

Document #2030933

Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2020 - Serbia

Partly Free

66

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 23 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 43 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

67 / 100 Partly Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Serbia is a parliamentary democracy with competitive multiparty elections, but in recent years the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations. Despite these trends, the country has continued to move toward membership in the European Union (EU).

Key Developments in 2019

- A series of antigovernment protests that were initially prompted by a November 2018 assault on opposition politician Borko Stefanović continued throughout the year, with participants calling for the resignation of President Aleksandar Vučić, increased press freedom, and fair elections.
- The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) documented 119 incidents of pressure or violence against journalists during the year, as independent media continued to endure smear campaigns by progovernment outlets, harassment, and physical threats.
- Recent scandals involving alleged plagiarism in the doctoral theses of senior state officials resulted in confrontations between rival groups of university students in September and the annulment of the finance minister's doctorate by Belgrade University in December.

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? 3 / 4

The president is directly elected for up to two five-year terms. In 2017, then prime minister Vučić won the election with 55 percent of the vote in a field of 11 candidates. The campaign was characterized by media bias and allegations of misuse of public resources and vote buying. Vučić remained prime minister throughout the election period, blurring the line between official and electoral activities.

The prime minister is elected by the parliament. Vučić named Ana Brnabić, then the minister for local government and public administration, to succeed him as prime minister following the 2017 presidential election, and she was subsequently confirmed in office by lawmakers.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 2 / 4

The Serbian 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 the wake of the snap parliamentary elections held in 2016, leaders of several opposition parties accused the SNS of rigging the polls, including by tampering with ballot boxes. Election observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) noted pressure on public-sector workers to vote for the ruling party. Private television outlets largely favored the SNS in their coverage.

While the SNS and its coalition partners won the largest portion of the vote, enabling Vučić to remain prime minister, they lost 27 seats, falling from 158 to 131. Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and its allies, running separately from the SNS-led list, took 29 seats. The far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS) placed third with 22 seats, returning to the parliament after a four-year absence. The progressive Enough Is Enough movement and a coalition led by the Democratic Party (DS) each won 16 seats. The pro-EU Alliance for a Better Serbia bloc won 13 seats, as did the conservative and Euroskeptic Dveri-Democratic Party of Serbia. The remaining seats went to smaller parties representing ethnic minorities. The SNS also performed well in the concurrent local and regional elections, particularly in the Vojvodina region, where the opposition DS had previously enjoyed broad support.

Belgrade city council elections held in 2018 were, according to domestic observers, marred by procedural errors and numerous irregularities. Some voters were pressured to vote for the SNS, while others were allegedly provided with completed ballots. Media coverage was largely biased in favor of the ruling party, and there were multiple reports of the misuse of administrative resources for campaigning. Some independent observers from the Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA) were threatened and expelled from polling stations before vote counting commenced. Similar problems were reported during municipal elections in smaller towns later that year; opposition parties boycotted in three of four towns that held balloting in December.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the 3 / relevant election management bodies? 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 some respects. The Republic Electoral Commission's composition before the 2017 presidential election raised concerns about partisan influence. A parliamentary oversight committee meant to monitor the campaign was never established, and the media regulator did not proactively track and punish biased media coverage.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other 3 / competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles 4 to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

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. Following the 2017 presidential election, the OSCE reported that the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) had decreased the resources dedicated to proactively monitoring campaign funds and did not thoroughly investigate dubious donations. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) found that the SNS had orchestrated the use of thousands of proxy donors to bypass legal limits on individual donations and disguise the true source of funding.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power 2 / through elections? 4

There have been peaceful transfers of power between rival parties over the past two decades, and the political system remains competitive. However, the current ruling party 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, and mobilizing public resources to support the SNS's campaigns.

The SNS has expanded its influence over the media through both state-owned enterprises and an array of private outlets that are dependent on government funding, and it has harnessed this influence to strengthen its political position and discredit its rivals, further reducing opposition parties' competitiveness. Opposition figures have also faced escalating harassment and violence in recent years. In November 2018, prominent politician Borko Stefanović of the Serbian Left party was severely beaten by seven men before a scheduled debate in the city of Kruševac. The attack was symptomatic of a broader campaign carried out by the ruling party to intimidate opposition leaders.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the 2 / political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 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 also 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 allegedly benefited from the misuse of public resources, such as use of public buses to transport loyalists to rallies. Separately, Russia has been accused of attempting to influence Serbian politics through its state-owned media and an array of small pro-Russian parties, media outlets, and civil society groups in Serbia.

