

Freedom in the World 2026 - Serbia

Overview

Serbia is a parliamentary republic that holds multiparty elections, but in recent years the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting legal and extralegal pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations.

Key Developments in 2025

- Antigovernment protests that began in 2024 continued throughout the year. Participants faced violent police responses, prompting concern from watchdogs as well as the European Parliament and Council of Europe. Protest supporters and individuals perceived to be associated with the movement also faced attacks by nonstate actors. Educators seen as supporting student-led protest actions faced government pressure.
- Authorities continued to threaten independent media. In June, President Aleksandar Vučić called reporting by major outlets N1 and Nova S “pure terrorism,” and suggested that the prosecutor’s office could take action against them. Vučić’s remarks came after both channels had been removed from the household satellite television service EON SAT, owned by the partially state-owned Telekom Srbija.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

2 / 4

The president is directly elected for up to two five-year terms. Incumbent president Aleksandar Vučić won reelection in April 2022 with 58.6 percent of the vote in a field of eight candidates. The campaign was characterized by media bias and allegations of misuse of public resources. President Vučić’s media engagement as both head of state and SNS leader afforded him unparalleled public exposure and lacked clear differentiation between those roles.

The prime minister is elected by the parliament. Đuro Macut, a doctor with no previous political experience, was tapped by Vučić and approved as Serbia’s prime minister in April 2025. Former Prime Minister Miloš Vučević had stepped down in January, saying he wanted to “defuse tensions” amid an ongoing antigovernment protest movement, and his resignation was acknowledged by Parliament in March.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

2 / 4

The National Assembly is a unicameral, 250-seat legislature whose deputies are elected to four-year terms under a system of proportional representation with a single nationwide constituency.

In December 2023, Serbia held parliamentary elections for the third time in less than four years. Voting was also conducted at the provincial and local levels. Five parties crossed the 3 percent electoral threshold to enter the national parliament. The incumbent SNS-led coalition won 47 percent of vote, giving it an absolute majority of 129 parliamentary seats. The main opposition coalition took 43 seats, and three smaller groups divided the remainder. SNS also generally claimed success in the subnational balloting.

Local and international observers reported numerous irregularities during the campaign and on election day. Several factors resulted in an unequal electoral environment for candidates and provided undue advantages to the SNS. These included the disproportionately high media access afforded to progovernment parties, pressure on public-sector employees and socioeconomically disadvantaged residents to support the incumbents, the abuse of administrative resources, and the central role of President Vučić in the elections, which contributed to the blurring of lines between the state and the SNS. On election day, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) noted a number of problems, including procedural shortcomings in 39 percent of observations, vote buying, breaches in secrecy of the vote, and instances of group voting.

Local elections were held in the municipalities of Kosjerić and Zaječar in June 2025, the first polls held in Serbia since mass anticorruption protests began in late 2024. The SNS won the greatest number of seats in both towns, though with a reduced majority compared to the number of seats the party had held previously. The Centre for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA) noted harassment of opposition figures ahead of the polls and significant irregularities on election day including vote buying. Municipal elections in November in Mionica, Sečanj, and Negotin produced similar results—SNS victories but with opposition gains—and reports of intimidation against voters, election workers, and election monitors.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

1 / 4

Electoral laws largely correspond to international standards, but aspects of the electoral process are poorly regulated, and implementation of existing rules is flawed.

In its report on the 2023 parliamentary elections, the ODIHR noted persistent concerns over campaign finance transparency, a passive approach by the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) to regulating media conduct during the campaign, and lack of intervention by the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (ACK) regarding administrative misuse of public resources. Both CRTA and the ODIHR cited additional concerns about continued vote buying, media bias, pressure on public employees, and misuse of public resources, and noted that previously recommended reforms to the electoral framework and administration had not been adopted.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

3 /
4

Political parties may be established freely and can typically operate without encountering formal restrictions. However, campaign finance regulations are weakly enforced and place no overall cap on the private funds raised and spent by parties and candidates.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

1 /
4

The SNS has used various tactics to unfairly reduce the opposition's electoral prospects. These include manipulating the timing of snap elections, exerting pressure on independent state institutions, busing in voters from neighboring countries or districts, and mobilizing public resources to support its campaigns.

