



# Nations in Transit 2016 - Serbia

Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 12 April 2016

**Regime classification:** Semi-Consolidated Democracy

## Nations in Transit Category and Democracy Scores

|                                     | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| National Democratic Governance      | 3.75 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 3.75 | 3.75 | 3.75 | 3.75 | 3.75 | 3.75 | 4.00 |
| Electoral Process                   | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.25 | 3.25 |
| Civil Society                       | 2.75 | 2.75 | 2.75 | 2.50 | 2.25 | 2.25 | 2.25 | 2.25 | 2.25 | 2.25 |
| Independent Media                   | 3.50 | 3.75 | 3.75 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.25 | 4.50 |
| Local Democratic Governance         | 3.75 | 3.75 | 3.75 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.50 |
| Judicial Framework and Independence | 4.25 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 4.50 |
| Corruption                          | 4.50 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 4.25 | 4.25 | 4.25 | 4.25 | 4.25 | 4.25 |
| Democracy Score                     | 3.68 | 3.79 | 3.79 | 3.71 | 3.64 | 3.64 | 3.64 | 3.64 | 3.68 | 3.75 |

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

## Executive Summary:

In 2015, Serbia's democracy continued the modestly negative trajectory observed in 2014. While some areas of democratic development saw minor improvements, they were outweighed by worrying developments in the government's attitude toward dissent or criticism. A huge parliamentary majority and strong public support allowed the government to take important steps in moving forward with European Union (EU) accession, normalizing relations with Kosovo, and implementing key fiscal and economic reforms. However, the ruling coalition of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) continued to display a sharp intolerance for any kind of criticism either from opposition parties, independent media, civil society, or even ordinary citizens. Independent government bodies, such as the ombudsman, came under particularly severe attack for attempting to hold government officials and institutions to account and upholding the rights of ordinary citizens.

Having negotiated a three-year reform agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government took bold moves to stabilize public finances and halt the alarming growth of public debt. Despite the unpopularity of austerity measures, the government maintained remarkable overall support for its efforts. In March, Serbia completed the first phase of EU accession negotiations, known as "screening," and the first negotiating chapters were opened in December. In addition, Belgrade and Pristina made significant progress in implementing the 2013 Brussels Agreement through accords agreed in August, helping the further normalization of relations.

Despite frequent speculation, fed by the ruling SNS, no early elections were held in 2015. Nevertheless, the ruling coalition kept up pressure to realign local governing coalitions; and the worrying trend of political violence and intimidation during local elections, which started in 2014, continued in 2015. In opposition-run municipalities such as Indija, accusations were frequently made that the SNS in particular was using violence and intimidation to wrestle control of local government away from their opponents. In southern Serbia, ethnic Albanian deputies from the municipalities of Preševo and Bujanovac demanded the creation of an autonomous Association of Albanian Municipalities, akin to the Association of Serb Municipalities due to be created in Kosovo. However, Serbian authorities and the international community largely ignored their demands.

Despite the challenges faced by many well-established nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) when it comes to funding, civil society life in Serbia remained vibrant and lively. Citizens continued to organize on an ad hoc basis to pressure the authorities on specific local issues as well as to offer support to the large wave of migrants and asylum seekers passing through Serbia from the Middle East. Unlike in parts of Central and Eastern Europe, there were no anti-Muslim or anti-immigration rallies. For the second consecutive year, activists and NGOs campaigning for the rights of LGBTI people held a Pride Parade in Belgrade. The event passed off with no major violent incidents, albeit under heavy police protection and with little public support.

By contrast, the media remained under heavy pressure. Editors and journalists continued to complain of government attempts to interfere with editorial policy and limit critical reporting. In particular, public advertising was used to reward friendly and punish critical media. Together with a contraction in other forms of income, this led to widespread self-censorship by editors and journalists. Official intolerance for investigative reporting critical of the ruling parties was particularly evident in the shrill attacks by Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić on the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in the first half of the year. The government moved to privatize many state-owned media; a step it argued would increase their independence. Yet, in reality, the process seems to have resulted in the sale of a large number of outlets to businessmen close to SNS, effectively further reducing their independence.

