

Serbia

by Misha Savic

Capital: Belgrade
Population: 7.164 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US\$12,480

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2015*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
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	2.75	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25
Independent Media	3.25	3.50	3.75	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.25
National Democratic Governance	4.00	3.75	4.00	4.00	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75
Local Democratic Governance	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50
Judicial Framework and Independence	4.25	4.25	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50
Corruption	4.75	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25
Democracy Score	3.71	3.68	3.79	3.79	3.71	3.64	3.64	3.64	3.64	3.68

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). 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.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early parliamentary elections in March brought a landslide victory to the center-right Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) led by Aleksandar Vučić. The vote results shattered the political opposition and eliminated a few smaller groups from the parliament. Despite deep differences over austerity, SNS formed a ruling coalition with the Socialist Party (SPS), its junior coalition partner in the previous government.

With its increased dominance of the parliament, the SNS-led ruling coalition faced no significant challenge in adopting new legislation, including laws needed for future EU membership. The Cabinet of Prime Minister Vučić restated its resolve to join the bloc and implement an agreement on normalizing ties with Kosovo without recognizing its unilateral secession. Government priorities temporarily shifted when catastrophic floods hit the country in May, pushing the economy deeper into recession. The country sought to attract foreign investors and improve its business environment, but failed to complete the large privatizations promised by SNS.

The government sought public support for austerity measures and for an arrangement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Cuts in public sector wages and pensions triggered protests in December. The introduction of notaries in Serbia's legal system led to a protracted strike by lawyers, which hampered the court system.

Despite threats by radical groups, police successfully protected the first uninterrupted Pride Parade in Serbia's capital, an important milestone for LGBT rights. Informal groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) launched initiatives on a range of issues during the year, including charity work, the protection of minorities, consumer rights, and the fight against crime.

News coverage became less diverse in 2014 amid dwindling media revenues and occasional political pressure, particularly on local outlets that rely heavily on local authorities for advertising contracts and subsidies. Most corruption cases remained open while new abuses such as questionable bank lending became acute, requiring additional efforts to tackle graft.

National Democratic Governance. Promising economic revival and a renewed fight against corruption, SNS won nearly two-thirds of the seats in parliament in the March elections, leaving the opposition fragmented and weak for most of 2014. SNS dominates the new cabinet, with junior coalition partner SPS filling a few ministerial posts. While some observers are concerned about the concentration of power in the hands of one political party, there is also hope that a strong government can finally implement necessary reforms, including fiscal consolidation and reining in the public debt. Accession negotiations with the European Union began in January, amid public approval for joining the bloc. The government also worked on closer ties with Russia and China, and refused to join Western sanctions against Russia over the conflict in Ukraine. *Serbia's national democratic governance rating remains unchanged at 3.75.*

Electoral Process. Election observers with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported that fundamental freedoms were respected during the 2014 snap parliamentary polls, despite occasional intimidation of voters. Election coverage was substandard amid declining media integrity. Scattered incidents took place on Election Day in several municipalities, with limited impact. Local votes held in a number of municipalities mirrored SNS's success on the national level. *Serbia's electoral process rating remains unchanged at 3.25.*

Civil Society. Civil society in Serbia is underfunded, but grassroots movements and citizen initiatives have been very active in recent years. Despite threats by radical groups and the condemnation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the first uninterrupted Pride Parade in Serbia's capital took place in September. NGOs backed initiatives to introduce hate speech and hate crimes into law, and activists won a court case against a prominent politician over homophobic remarks. Citizen initiatives targeted drug dealers and violent anti-Roma rhetoric, and ad hoc groups used social networks to pressure the authorities on issues such as health care, consumer protection, and education. *Serbia's civil society rating remains unchanged at 2.25.*

Independent Media. Media independence and professionalism deteriorated under economic duress, which together with the increased dominance of one political party led to more self-censorship. The nation's top political talk show was taken off the air allegedly due to political pressure. Verbal and physical attacks continued against journalists, despite calls for better protection of reporters and for full investigations of earlier violence against them. Several news websites came under cyber attacks after running reports critical of the authorities. The prime minister engaged in verbal sparring with an OSCE official over freedom of speech. Opposition parties claimed they were underrepresented in election campaign coverage due to political pressure on media by the ruling parties. *Serbia's independent media rating declines from 4.00 to 4.25.*