During the 2017 election, there were widespread reports of employees at state or state-affiliated entities facing pressure to support the SNS and to compel their friends and families to do the same. Allegations of bribery, usually with money or food, in exchange for SNS votes, were extensive during the 2018 local elections. Citizens were also reportedly intimidated by SNS operatives who knocked on doors and pressured them to vote.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and 3 / other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4

The country's 5 percent electoral threshold for parliamentary representation does not apply to parties representing ethnic minorities. Groups centered on the ethnic Albanian, Bosniak, Slovak, and Hungarian communities won a total of 10 seats in the 2016 legislative elections. Nevertheless, ethnic minorities have a relatively muted voice in Serbian politics in practice. No party representing the interests of the Romany minority ran in the 2016 elections.

Women enjoy equal political rights. According to electoral regulations, women must account for at least 33 percent of a party's candidate list, and women currently hold 34 percent of seats in the parliament. Ana Brnabić became Serbia's first woman and first gay prime minister in 2017, but critics argued that her appointment was a superficial bid to showcase the government's claims of openness toward the LGBT+ community without systematic engagement on policy issues important to LGBT+ people.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives 2 / determine the policies of the government? 4

Vučić's move 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.

Moreover, the executive largely controls the legislative process, and opposition lawmakers are sidelined through the disproportionate use of disciplinary measures, frequent use 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 very rare. Critics have credibly accused President 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. The responsibility for prosecuting corruption cases has been passed among different public prosecutors, who typically fault the police for supplying insufficient evidence in cases against government ministers. The work of the ACA is also undermined in part by the ambiguous division of responsibilities among other entities tasked with combating corruption.

Notable cases that came to light in recent years without being resolved include those of Nenad Popović, a minister without portfolio who was implicated in a questionable privatization that caused an important electrical transformer manufacturer to declare bankruptcy; Finance Minister Siniša Mali, whom anticorruption agencies have investigated for suspected money laundering; and Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar, who allegedly has links to an organized crime group. Senior officials' close relatives and associates have also faced corruption allegations. For example, a series of reports and leaked documents since 2018 have tied the father of Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović to an arms-trading scheme and other malfeasance. A whistleblower who implicated Stefanović's father in the purchase of arms from the state at reduced rates was arrested in September 2019, potentially deterring others with knowledge of corruption from coming forward.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because many cases of alleged corruption among senior officials have gone unaddressed in recent years.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2 / 4

The government has received sustained criticism for a lack of transparency in large-scale infrastructure projects and for secrecy surrounding public tenders. For example, details about the state-funded Belgrade Waterfront project, which includes the construction of hotels and luxury apartments and has been beset by controversy since its announcement in 2012, have not been made available to the public.

Members of parliament 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 ACA, 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

Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4

Despite a constitution that guarantees freedom of the press and a penal code that does not treat libel as a criminal offense, media freedom is undermined by the threat of lawsuits or criminal charges against journalists for other offenses, lack of transparency in media ownership, editorial pressure from politicians and politically connected media owners, direct pressure and threats against journalists, and high rates of self-censorship. The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) has been criticized for a lack of independence.

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. Some privately owned national broadcasters and popular tabloids regularly participate in smear campaigns against the political opposition and other perceived government opponents. The incumbent political parties generally receive the majority of media coverage from public broadcasters. In March 2019, protesters in Belgrade stormed the headquarters of the Serbian public broadcaster RTS to draw attention to its biased coverage.

A number of critical journalists and outlets faced smear campaigns, punitive tax inspections, and other forms of pressure in 2019. According to NUNS, there were 119 media freedom violations against journalists during the year. They included physical assaults, though most incidents involved aggressive rhetoric and other forms of pressure or intimidation. In December 2018, investigative reporter Milan Jovanović, who has reported extensively on corruption, was the victim of an arson attack for which an SNS official was on trial at the end of 2019.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public 4 / and private? 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 3 / indoctrination? 4

Academic freedom has largely been upheld, though recent practice and legal changes have raised concerns about political influence. The Law on Higher Education, adopted by the National Assembly in 2017, increased the presence of state-appointed members on the National Council for Higher Education and a national accreditation body; another education law, also adopted in 2017, gave the education minister centralized control over the appointment of school principals.

