student List ran as a citizens' group, with many candidates from outside party politics – among

them the former basketball star Dejan Bodiroga, the economist and former central bank governor Dejan Šoškić and the sociologist Jovo Bakić. As Members of Parliament, they now answer to the whole electorate. As a new government takes shape, the student *plenums* will have to move from mobilising against those in power to deciding how to deal with those they helped bring to power.

Much of the energy of the past two years will fade, and that is no bad thing: the new government needs room to govern, and the plenums were not built to run ministries. Serbian civil society could still learn a good deal from how the students talked about politics. When students made a blood-red handprint and the slogan 'Your hands are bloody' the emblems of their movement, nobody needed a policy paper to understand what corruption costs. The same approach could bring ordinary citizens into debates that have so far been left to officials and experts.

European integration is the obvious one. Relations with Kosovo and the rest of the region are another.

Slogans will not settle any of these questions. The students have, however, set a standard for political communication that Serbia's nongovernmental organisations, think tanks included, have rarely met. Civil society and the EU Delegation in Belgrade should learn from it, particularly when addressing younger Serbians. They have grown up hearing from the same officials that EU membership is a strategic priority, that it will probably never happen, and that Brussels is working against Serbia anyway. Few of them have ever been shown what membership would actually change in their own lives.

The students have shown that they can change who governs Serbia. Changing how Serbia is governed, and how it sees its place in Europe, will take longer, and it is not a job they can do alone.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or its members.

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