

Freedom in the World 2025



header1 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.

header2 Key Developments in 2024

- In February, the European Parliament adopted a resolution that called for an independent probe into alleged fraud and manipulation associated with Serbia's December 2023 parliamentary, provincial, and local elections, in which an SNS-led coalition claimed key victories.

- Citizens mounted a series of major street protests in the second half of the year, first in response to the government’s decision to approve a lithium-mining agreement in July despite environmental concerns, and later after the November collapse of a recently renovated canopy at a train station in Novi Sad, which killed more than a dozen people and was blamed on systemic corruption. Protesters faced repressive efforts including police violence, arrests, home searches, and online threats.

PR Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	2.002 4.004
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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. Miloš Vučević, previously the defense minister, was confirmed as prime minister in May 2024, replacing Ana Brnabić, who had moved to the post of National Assembly president.

A2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	2.002 4.004
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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. In February 2024, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for an independent investigation into the irregularities of the December 2023 elections.

Local elections were held in 88 of Serbia's 145 municipalities in June 2024. In Belgrade, where the divided city council had failed to form a working majority after the December 2023 elections, an SNS-led coalition captured 64 of the 110 seats amid further reports of irregularities.

A3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	1.001 4.004
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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 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. A previous ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendation to audit the voter list had not been implemented, potentially allowing the organized migration of voters from neighboring countries.

A report by the Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA), a Serbian nongovernmental organization (NGO), presented evidence that the June 2024 Belgrade elections had featured abuses including attempts at organized voter migration among different municipalities. 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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 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?	3.003 4.004
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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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	1.001 4.004
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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, further reducing opposition parties' competitiveness. Opposition figures have also faced escalating harassment, intimidation, manipulation, and violence in recent years, resulting in the suppression of opposition parties' political representation at every level.

B3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 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? | 2.002
4.004

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 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. According to CRTA, social welfare beneficiaries were also pressured to vote for the SNS. SNS operatives have been known to intimidate voters directly, by appearing at their homes and pressuring them to support the party.

B4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? | 3.003
4.004

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 in 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. Ana Brnabić, who moved from the premiership to the presidency of the parliament in 2024, is an openly gay woman. While LGBT+ people have formal access to voting and electoral opportunities, political parties rarely address their interests or concerns.

C Functioning of Government

C1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? | 2.002
4.004

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? | 1.001 4.004

Although the number of arrests and prosecutions for corruption has risen in recent years, high-profile convictions are very 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. In 2023, anticorruption prosecutors Bojana Savović and Jasmina Paunović were removed from their positions and transferred to a different department after they indicted six individuals at the state-owned electricity utility for alleged embezzlement. Following the transfers, Savović was publicly threatened by a senior SNS figure, Svetozar Vujačić.

Notable cases that came to light in recent years without being resolved include those of Nenad Popović, a politician who was implicated in a questionable privatization that caused an electrical transformer manufacturer to declare bankruptcy; Finance Minister Siniša Mali, whom anticorruption agencies have investigated for suspected money laundering; and former Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar, who allegedly has links to an organized crime group.

In 2023, after the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control imposed sanctions on him for alleged corruption, Aleksandar Vulin resigned from his post as a director of the Serbian Security and Intelligence Agency (BIA). In May 2024, however, he was appointed as a deputy prime minister.

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? | 1.001 4.004

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.

CL Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? | 2.002 4.004

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. Four national broadcast frequencies were awarded to progovernment media in 2022. 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 have been increasingly subjected to harassment, intimidation, and violence by authorities, tabloid outlets close to the government, and progovernment groups. Several members of the ruling party have openly threatened journalists, and Vučić regularly and publicly disparages independent media. The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia reported 166 attacks directed at journalists during 2024, including physical attacks, property damage, threats, lawsuits, and other forms of pressure.

D2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	4.004 4.004
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The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, which is generally respected in practice.

D3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	3.003 4.004
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Academic freedom has largely been upheld, though recent practices and legal changes have raised concerns about political influence. 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.

D4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	2.002 4.004
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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. Perceived government opponents—including journalists, university professors, civil society leaders, celebrities, and ordinary citizens—have faced smear campaigns in progovernment media outlets, criminal investigations, and other retaliatory measures in recent years. The government's top officials regularly take part in discrediting nonpolitical figures based on their public criticism of government policies.

Critics of the government who documented endemic corruption have been targeted with advanced spyware, according to reports that emerged in 2023. 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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? | 2.002 4.004

Citizens are generally able to exercise freedom of assembly, though in recent years protesters have faced prosecutions for alleged offenses including “preparing acts against the constitutional order and security of Serbia” and “calling for a violent overthrow of the constitutional order.” Serbians mounted a series of major street protests beginning in July 2024, when the government approved a lithium-mining agreement despite environmental concerns. Another wave of protests erupted in November, after a recently renovated canopy at a train station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing more than a dozen people; the disaster was widely blamed on systemic corruption. Some demonstrations were met with excessive use of force by police, private security agencies, and masked individuals allegedly organized by the government. Activists and organizers were subjected to online threats and harassment, as well as targeted detentions, home searches, and confiscation of devices.

E2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? | 2.002
4.004

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.” The BIA and police reportedly use spyware to monitor think-tank workers and activists. In November 2024, the government introduced draft legislation that would require NGOs with foreign funding to register as “agents of foreign influence” and comply with related regulations or risk heavy penalties. The bill was still under review at year’s end.

E3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? | 3.003 4.004

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? | 2.002 4.004

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? | 2.002 4.004

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

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4.004

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 assault members of ethnic minority groups, LGBT+ people, and other perceived enemies also remain a concern. Two mass shootings in 2023 prompted large antigovernment protests by citizens who criticized the police and the government for failing to uphold their basic responsibilities. The use of progovernment thugs to violently disrupt demonstrations was reported during the protests of 2024.

F4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

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4.004

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

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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. However, reports emerged during 2024 that a variety of individuals—including foreign and Serbian public figures and human rights activists—had been temporarily detained and interrogated at Serbian airports and border crossings as a result of their views or work on politically sensitive topics. In August, Internal Affairs Minister Ivica Dačić confirmed the existence of official “watch lists” that could result in travel restrictions, but he pledged to tighten the criteria for inclusion. The status of the lists remained unclear at year’s end.

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 because Serbian border authorities have barred or impeded the travel of foreign and Serbian individuals based on their political views or human rights activism.

G2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

3.003

4.004

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 avenues for challenging eviction notices.
G3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner	3.003
and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	4.004

Personal social freedoms are generally respected, and men and women have equal legal rights on personal status matters such as marriage and divorce. A new law aimed at preventing domestic violence took effect in 2017, but such violence remains a problem. Activists have noted that few reported incidents result in criminal cases, and that convicted perpetrators often receive suspended sentences.
G4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic	2.002
exploitation?	4.004

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. 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.