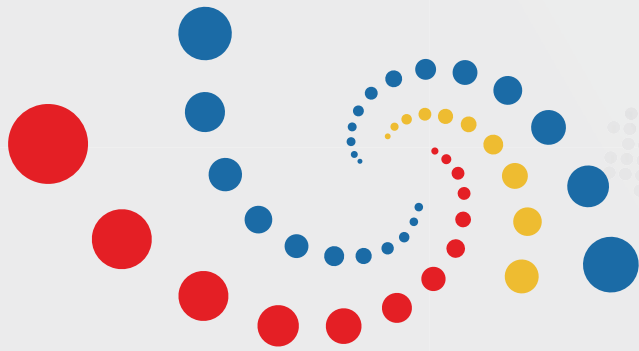




Keeping Focus: Reporting developments in Serbia

Serbia in Political and Economic Turmoil Ahead of the 1 November Anniversary Protest

Key points:

- ⊕ Serbia poised for another large student protest in Novi Sad on the anniversary of the railway station tragedy
- ⊕ European Parliament resolution on Serbia and von der Leyen's visit to Belgrade show increasing pressure on Vučić's government concerning democracy
- ⊕ U.S. sanctions against the Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS) pose significant challenges to Serbian economy and Belgrade's balancing foreign policy

Smaller-scale protests ahead of the major November gathering in Novi Sad

As the first anniversary of the Novi Sad tragedy of 1 November 2024 approaches, Serbia remains in a political deadlock. The student movement, which has become a major political actor, called for early parliamentary elections in May, but the ruling Serbian Progressive Party rejected these demands, claiming that early elections would probably be held towards the end of 2026.

Over the past month, polarization has remained high and the atmosphere in society tense. While there have been no major protests by the student movement since the first week of September, numerous smaller-scale protest activities have continued, accompanied by a series of counter-gatherings organized by the ruling party. A new major student protest is expected on 1 November in Novi Sad, marking the first anniversary of the death of 16 people.

The student protest in Novi Sad on 5 September 2025 gathered thousands of participants. Although the immediate cause of the protest was police violence against students on 1 September, the protest on 5 September was marked by an even more brutal police response. Following a peaceful gathering, part of the protesters marched to the

Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Novi Sad, where clashes with police began.

While videos of the event show several individuals from the crowd attacking the police, the response was described by many eyewitnesses as disproportionate and brutal, targeting peaceful citizens who did not participate in the clashes. Large amounts of tear gas were deployed by the police, and there were reports of injured protesters.

The police response was condemned by multiple domestic and international actors, including the European Green Party, whose co-chairs were present at the protest at the invitation of their member party, the Green-Left Front. In a speech given late in the evening, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, among other remarks, noted the presence of the European Greens delegation, whom he repeatedly referred to as “scum” and threatened with prosecution.

In the weeks following the September protest in Novi Sad, there were no major gatherings organized by the student movement, partly because the majority of students were occupied with exams required for continuing their studies. Various smaller-scale protests and gatherings continued to take place, many organized by activist groups unrelated to the student movement. Classes in several prominent high schools across the country were disrupted due to disagreements between parents and headmasters, while hundreds of teachers lost their jobs for expressing support for the protesters. The treatment of several imprisoned students also caused outrage among parts of the public in September.

Meanwhile, in an effort to bolster the morale of the ruling party, its leadership organized several protest walks “against the blockades” (acts of civil disobedience carried out by students and their supporters) across the country.

The situation in society remains tense. On 22 October, a 70-year-old pensioner was arrested soon after shooting and injuring a 57-year-old man in an area in front of the



*The police clashes with the protesters in Novi Sad;
Photo: Protesti.pics / Gavriilo Andrić*

National Assembly - derogatively referred to as “Ćacilend” - that has been occupied by government supporters since March. One of the tents set up in the area caught fire. President Aleksandar Vučić described the attack as an act of terrorism and accused the student movement, opposition parties, and critical media of inciting it. The accused has been charged with attempted murder and has not disclosed details of his motivation.

Cooling of the relations between the SNS and the EU

President Vučić’s insults toward the European Greens MEPs, described above, drew widespread criticism and condemnation. The following weeks in September and October were marked by several events indicating that relations between the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the European Union were deteriorating.

On 25 September, the Presidency of the European People’s Party (EPP) announced that it had tasked two senior figures within the party to lead an internal scrutiny process regarding the role of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), its associate member, within the EPP. This had been announced earlier that month by EPP President Manfred Weber.

Addressing the media in Strasbourg, Weber stated that the EPP was closely following the situation and developments in Serbia, adding that the group “was not blind to the latest events and images from Serbia.” As of October, the SNS leadership has officially met with the EPP in the context of the scrutiny process, but the outcome and further timeline remain unknown.

The visit of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to Belgrade on 15 October, part of her annual tour of the Western Balkans, was noted for a less enthusiastic tone than in previous years. Unlike her earlier visits, which were marked by praise for Serbia’s leadership, this time von der Leyen emphasized that the European Union stands for freedom, including the right to peaceful assembly. She added that the EU expected Serbia to redouble its efforts on the path toward membership.

Finally, on 22 October, the European Parliament adopted, by a large majority, a Resolution on polarization and increased repression in Serbia on the eve of the first anniversary of the Novi Sad tragedy. The text of the Resolution, described as harsher than any previous such document, reflects on the situation in Serbia, including the repression of protesters by the authorities, obstruction of justice in the case, and growing polarization in the country. The spreading of conspiracy theories regarding

the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station by the highest state officials was condemned.

With the exception of the EP resolution, which was dismissed by the authorities, the ruling party responded to these developments by adopting a constructive posture, stepping up its activities within the EPP, and pledging to implement long-overdue reforms.



*Ursula von der Leyen and Aleksandar Vučić in Belgrade;
Photo: European Union*

Many experts, however, based on past experience, believe these activities to be mere window dressing. These concerns appeared to be confirmed when the ruling party violated procedure in the election of the new Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media, in an attempt to maintain a majority in this influential institution. Two-thirds of the candidates who reached the final stage of the process sent an open letter to the Speaker of the Assembly, calling for the restoration of legality in the process.

Serbian energy sector falls victim to the foreign policy balancing

On 9 October 2025, the United States sanctions on the majority Russian-owned Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS) entered into force. The U.S. had placed NIS on the sanctions list on 10 January, with the aim, among other things, of preventing the financing of the war in Ukraine through revenues from Russian energy companies. Since then, the implementation of the sanctions had been postponed several times.

Serbia sold the majority of NIS shares to Russian companies Gazprom and Gazprom Neft in 2008. Since the sanctions were announced in January, the ownership structure of NIS has changed several times, but the company remains majority-owned by Russian firms. The Serbian government has been unwilling to nationalize the company. At the same time, Russia extended its gas-supply contract with Serbia only until the end of the year, which

has been interpreted as a demonstration of continued leverage in the context of the dispute over NIS.

Upon the announcement of the sanctions, NIS management stated that it had temporarily secured the regular supply of oil products to the domestic market as well as the social stability of its employees. However, experts expect that, if the sanctions remain in place, the company will face logistical difficulties in supply, which could lead to higher oil prices.

On 26 October, President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić announced that the country was in negotiations with Russian, American, and European partners, and that there were sufficient oil reserves until mid-November, after which Serbia would “start making its own decisions and protect the population.” A day later, Reuters reported that, due to supply shortages, Serbia had only a few days left before the NIS oil refinery in Pančevo would be forced to halt crude-oil processing.



*NIS company;
Photo: FoNet //021.rs/printscreens*

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