Little progress was made in improving the organization and efficiency of the judicial system in 2015. The government drew up an action plan for judicial reform, prepared as a condition for opening accession negotiations with the EU in Chapter 23 on the Judiciary and Fundamental Rights. The action plan, which was drafted following consultation with the EU, contains detailed measures to be implemented over the coming years and includes measurable indicators of success. Attempts to exert political influence over the judiciary continued in 2015 and were most visible in efforts to remove Chief War Crimes Prosecutor Vladimir Vukčević from office before the end of his mandate. Many saw his willingness to dig deep in war crimes committed by the Serbian side during the wars of the 1990s as the reason behind such efforts.

Despite the fact that the ruling SNS's rise to power was based on promises to fight corruption, there was a significant discrepancy between official rhetoric and concrete steps taken to stem corruption. The rare exception was a June law protecting whistleblowers. A clear record of corruption-related court convictions still needs to be established; and even the number of indictments brought forward remains low relative to the number of cases opened and investigated. Meanwhile, periodic corruption accusations against members of the SNS and individuals close to it were usually dismissed by senior party officials, with no legal action taken.

### Score Changes:

- **National Democratic Governance rating declined from 3.75 to 4.00** due to an excessive concentration of power in the hands of Prime Minister Vučić and a gradual deterioration of domestic democratic governance in past few years that signifies a lasting trend.
- **Independent Media rating declined from 4.25 to 4.50** as the space for independent media reporting continued to shrink amid widespread self-censorship, while the ruling party's control of advertising and other sources of funding, along with verbal attacks by government officials, amounted to indirect censorship.

**As a result, Serbia's Democracy Score declined from 3.68 to 3.75.**

**Outlook for 2016:** Serbia will hold regularly scheduled local elections as well as Vojvodina provincial elections in the spring of 2016, and Prime Minister Vučić has already decided to combine this with early parliamentary elections. There seems little doubt that the SNS will emerge victorious after these elections, particularly as the opposition remains in disarray. It will be important to watch whether the ruling party steps up attempts to bring independent media under greater control in the run-up to these elections, as seems likely. Equally important will be whether the trend of violence in elections at the local level seen in 2014 and 2015 continues next year. On a more positive note, the government can be expected to continue pursuing EU accession together with the normalization of relations with Pristina. Attempts at fiscal consolidation and economic reform are also likely to continue in 2016.

### National Democratic Governance:

**2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016**

3.75 4.00 4.00 3.75 3.75 3.75 3.75 3.75 3.75 4.00

- During the course of 2015, Serbia's ruling coalition between the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) remained stable under the firm leadership of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić. However, rumors periodically surfaced, particularly in the second half of the year, that early parliamentary elections would be held in December, along with early elections for local government assemblies and the Vojvodina provincial government.<sup>[1]</sup> Such speculation was fed primarily by senior members of the SNS leadership, including Vučić himself, and served two main goals. First, such speculation crowded out other news items from the media as well as served to control the agenda itself. Second, it was clearly intended to place a strain on the – until then – relatively stable coalition government in Vojvodina province, led by the opposition Democratic Party (DS), in the hope that it would collapse. The fact that senior SNS officials were aware that the calling of early local elections across the country was unconstitutional made it even more

troubling. Equally, the central government did not have the prerogative to dismiss the Vojvodina Assembly and call early provincial elections unless the Vojvodina government lost its majority in the provincial assembly.