The SNS has expanded its influence over the media through its effective control of both state-owned enterprises and an array of private outlets that are dependent on government funding, and has harnessed this influence to strengthen its political position and discredit its rivals. Opposition figures have also faced harassment, intimidation, and violence in recent years.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

2 /
4

Voters enjoy a significant degree of freedom to make political decisions without undue interference, though the ruling party and allied private businesses allegedly use patronage networks to influence political outcomes.

Various incentives have been employed in recent years to convince hundreds of local elected officials to form alliances with the SNS or change their party affiliation after elections. SNS electoral campaigns have benefited from the misuse of public resources, such as the use of public buses to transport loyalists to rallies. Local observers reported that workers at state-owned enterprises were pressured to support the ruling SNS during the December 2023 parliamentary elections. SNS operatives have been known to intimidate voters directly by appearing at their homes and pressuring them to support the party.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

3 /
4

The country's electoral threshold for parliamentary representation does not apply to parties representing ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, members of ethnic minority groups have a relatively muted voice in Serbian politics in practice. In recent years, ethnic Albanians in southern Serbia have reported a pattern by which authorities mark their addresses as "inactive" in official databases, meaning they cannot renew identity documents that are necessary for voting. Women enjoy equal political rights and benefit from a party-list gender quota. While LGBT+ people have formal access to voting and electoral opportunities, political parties rarely address LGBT+ interests.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

2 / 4

Vučić's move from the premiership to the presidency in 2017 raised new concerns about the personalization of governance and politicization of state institutions. Vučić has remained the dominant figure in government despite the presidency's limited executive powers under the constitution, creating a de facto presidential system.

The executive largely controls the legislative process, and opposition lawmakers are sidelined through the disproportionate use of disciplinary measures, frequent employment of accelerated legislative procedures, and late changes to the legislative agenda, among other tactics.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

1 / 4

Although the number of arrests and prosecutions for corruption has risen in recent years, high-profile convictions are rare. Critics have credibly accused Vučić and the SNS government of having ties to organized crime, and cronyism—in the form of jobs provided to allies of the president and the ruling party—is reportedly common.

Whistleblowers and members of law enforcement agencies who disclose the potentially corrupt practices of government officials have faced pressure from state institutions, including removal from their positions and arrest.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

1 / 4

The government has received sustained criticism for a lack of transparency on matters including public tenders, infrastructure and extractive-industry projects, and travel restrictions based on supposed threats to national security. The Law on Public Procurement has not been applied to the state-funded Belgrade Waterfront project, the construction of the Moravski corridor highway by Chinese companies, the South Stream gas pipeline, or the exhibition area for EXPO 2027.

Legislators do not have adequate opportunities to ask questions about government activities and legislation, and the vast majority of parliamentary questions go unanswered by the government.

Public officials are subject to asset-disclosure rules overseen by the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, but penalties for violations are uncommon. While a 2004 freedom of information law empowers citizens and journalists to obtain information of public importance, authorities frequently obstruct requests in practice.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Despite a legal framework that guarantees freedom of the press, journalists in Serbia are exposed to intimidation, editorial pressure from politicians and politically connected media owners, selective bans from official venues, and abusive lawsuits aimed at denying the public access to investigative journalism. Defamation has been only partly decriminalized. In December 2024, Amnesty International reported that Serbian authorities were using commercial spyware products against journalists and others in the country.

The REM has been criticized for a lack of active involvement in upholding media pluralism and a lack of independence, particularly when deciding on allocation of national broadcast frequencies. In July 2025, the International Press Institute, a global network of independent media workers, noted “significant concerns regarding the impartiality of the process” of electing new REM members. The state and ruling party exercise influence over private media in part through advertising contracts and other indirect subsidies. Many private outlets are owned by SNS supporters.

The media environment features extreme propaganda and the manipulation of facts around certain topics, including the war in Ukraine, the relationship between the ruling parties and the opposition, and Serbian policy on Kosovo. Some privately owned national broadcasters and popular tabloids regularly participate in smear campaigns against the political opposition and other perceived government opponents.