Over the last several years, senior state officials have been accused of plagiarizing their doctoral theses, stirring debate within academia and casting doubt on the autonomy of university administrative bodies. The officials implicated include Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović, Finance Minister Siniša Mali, and National Bank Governor Jorgovanka Tabaković. The plagiarism controversies have triggered a smear campaign against academics who express criticism of the government and the accused officials. In May 2019, the ethics council of Belgrade University ruled that Mali did not commit plagiarism, but it reversed its decision in November, and the university

senate annulled his doctorate in December. In September, a group of students calling for Mali's dismissal blocked the rectorate building at Belgrade University and clashed with activists affiliated with the SNS.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics 3 / without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4

Private discussion is generally free and vibrant, but a pattern of retribution against high-profile critics of the government has contributed to an increasingly hostile environment for free expression and open debate. Throughout 2019, perceived government opponents including journalists, university professors, civil society leaders, and celebrities were targeted with smear campaigns in progovernment media outlets, as well as with criminal investigations and other retaliatory measures. Particularly worrisome were instances in which even the highest government officials took part in discrediting nonpolitical figures based on their public criticism of government policies.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

Citizens are generally able to exercise freedom of assembly, though in late 2019 there were more than 30 ongoing prosecutions against activists associated with the protest movement Ne davimo Beograd, which had organized demonstrations against the contentious development project on Belgrade's waterfront.

The assault on Stefanović in November 2018 prompted massive demonstrations against the SNS and President Vučić, which continued through 2019. The protesters called on the government to cease attacks on the press and opposition figures, and denounced corruption within the government and the SNS.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are 3 / engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 4

Foreign and domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGO) generally operate freely, but those that take openly critical stances toward the government or address sensitive or controversial topics have faced threats and harassment in recent years. In 2019, a number of NGOs were the targets of sustained smear campaigns in the media in response to their activities. Some individual activists were physically assaulted, and the offices of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights and the Pride Info Center were vandalized or attacked, apparently by right-wing extremists.

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 the International Trade Union Confederation has reported that organizing efforts and strikes are often restricted in practice, with employers allegedly retaliating against workers and union activists.

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 regularly comment on judicial matters, including by discussing ongoing cases or investigations with the media.

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 3 / and insurgencies? 4

The population is generally free from major threats to physical security, though some prison facilities suffer from overcrowding, abuse, and inadequate health care. Radical right-wing organizations and violent sports fans who target ethnic minorities and other perceived enemies also remain a concern.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the 2 / population? 4

Legal safeguards for socially vulnerable groups are poorly enforced. For example, women are legally entitled to equal pay for equal work, but 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 even physical violence, and perpetrators are rarely punished despite laws addressing hate crimes and discrimination. The government has made some gestures of support for the rights of LGBT+ people, for example by sending representatives to pride events and ensuring adequate police protection for parades.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights**G1 0-4 pts****Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place 4 / of residence, employment, or education? 4**

There are no formal restrictions on freedom of movement. Serbians are free to change their place of employment and education, and have the right to travel. Citizens have been able to enter the Schengen area of the EU without a visa since 2010.

G2 0-4 pts**Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private 3 / businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4**

In general, property rights are respected, but adjudication of disputes is slow, and problems such as illegal construction and fraud persist. An estimated two million buildings in Serbia are not registered. Romany residents are often subject to forced evictions, and those evicted are generally not offered alternative housing or access to legal remedies to challenge eviction notices.

G3 0-4 pts**Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and 3 / size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4**

Personal social freedoms are generally respected, and men and women have equal legal rights on personal status matters like marriage and divorce. However, early and forced marriage is reportedly more common among the Romany minority, with more than half of Romany girls marrying before the legal age of 18. A new law aimed at preventing domestic violence took effect in 2017, but such violence remains a problem; Serbia has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in Europe.

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. According to the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans Affairs, and Social Affairs, 53 workers died in workplace accidents in 2018, and a similar number of occupational fatalities was reported for 2019.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2019

Country:

Serbia

Source:

[Freedom House](#)

Original link:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2020>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

4 March 2020

Document ID:

2030933

Austrian Red Cross

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

T (Telephone) +43 1 589 00 583

F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589

info@ecoinet

Contact

Imprint & Disclaimer

F.A.Q.

Data Protection Notice

ecoinet is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoinet is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoinet is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