- The fact that Vučić's own SNS had an absolute majority in parliament and was therefore not dependent on its junior coalition partners gave the prime minister a degree of control over the government that is unprecedented in recent Serbian political history. Thanks to this, the government was able to drive legislation through parliament with relative ease, adopting important laws aimed at improving the business environment in Serbia and implementing fiscal consolidation efforts envisaged under the Stand-By Arrangement signed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in November 2014.<sup>[2]</sup> However, civil society organizations monitoring the work of the parliament were critical of the increasing use of urgent procedures to pass laws, limiting public and parliamentary debate.<sup>[3]</sup> Equally, with the ruling coalition enjoying the support of around four-fifths of deputies in the parliament, there was little scope for the legislature to act as a meaningful check on the executive.
- Attempts to suppress criticism and even undermine the work of independent institutions were evident throughout the year. The most intense attacks were directed at Citizens' Ombudsman Saša Janković. During late 2014 and early 2015, Janković's office sought to conduct probes into illegal military surveillance against opponents of the government, but his work was hindered by Defense Minister Bratislav Gašić and other government officials. In January 2015, Janković complained that he was receiving threats because of these investigations, and in late April, tabloid newspapers close to the SNS began a campaign against the ombudsman.<sup>[4]</sup> The smear campaign, which lasted for weeks, questioned Janković's involvement in the suicide of a friend who had shot himself with a gun in his apartment in 1993. Despite the fact that the original investigation cleared Janković, Gašić intervened to call on the ombudsman to explain his involvement in what he pointedly referred to as a "murder."<sup>[5]</sup>
- Such actions were complemented by efforts to create a perception that domestic and external "enemies" of the government were hatching sinister plans to bring down Vučić's cabinet. One very clear example of this were accusations by Vučić himself on January 9 that certain local media were receiving money from the European Union (EU) to criticize his government.<sup>[6]</sup> Later, in November, pro-SNS outlets and journalists, with the collusion of senior SNS officials, published articles about an imminent coup against Vučić and his government. The drama ended with Vučić clarifying that the claims were "not quite true." On a separate occasion in December, Vučić accused OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović of "orchestrating an attack" on the country during the 2014 floods in Serbia.<sup>[7]</sup>
- The government undoubtedly also achieved some positive results during the year. The process of examining the alignment of Serbian legislation with the EU's *acquis communautaire* (known as "screening"), which started in 2014, successfully ended in March. The Serbian government formed its official negotiating team in August 2015,<sup>[8]</sup> and the first negotiating chapters were opened in December. During 2015, EU officials had made it clear that further progress in normalizing relations with Kosovo and implementing the 2013 Brussels Agreement were the primary hurdles to opening specific negotiating chapters.<sup>[9]</sup> After protracted negotiations, Belgrade and Pristina reached a series of agreements in August, including a key one on the powers and competencies of the Association of Serbian Municipalities.<sup>[10]</sup> It was this agreement that paved the way for the opening of specific negotiating chapters.

- The government's response to the stream of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from the Middle East entering its territory was also commendable. It made a clear effort to create a tolerant climate for the migrants within Serbia, stressing that migrants were no threat to citizens and were in any case uninterested in remaining in Serbia. Politicians and public figures reminded the public that many Serbian citizens had also fled to Western Europe during the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Electoral Process:

**2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016**

3.25 3.25 3.25 3.25 3.25 3.25 3.25 3.25 3.25 3.25

- With no nation-wide or regional elections and only a few local electoral contests, 2015 was a quiet year by Serbia's standards. For much of the year, members of the ruling coalition at the national level publicly speculated that local elections coupled with provincial elections in Vojvodina would be held in December 2015, ahead of their regularly scheduled time in spring 2016. While such speculation enlivened daily political debates, it ignored the fact that the constitution does not permit the possibility of early local elections across the board.<sup>[12]</sup>
- The municipality of Medveđa in southern Serbia was one of the few that held local elections in 2015. The election took place on September 13 and a coalition comprised of the SNS and SPS won a landslide victory, securing 60 percent of votes. The ethnic Albanian Democratic Party-Nagip Arifi won 14 percent, ahead of the previously ruling Citizens Group "Gornja Jablanica" which secured 13.4 percent of the votes, while the Democratic Party (DS), the main opposition party at the national level, did not pass the 5 percent electoral threshold. There were no major irregularities on election day.<sup>[13]</sup>
- A worrying trend of violence in local elections, which became particularly prominent during 2014, continued in 2015. In May, ahead of a submunicipal elections in the small town of Velika Plana, local media reported about two attacks on individuals and damage to two cars and a local café. Parties from the local ruling coalition blamed SNS activists.<sup>[14]</sup> The following month, in a similar submunicipal election in the village of Majur, close to Šabac, SNS activists reportedly intimidated activists from the DS and "Zajedno za Srbiju," a local party.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Civil Society:

**2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016**

2.75 2.75 2.75 2.50 2.25 2.25 2.25 2.25 2.25 2.25

- There are just over 26,000 civil society organizations (CSOs) active in Serbia according to the Serbian Business Registers Agency.<sup>[16]</sup> For the vast majority, securing finance remains a major problem, with most dependent either on declining funding from international donors or different levels of government in Serbia. Other local forms of funding are rarely available, as businesses and individuals rarely donate to CSOs. Despite the fact that well-established organizations are increasingly facing funding difficulties, new and often informal forms of civic activism surface frequently, often on an ad hoc basis and around specific issues.

- On September 20, Belgrade held its Pride Parade for the second consecutive year.<sup>[17]</sup> While support and understanding among the public remains low, there appeared to be fewer threats and less vocal opposition by extremists this year – although strong police presence was still needed to ensure the safety of participants, with police closing off large sections of the city center.<sup>[18]</sup> One novel development was the holding of a separate Trans Pride parade by transgender activists, who claimed that they felt marginalized by the mainstream LGB community.<sup>[19]</sup> Two attacks before and right after the parade, however, demonstrated the precariousness of the position of the LGBT community.<sup>[20]</sup>
- One prominent example of grassroots activism in 2015 is the "Ne(da)vimo Beograd" (Let's not drown Belgrade) movement. The group is opposed to the Belgrade Waterfront, a high-profile commercial and residential development project in the center of Belgrade, pushed by the national government and that of Belgrade, yet with little transparency about even the basic details. To date, the group has organized a number of protests and publicity stunts, while harnessing social media to spread their message.<sup>[21]</sup> Authorities have sought to prevent the group from carrying out its activities. During the Belgrade Boat Carnival in August, river police stopped a boat used by the movement, confiscated its banner and prevented them from participating in the carnival. The only justification given was that their banner sent a political message.<sup>[22]</sup> Earlier, in March, police arrested activists handing out a newspaper produced by the group, claiming citizens had no right to express themselves in this way.<sup>[23]</sup> This demonstrated authorities' willingness to obstruct legitimate protest by illegitimate means.
- Ordinary citizens also organized on an ad hoc basis to assist the wave of Middle-Eastern refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers passing through the country, particularly in Belgrade.<sup>[24]</sup> Groups such as Refugee Aid Serbia organized primarily on an informal basis, exploiting social media to organize volunteers and coordinate in-kind donations.<sup>[25]</sup> At Miksalište, a hip local cultural and concert venue close to the area of Belgrade where most migrants were residing, volunteers established a collection point for food and clothes.<sup>[26]</sup> There were no significant protests organized against migrants and asylum seekers.

## Independent Media:

**2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016**

3.50 3.75 3.75 4.00 4.00 4.00 4.00 4.00 4.25 4.50

- Freedom of speech and independence of the media continued to deteriorate in 2015. While government officials, including Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, asserted that the media were absolutely free and that the government was seeking to raise media freedoms to levels present in West European countries, most independent journalists argued otherwise.<sup>[27]</sup> Attempts by ruling politicians to interfere with editorial policy, from the central to the local level, were commonly cited. Media practitioners also raised self-censorship as a problem, whereby journalists or editors refrained from writing about certain issues that could irritate the authorities because they feared they would be deprived of crucial funding, either via public sector advertising or in the form of official funding calls.<sup>[28]</sup>
- This year saw unusually visible and transparent attacks by government officials, including the prime minister himself, on the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). In January, BIRN published a story about questionable practices in the awarding of a tender by state-owned electricity corporation EPS.<sup>[29]</sup> Angered by the report, Vučić accused BIRN of spreading lies and lobbying for other, foreign, companies. More disturbingly, he claimed