Local Democratic Governance. Most local democratic governance challenges in 2014 concerned the northern province of Vojvodina, whose government defied attempts by the central authorities to hold early elections. The Democratic Party remained in power in Vojvodina even as it suffered election defeats elsewhere in the country. A revised statute for the province was approved in May to comply with a Constitutional Court ruling that had struck down some provisions of the previous one. Many ethnic Albanians in the three southern municipalities of Serbia feel more loyal to neighboring Kosovo than to Serbia, and integration of the community remains a major challenge. *Serbia's local democratic governance rating remains unchanged at 3.50.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. Judicial reforms, long overdue and urgently needed for Serbia's progress toward EU membership, stalled for most of 2014 and even suffered setbacks, in part because of a months-long strike by lawyers. The protest, triggered by a tax hike and the introduction of notaries, complicated more than 200,000 court cases and created system-wide delays. A historic backlog of cases remained and hundreds ended without a verdict as the statute of limitations ran out. Restitution of private property seized under Communist rule made some progress but most claims still await an outcome. Appraisal rules for judges and prosecutors were adopted but need to be fully implemented. A law on protection of whistleblowers was adopted. *Serbia's judicial framework and independence rating remains unchanged at 4.50.*

Corruption. Widespread tax evasion and fraudulent bank loans heightened the need to fight corruption, but the ruling SNS party has yet to build a track record of concrete results. New high-profile cases were opened involving owners of large companies, while those begun in previous years are still ongoing. The EU urged the government to use its strong backing in parliament to follow through with anticorruption commitments. The government jumpstarted privatizations of

state-owned companies where losses due to the misuse of funds had bled the state budget and pushed up the public debt. *Serbia's corruption rating remains unchanged at 4.25.*

Outlook for 2015.

Serbia may face crucial choices in 2015. It will have to decide whether it can commit to meeting conditions for further integration with the European Union, notably the implementation of an EU-brokered deal with Kosovo, as well as tough measures needed to cut the budget deficit and rein in public debt. It will be a challenge for the ruling SNS to maintain its high approval ratings under these circumstances and deliver on numerous election promises, such as attracting foreign investors and jumpstarting the economy. The country's international position may hinge on further balancing between the European bloc it aspires to join and its historical ally, Russia. The country assumes the rotating presidency of the OSCE in January.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
4.00	3.75	4.00	4.00	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75

Early elections in March won Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) the biggest parliamentary majority¹ held by any party since the rule of strongman Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s.² SNS's electoral platform was based on intense criticism of opponents—particularly the once-powerful Democratic Party (DS)—along with pledges to finally bring public finances to heel, root out corruption, meet criteria for European Union (EU) membership, and mend ties with Kosovo without formally recognizing its independence.³ The election results brought parliamentary politics closer to the center of the spectrum, as neither the left-leaning Liberal Democratic Party nor the right-wing Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) met the 5 percent electoral threshold for representation in the legislature.

Accession negotiations with the EU, which began on 21 January,⁴ were hailed as “an entirely new chapter in our relations and a major success” by then European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso.⁵ Although Barroso commended Serbia for reform efforts, none of the 35 *acquis* chapters that are crucial steps to EU membership had been opened by year's end. Some EU countries reminded Serbia that its membership aspirations hinge upon the implementation of a 2013 agreement with Kosovo under which Serbia promised to dismantle its institutions in Kosovo's Serb-populated north—a process that Serbia contends is nearly complete.⁶ Such statements, along with proclamations by EU officials that no new members will be taken before 2020,⁷ appeared to dim the Serbian public's view of the EU, although support for membership remained well above 50 percent throughout the year.⁸

Implementation of the 2013 agreement with Kosovo made little progress in 2014, initially because of elections and the change of government in Serbia and then because of early elections in Kosovo on 8 June⁹ that were followed by six months of political before the formation of a new government.¹⁰ The most contentious point of the deal—the establishment of an Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo—was held up by a disagreement between Serbia and Kosovo over whether the body will have any executive powers.¹¹ Local Serbs took part in the elections organized by the government in Pristina, in hope of securing some autonomy for their community.¹²

While Kosovo remained a sensitive issue for Serbia's electorate, the economy topped the agenda for most of 2014, particularly after floods in May caused damage estimated at up to €2 billion,¹³ pushing the country deeper into an already creeping recession.¹⁴ A national state of emergency was declared after more than a dozen municipalities were flooded by record rains, hampering economic activity, particularly power production, mining, and agriculture.¹⁵ International donor conferences were organized in Paris and Brussels,¹⁶ and international institutions such as the World Bank and the EU committed funds for recovery.¹⁷