Independent investigative media groups are subject to harassment and intimidation by authorities, tabloid outlets, and progovernment groups. Financial and regulatory pressures are applied against independent media outlets in an effort to discourage partnerships with advertisers and businesses. In June 2025, President Vučić called reporting by major outlets N1 and Nova S “pure terrorism,” and suggested that the prosecutor’s office could take action against them, prompting concern from domestic and international journalists’ groups and the Council of Europe’s Safety of Journalists Platform. Vučić’s remarks came after both channels had been removed from the household satellite television service EON SAT, owned by the partially state-owned Telekom Srbija.

In June 2025, the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia (NUNS) reported 135 press freedom violations since the start of the year, including 34 verbal threats and 19 physical attacks.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

4 / 4

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, which is generally respected in practice.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

2 / 4

Recent practices and legal changes have raised concerns about political influence at educational institutes. In 2025, educators faced pressure from authorities for perceived support of student protesters.

The 2017 Law on Higher Education increased the presence of state-appointed members on the National Council for Higher Education and a national accreditation body; another education law, also adopted that year, gave the education minister centralized control over the appointment of school principals.

In 2025, educators who supported or were perceived as supporting the student-led antigovernment protests that erupted in late 2024 faced retaliation from the government. A number of teachers did not have their contracts renewed in decisions condemned by teachers' unions and others as retaliation over the teachers' support for the protest movement; the Independent Trade Union of Educational Workers counted more than 100 such cases. Some university professors faced smear campaigns for supporting the protesters. Authorities also adopted new rules on the calculation of instructor's salaries at higher education institutes in response to student-led "blockades," or cancellation of classes and exams as part of the protest movement: salaries were reduced or unpaid for faculty whose classes were not held. On numerous occasions, police confronted student protesters on university grounds, making arrests in at least one case.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to authorities' retaliatory measures against educators viewed as supporting student protesters.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

2 / 4

A pattern of retribution against critics of the government has contributed to an increasingly hostile environment for free expression and open debate. Perceived government opponents—including journalists, university professors, civil society leaders, celebrities, business owners, artists, and ordinary citizens—have faced smear campaigns in progovernment media outlets, criminal investigations, verbal threats, and physical attacks against them or their property and other retaliatory measures in recent years. The government's top officials regularly criticize nonpoliticians based on their public criticism of government policies.

An investigation supported by Amnesty International found in 2024 that Serbian police and intelligence services had used spyware to monitor a variety of journalists, civil society activists, and protest organizers.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

1 / 4

Although freedom of assembly is constitutionally guaranteed, protesters have faced prosecution for "preparing acts against the constitutional order and security of Serbia" and "calling for a violent overthrow of the constitutional order."

Participants in a mass antigovernment protest movement that featured daily events since November 2024 have been met with excessive force by police, private security agencies, and masked individuals thought to be government affiliated. During 2025, organizers and participants continued to face violent police responses, prompting concern from watchdogs as well as the European Parliament and Council of Europe. Protesters have faced arrest, degrading treatment in custody, and confiscation of devices. Many experienced media smears and harassment. There have also been allegations of authorities deploying illegal weapons against protesters, including chloroacetophenone (CN) tear gas and sonic weapons.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to continued violence against antigovernment protesters.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

2 / 4

Foreign and domestic NGOs that engage in work related to the rule of law and governance have faced threats and judicial harassment in recent years, and their employees have been smeared as “foreign mercenaries.” Intelligence services and police have reportedly used spyware to monitor think-tank workers and activists.

In February 2025, Belgrade police raided the offices of four democracy watchdog groups under warrants from anticorruption prosecutors. Members of the European Parliament, nongovernmental organizations, and opposition politicians denounced the raids as improper pressure on civil society.