that BIRN was being funded by the EU precisely in order to attack and destabilize his government.<sup>[30]</sup> In the days and weeks that followed, government officials and tabloids close to the ruling SNS, such as *Informer*, continued a campaign of attacks against BIRN.<sup>[31]</sup> Just over a month later, in late February, distribution of Belgrade Insight, a free, English language paper published by BIRN, was discontinued at various state-controlled outlets, such as Belgrade Airport and the Tourist Organization of Belgrade.<sup>[32]</sup>

- Other, more or less subtle, forms of pressure against independent journalists continued. In March, Danica Vučenić, a respected journalist who ran the *Jedan na jedan* (One on one) daily show on Radio-Television Vojvodina, stated that she had decided to leave journalism because an active boycott of her program by government officials had prevented her from performing her job of informing the public objectively.<sup>[33]</sup> In November, Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović announced in front armed police that Vučić had taken a lie detector test over allegations of involvement in blackmailing media. In a criminal report submitted earlier, the former director of the tabloid *Kurir* had accused Vučić and Dragan J. Vučićević, the owner of *Informer*, of asking him to make false allegations about the *Kurir*'s owner. The accusations were allegedly part of a war between the two tabloids.<sup>[34]</sup>
- More sinister were physical attacks on journalists, such as that against Ivan Ninić, an associate of the anticorruption portal Pištaljka. Ninić was attacked and beaten with metal bars outside his residential building by two masked men in August. He believes that the attack was ordered by members of the ruling political elite over a corruption story he was planning to publish.<sup>[35]</sup>
- In December, Defence Minister Bratislav Gašić sparked outrage by commenting on air that he "loved journalists who get down on their knees so easily" while a female journalist crouched in front of him holding a microphone. PM Vučić immediately declared that Gašić could no longer remain in his post, but as of year's end, he had yet to resign.<sup>[36]</sup>
- In 2015, the government made important progress in reducing state ownership of media but the process was heavily criticized. Under the Media Strategy adopted in 2011, a total of 73 state-owned media, mostly local radio and television stations, were scheduled for privatization, with the process legally due to be completed by 31 October 2015.<sup>[37]</sup> At time of writing, only 34 media outlets had been privatized, but most of them appear to have been bought by individuals close to the ruling SNS. Many these owners were later able to recoup the costs through project financing grants provided by local authorities.<sup>[38]</sup>

## Local Democratic Governance:

**2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016**

3.75 3.75 3.75 3.50 3.50 3.50 3.50 3.50 3.50 3.50

- According to the 2007 law on the territorial organization of the Republic of Serbia, the country has two autonomous provinces (Vojvodina and Kosovo, which declared independence in 2008) and 174 units of local government. In practice, Serbia is a very centralized state, where local governments have very limited competencies and abilities to fund themselves independently of the central government. The Vojvodina provincial administration enjoys certain limited powers – including in healthcare, education, regional development, sport and culture – yet the question of how much autonomy Vojvodina should have is a point of controversy as well as sensitivity in Serbia, with fears that greater autonomy could lead to secession.