With parts of Bosnia and Croatia also under water, the floods brought a resurgence of regional cooperation and solidarity. However, nationalist passions flared anew in October during a soccer match between Serbia and Albania.¹⁸ The match was disrupted when a drone carrying a flag displaying the map of Greater Albania (combined territories of Albania and Kosovo, plus parts of neighboring Montenegro, Macedonia, Greece, and southern Serbia) flew over the

stadium, triggering a melee between the players and fans. Serbian authorities said the stunt was a deliberate provocation by Orsi Rama, the brother of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, who was in the audience.¹⁹ The Albanian side rejected the accusation²⁰ and the incident led to scattered attacks against businesses owned by ethnic Albanians in Serbia,²¹ and to the postponement of an official visit to Belgrade by the Albanian prime minister.²²

The visit eventually took place on 11 November but was marked by yet another incident²³ when Rama, in a live broadcast of a press conference with his host, Serbian prime minister Vučić, urged Serbia to recognize Kosovo. Vučić promptly rejected the notion, saying in front of the cameras that the guest had abused Serbia's hospitality by making such a demand.

Rama was in Belgrade again on 16–17 December as one of 16 leaders from Central and Eastern Europe who gathered to meet Chinese premier Li Keqiang for talks on financing infrastructure projects in their countries.²⁴ China had created a \$10 billion fund for investments in the region, also supporting work for Chinese construction and other companies that expand overseas. Serbia used the opportunity to emphasize its multipronged foreign policy, seeking stronger ties with Asia and the Middle East in tandem with efforts to become an EU member.

Vučić traveled to Berlin in August for talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel.²⁵ The government in Belgrade welcomed Russian president Vladimir Putin in October, just as Western sanctions against Russia were intensifying over the conflict in Ukraine.²⁶ Serbian officials refused to join the EU and U.S. sanctions against the Putin regime, citing historical ties with Russia and the need to preserve access to a lucrative market for Serbian products.²⁷ EU officials did not demand that Serbia comply immediately with EU policies but stressed that the Balkan candidate eventually will have to harmonize its foreign policy as it moves closer to the bloc.²⁸

Serbian companies actually increased sales to Russia as Moscow retaliated against Western Europe by imposing its own import ban on EU producers.²⁹

The issue of relations with Russia came against the backdrop of rising public debt and a widening fiscal deficit,³⁰ which Serbia struggled to contain for most of 2014. Another setback was Russia's decision in December to abandon its South Stream gas pipeline project, which could possibly have improved Serbia's energy security and benefited its economy in general.

Acknowledging that it must stop subsidizing unprofitable state companies and trim the public payroll, Serbia agreed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on a three-year standby deal intended to consolidate public finances and boost investor confidence.³¹ The government temporarily cut public sector wages by 10 percent and, on the advice of foreign investors, the National Assembly (parliament) adopted bills dealing with construction, bankruptcy procedures, asset sales, and energy, all intended to improve the business environment.³²

Opposition parties' objections to the measures made little difference, given the ruling coalition's commanding majority in parliament. Former ruling parties DS and DSS suffered internal rifts during the year that led to further fragmenting of the opposition.³³ Former president Boris Tadić launched a defector group from DS,³⁴ and Vojislav Kostunica, the founder and longtime leader of the conservative DSS, stepped down after the election defeat in March. His departure triggered a power struggle among the remaining members, with Sanda Rašković Ivić emerging as the new leader. Within months, Rašković Ivić had forged an alliance with the ultraconservative group Dveri, pushing the party deeper into right-wing territory.³⁵

Electoral Process

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25

Before the 2014 elections, SNS had 73 seats in Serbia's 250-seat parliament—more than any other party in the governing coalition between SNS, DS, and then prime minister Ivica Dačić's SPS. SNS's popularity grew throughout 2012 and 2013 as the party promised to fight corruption and deal with the shortcomings of several previous cabinets. In late January 2014, SNS leadership asked Serbian president and SNS founder Tomislav Nikolić to call elections two years ahead of schedule so the party could form a stronger majority and accelerate reforms, particularly those needed for EU membership. Critics maintained that the SNS could have continued with reforms even without the early vote, but Nikolić agreed to the proposal and elections were scheduled for 16 March.³⁶ The campaign period was limited to the legal minimum of 45 days.