A draft law introduced in 2024 seeks to regulate organizations and individuals that receive more than 50 percent of their funding from foreign sources. The law drew criticism from rights organizations and the EU’s European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) as aiming to stigmatize civil society, and drew comparisons in media and elsewhere to harsh such laws in Russia and Belarus. Citing the draft law among other kinds of government pressure on the sector, numerous Serbian NGOs cut ties with legislative and executive authorities in February 2025, withdrawing from all government and ministry bodies.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

3 / 4

Workers may legally join unions, engage in collective bargaining, and strike, but organizing efforts and strikes are often restricted in practice, with employers allegedly retaliating against workers and union activists. According to the Serbian trade union federation Independence (Nezavisnost), employers regularly establish and register their own trade unions to undermine independent unions.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

2 / 4

The independence of the judiciary is compromised by political influence over judicial appointments, and many judges have reported facing external pressure regarding their rulings. Politicians have made direct calls for individuals to be dismissed from judicial and prosecutorial positions. In December 2025, assailants set on fire a Subotica prosecutor’s vehicle as it was parked at her home; she characterized the incident as an attack on herself and her family.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

2 / 4

Due process guarantees are upheld in some cases, but corruption, lack of capacity, and political influence often undermine these protections. Among other problems, rules on the random assignment of cases to judges and prosecutors are not consistently observed, and mechanisms for obtaining restitution in civil matters are ineffective. High-profile, politically sensitive cases are especially vulnerable to interference.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

2 / 4

The population is free from threats to physical security like war and insurgency. However, in 2025, people associated with the protest movement and “blockade” events, or perceived to be, faced attacks and intimidation.

During the year, perceived protest supporters, including uninvolved bystanders, were badly beaten by individuals generally thought to be government supporters. Such attacks were reported near protests, at sporting events, and on city streets. In July, President Vučić pardoned four individuals accused of using baseball bats to attack several students who had been gluing protest stickers to trash cans. Among other reported attacks, in July, an explosive device was thrown at the home of a student who had been arrested while participating in protest events. The shop of a florist who supported the protesters was subject to arson attacks on two occasions in August.

Some prison facilities suffer from overcrowding, abuse, and inadequate health care. Radical right-wing organizations and violent sports fans who assault members of ethnic minority groups, LGBT+ people, and other perceived enemies also remain a concern.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because individuals perceived to be associated with the antigovernment protest movement faced extralegal violence and intimidation.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

2 / 4

Legal safeguards for socially vulnerable groups are poorly enforced. For example, though women are legally entitled to equal pay for equal work, this rule is not widely respected. The Romany minority is especially disadvantaged by discrimination in employment, housing, and education. LGBT+ people continue to face hate speech, threats, and physical violence, and perpetrators are rarely punished despite laws addressing hate crimes and discrimination.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

3 / 4

There are few formal restrictions on freedom of movement. Serbians are free to change their place of employment and education, and they have the right to travel.

In recent years, a variety of individuals—including foreign and Serbian public figures and human rights activists—have been temporarily detained and interrogated at Serbian airports and border crossings as a result of their views or work on politically sensitive topics. In 2025, several foreign citizens who attended a NGO workshop were reportedly expelled.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

3 / 4

In general, property rights are respected, but adjudication of disputes is slow, and problems such as illegal construction and fraud persist. Romany residents often face forced evictions without alternative housing or legal recourse.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

3 / 4

Personal social freedoms are generally respected, and men and women have equal legal rights on personal status matters such as marriage and divorce. Despite relevant legislation, domestic violence remains a problem. Activists have noted that few reported incidents result in criminal cases, and that convicted perpetrators often receive suspended sentences.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

2 / 4

Residents generally have access to economic opportunity, but factors such as weak macroeconomic growth and a relatively high rate of unemployment contribute to labor exploitation in some industries. Several reports in recent years have described worsening conditions in factories, particularly those that produce shoes and garments, including low wages, unpaid overtime, and hazardous work environments. Legal protections designed to prevent such abuses are not well enforced, in part because many labor workers have no means to cover the costs of the legal proceedings. SNS rallies in several cities in 2025 saw a noticeable presence of migrant workers, a development described by one human rights lawyer as exploitation. Serbian and international NGOs have also issued reports regarding persistent human rights violations against migrant workers across the country, which often go unaddressed by authorities.