- The SNS campaign to bring down the DS-led Vojvodina government and thus trigger early provincial elections peaked in 2014 and subsided somewhat in 2015. SNS officials satisfied themselves with feeding speculation that early elections could be held in December 2015,<sup>[39]</sup> but refrained from seeking to actively destabilize the provincial ruling coalition in the way that had been seen during the previous year. The central SNS-dominated government kept cooperation with the Vojvodina provincial government to a minimum, while wrangling continued over the scale of budgetary transfers to Vojvodina's budget from the central government budget, mainly to Vojvodina's detriment.<sup>[40]</sup>
- Meanwhile, at the municipal level political contestation between different parties often took a violent and undemocratic form. Continuing their previous year's efforts to realign local government coalitions to reflect the ruling coalition at the central level, the SNS sought to remove the DS from power in the municipality of Indija. The DS municipal leadership claimed the SNS was using intimidation to win over its deputies in the local assembly,<sup>[41]</sup> while also accusing it of being behind a physical attack on Vladimir Ješić, a local journalist and brother of the previous DS mayor.<sup>[42]</sup> For its part, the SNS accused the DS of holding its own local assembly delegates hostage at a hotel, in order to prevent them voting against the DS mayor.<sup>[43]</sup> Ultimately, the SNS effort to unseat the DS failed.
- In several other areas, opposition activists accused local SNS representatives of carrying out physical attacks on them. In May, in the small municipality of Čajetina two officials of the locally ruling Serbian People's Party (SPP) accused a group of SNS activists of beating them with spades, which SNS officials denied.<sup>[44]</sup> During the same month, a similar incident was reported in the town of Gornji Milanovac, where a local representative of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), part of the local ruling coalition, was attacked in a restaurant by SNS activists. The attack was again denied by the local SNS, but confirmed by local representatives of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS).<sup>[45]</sup>
- Following the August agreement between Belgrade and Pristina on the establishment of an Association of Serbian Municipalities in Kosovo, ethnic Albanian local government representatives in southern Serbia demanded the establishment of a similar structure.<sup>[46]</sup> The Association of Albanian Municipalities in Presevo Valley was to be comprised of the municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac, and Medveđa, two of which have an Albanian majority. Ethnic Albanian members of the assemblies of Preševo and Bujanovac met on September 12 to formally proclaim the Association, but their meeting was boycotted by a significant number of ethnic Albanian local assembly members from all three municipalities, who objected to the lack of organization surrounding the event.<sup>[47]</sup> Serbian government officials mostly dismissed the move.

## Judicial Framework and Independence:

**2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016**

4.25 4.50 4.50 4.50 4.50 4.50 4.50 4.50 4.50 4.50

- Following a failed effort to reform the judicial system in 2009-10, the government adopted a new five-year reform strategy aimed at improving judicial independence, accountability, and efficiency. However, the judiciary continues to suffer from poor organization, inefficiency, political influence, and a significant case backlog. Public trust in judicial institutions also remains low. One recent public opinion survey from June 2015 found that only 18 percent of respondents trusted the judicial system, while 51 percent stated that they did not trust it. This

was a much lower level of trust and much higher level of mistrust than in other institutions such as the police, army, parliament or government.<sup>[48]</sup>

- Improving the rule of law and the functioning of the judicial system is a key task in Serbia's EU accession process. Negotiations on Chapter 23 covering Judiciary and Fundamental Rights are expected to open in 2016,<sup>[49]</sup> and should act as a catalyst for judicial reforms. In preparation for this, Belgrade worked on an action plan for Chapter 23, setting out detailed steps for reforms related to the judiciary and fight against corruption. The EU approved the final draft in September 2015; the action plan, among other steps, envisages the adoption of constitutional amendments by 2017 to safeguard judicial independence.<sup>[50]</sup> The latest Enlargement Progress Report for Serbia notes that "the Constitution and laws allow political influence" over the judiciary and criticizes the practice of government officials publicly commenting on ongoing trials and/or investigations, thus exerting pressure on judges and prosecutors.<sup>[51]</sup>
- The Serbian judicial system continues to be plagued by a significant backlog of cases.<sup>[52]</sup> According to Judge Dragomir Milojević, the Head of the Supreme Court of Cassation, during the first nine months of 2015, the backlog of court cases increased by more than 100,000 and reached close to 3 million cases.<sup>[53]</sup>
- During 2015, attempts to exert political influence were most starkly visible in relation to the Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor. A snap change to the Law on Public Prosecutors at the end of 2014 meant that Chief War Crimes Prosecutor Vladimir Vukčević would have been forced out of his job in January 2015 on grounds of retirement, rather than at the end of 2015 when his mandate was due to expire.<sup>[54]</sup> Vukčević and other observers saw this legal change as being directed at him personally, due to the fact that the war crimes investigations he had presided over had stirred up a "hornets' nest".<sup>[55]</sup> Under international pressure, changes to the law were adopted in January 2015 that allowed Vukčević to remain in his job until the end of his mandate.<sup>[56]</sup> Yet, political pressure continued. Following Vukčević's statements in early February that he would investigate war crimes allegations made by a human rights NGO against the head of the army, Ljubisa Diković, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić publicly warned Vučković that he should be careful of "what he is digging into."<sup>[57]</sup>