SNS won 48.35 percent of the vote and 158 parliamentary seats. The SPS Socialists, who campaigned and ran separately from SNS but remained in the government, won 44 seats. DS won 19 seats and 18 went to the New Democratic Party led by former president Boris Tadić (the party was renamed the Social Democratic Party, SDS, in October). The remainder was distributed among parties representing ethnic minorities that are not obliged to win 5 percent of the vote in order to enter parliament. The most notable losers were the Liberal Democrats (the only mainstream party advocating recognition of Kosovo and NATO membership), and the right-wing DSS, which is against joining the EU or NATO and strongly opposes making any deal with Kosovo. In its annual report on Serbia's progress toward membership, the EU said the vote had "confirmed the European integration aspirations of the country" and that planned reforms may be easier to accomplish now that the government holds an "unprecedented" two-thirds majority in parliament.³⁷

Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) said the elections had offered voters a genuine choice and that fundamental freedoms had been respected throughout the campaign, despite some cases of voter intimidation. Election authorities "operated efficiently, acted within legal deadlines, and passed decisions in a collegial manner," said the report, while noting that voter registration requires improvement. The most important shortcoming reported by the OSCE was a "lack of critical and analytical reporting on the campaign in the media," a reflection of the overall deterioration of the media environment.³⁸

Scattered incidents took place during the campaign and on voting day in seven municipalities.³⁹ Arson and attacks on party premises were reported in Kruševac, Požarevac, Topola, and Užice, but they were "of a limited impact and did not disturb the campaign," according to the OSCE. The report recommended that in future elections "law enforcement bodies should take more resolute steps to prevent, identify, investigate, and prosecute instances of vote-buying, pressure, and intimidation of voters and misuse of state resources for campaign purposes."

According to Transparency Serbia, political parties spent a total of about €13 million on the campaign, of which the largest share—€4 million—was spent by SNS and €1.5 million was spent by SPS and its allies.⁴⁰ Officials from the ruling parties also made daily media appearances during the campaign, taking full advantage of their position and visibility. Such air time was not formally part of political advertising.

In November, the parliament amended the Law on Party Funding and Financing to allow parties to use some state-provided financing to buy real estate or pay for campaign ads. The head

of Serbia's anticorruption agency, Tatjana Babić, warned that instead of facilitating oversight, the changes could hamper accountability.⁴¹

Local elections took place in the municipalities of Lučani and Mionica in December. SNS triumphed at the polls, winning control of local assemblies.⁴² Several members of opposition parties claimed to have been attacked on election day and pointed fingers at SNS. Mionica's DS party candidate, Milan Gavrilović, was seriously beaten. Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović rejected allegations that SNS was responsible for the violence, saying he had ordered the police to restore calm after initial incidents.⁴³

Civil Society

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
2.75	2.75	2.75	2.75	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25

Roughly 18,000 civil society organizations (CSOs) operate in Serbia, but most are chronically underfunded, relying on government support and international donations that have shrunk since the 2008 financial crisis. New, largely informal types of civic activism have emerged in the last few years, filling some of the void and making extensive use of online media. Grassroots activism of various kinds was highly visible in 2014.

Despite threats from extremists and low support among the general public, Serbia's capital city held its first peaceful Pride Parade in 2014, breaking a multiyear trend of cancellations rationalized by security concerns.⁴⁴ After intensive lobbying by LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) activists and international rights watchdogs, the government in Belgrade committed to intense preparations and heavy security that deterred attacks by right-wing groups, coordinating its efforts with the parade's organizers. The Interior Ministry appointed a liaison officer for the LGBT community and overcame opposition by the police union, which demanded that officers not be deployed to protect the high-risk event.⁴⁵

Pride organizers overcame other institutional opponents, such as the Serbian Orthodox Church and its leader, Patriarch Irinej. In an open letter published a few days before the parade, Irinej told LGBT people, "You have the right to parade, but only at your own expense and at the expense of those who give you orders," an allusion to the EU, which has long insisted that Serbia protect the parade.⁴⁶ Irinej also warned that the parade would bring "humiliation and violation of the moral feelings of the vast majority of humankind" and asked if acceptance of LGBT values would lead to tolerating pedophiles and incest. His comments were condemned by liberal groups and echoed by some conservative ones.⁴⁷