## Corruption:

**2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016**

4.50 4.50 4.50 4.50 4.25 4.25 4.25 4.25 4.25 4.25

- The rise of the SNS, including its triumph in the 2014 elections, owes much to the fact that it campaigned on a ticket of fighting corruption, a great source of frustration for the Serbian public. The very public arrest of prominent businessman Miroslav Mišković in 2012 gave credibility to the SNS's claims. However, since winning the 2014 elections, SNS efforts to fight corruption have not matched the preelection rhetoric. Overall, the number of convictions is well below the number of corruption-related indictments, and the discrepancy is even bigger in the case of announcements and eventual investigations.
- Accordingly, the trial of Miroslav Mišković continued to move forward at a slow pace in 2015. Negligible progress was also made in investigating the 24 problematic privatizations flagged by Serbia's own Anti-Corruption Council and consecutive EU Progress Reports.<sup>[58]</sup> When it comes to prosecuting corruption cases, the 2015 Progress Report noted that there was an "initial track record of investigation, prosecution and convictions which are not

considered high-level" but that "there has been no final conviction for high level corruption".<sup>[59]</sup>

- Serbia was ranked 71st out of 168 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, which reflected a one point improvement from previous year when the country was ranked 78th out of 175 countries.<sup>[60]</sup> In the Open Budget Index (OBI), a comparative measure of government budget transparency, Serbia also improved a few places. However, the country still provides "limited" information, with the biggest problems related to public participation in preparing annual budgets and the space available to monitor budget expenditures.<sup>[61]</sup>
- In June, a new law protecting whistleblowers who reveal corruption and abuses came into effect. The law provides greater powers to the Anticorruption Agency (ACA) and courts in protecting whistleblowers from reprisals by employers. Anticorruption campaigners welcomed the changes, but stressed that implementation will be a key test for the law.<sup>[62]</sup>
- The ACA continued with its efforts to hold public officials to account, although the limited nature of its powers once again proved a considerable constraint. An investigation by BIRN published in May revealed that current defense minister and senior SNS official Bratislav Gašić had awarded contracts to companies linked to his family while serving as mayor of Kruševac in 2012-14.<sup>[63]</sup> The ACA began an investigation into whether Gašić had broken laws relating to conflict of interest and in September ruled that the minister had indeed broken the relevant laws.<sup>[64]</sup> However, other than making this public, the agency could not take any further steps and Gašić did not suffer further consequences as a result of the revelations.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> "Vučić: Razmišljam o vanrednim izborima, neću da sedim u fotelji 15 godina i brčkam se po primorju" [Vučić: I am considering early elections, I don't want to sit in my chair for 15 years and paddle on the coast], Blic, 19 August 2015, <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/584001/Vucic-Razmisljam-o-vanrednim-izborima-necu-da-sedim-u-fotelji-15-godina-i-brckam-se-po-primorju>

<sup>2</sup> "IMF Mission Reaches Staff-Level Agreement with Serbia on a Precautionary Stand-By Arrangement," International Monetary Fund, 20 November 2014, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2014/pr14531.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Sasa Dragojlo, "Rise in 'Urgently' Passed Laws Queried in Serbia," Balkan Insight, 12 October 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/urgent-procedure-laws-detrimental-for-serbia-s-rule-of-law-10-06-2015>

4 "Janković: Prete mi, ne osećam se bezbedno" [Janković: They are threatening me, I do not feel safe], Blic, 21 January 2015, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/jankovic-prete-mi-ne-osecam-se-bezbedno/32ehszc>

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