In concert with other efforts to protect the parade, the authorities tracked calls for anti-gay violence on social networks and filed criminal charges against eight offenders.⁴⁸ The parade's organizers also called for legislation introducing the concept of hate crimes into Serbia's penal system, following scattered attacks against gay men in Belgrade and other cities.⁴⁹

The EU praised the success of the Pride Parade while calling for long-term "political commitment to promote a culture of respect toward the LGBT community" amid recurring acts of discrimination, intimidation, and violence against vulnerable groups.⁵⁰ According to EU progress report, the groups most discriminated against remain Roma, sexual minorities, and people with HIV/AIDS. In October, the government adopted a four-year plan for implementing the 2013 anti-discrimination strategy.⁵¹

A few months earlier, LGBT activists won a case against parliamentary deputy and leader

of the United Serbia party Dragan Marković for discriminatory treatment.⁵² Marković had repeatedly labeled gay men and women “sick,” in addition to opposing any events promoting LGBTI rights. Overturning a lower court ruling, the Appellate Court ordered Marković to pay 57,300 dinars (about \$530) and refrain from further homophobic statements. The case was initiated by the Belgrade-based Gay-Straight Alliance in 2011. Marković paid the fine but issued no apology. He also retained his seat in the parliament.

A survey conducted in August by the Center for Research, Transparency, and Responsibility indicated rising public awareness of the need to hold police and government authorities more accountable for corruption and ongoing law enforcement problems.⁵³

A previously little-known initiative launched in 2013 by the Saint Sava citizens’ association in order to combat drug dealers’ power in their town expanded in 2014. While continuing their activities in Lazarevac, the group brought together activists in Bajina Bašta, Mladenovac, and Valjevo to support and pressure police to combat drug abuse and sales.⁵⁴ Saint Sava increased its visibility by organizing meetings and public debates, bringing together families of victims to educate and prepare them to confront criminal activity. By early November, the organization had helped police to identify five top cocaine and heroin dealers in Mladenovac, despite threats from drug cartels.⁵⁵

Anti-fascist Action, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in the northern city of Novi Sad, alerted the authorities about an informal group, Srbska Akcija, that called for violence against the Roma ethnic minority.⁵⁶ After leaflets calling for extermination of Roma appeared in mailboxes in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and other cities, police arrested five perpetrators.

Even outside of organized associations, civic activism was highly visible in 2014. Following media reports that the doctoral theses of some government officials, including Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović, lacked scientific and academic merit, more than 800 university professors signed a petition demanding the formation of a special commission to investigate the matter. They also demanded that all products of academic work be made available online so that the entire public could see them.⁵⁷

The year also witnessed a number of successful social media campaigns. A number of hospitals changed their menus after patients in their maternity wards uploaded pictures of the junk food they were being served.⁵⁸ In November, a Facebook initiative demanding the reversal of the failed privatization of the state-owned company Beograd Film led to an “Occupy Cinema” protest at the Zvezda theater in Belgrade.⁵⁹

In June, Serbian authorities set up the National Convention on the European Union as a way for civil society groups to become involved in the accession negotiation process. The convention gathered around 200 civil society organizations into 21 working groups and covered all 35 negotiation chapters.⁶⁰

While grassroots and informal groups and campaigns proliferated, other, more traditional forums appeared increasingly weak. Two leading union organizations, the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia and the United Trade Unions, were unable to mount the general strike and campaign for a national referendum they had attempted after the government revised labor legislation and passed other reform measures backed by the investor community, the EU, and international financial institutions in the second half of the year.⁶¹

Independent Media

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
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3.25	3.50	3.75	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.25
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Freedom of speech and independence of the media deteriorated in 2014, even as the authorities adopted legislation designed to make media ownership and financing more transparent. In its annual progress report, the EU expressed “concerns about deteriorating conditions for the full exercise of freedom of expression.”⁶²

Before the March parliamentary elections, the DS party reported that on at least two occasions a local cable provider controlled by an SNS party member had suddenly suspended service to viewers in southeastern Serbia during scheduled television appearances by DS chairman Dragan Djilas. DS called this “censorship that exceeds even the darkest times that we thought were far behind us.”⁶³

During the devastating floods in May, the authorities brought in 15 people for questioning—two of them journalists—and held three of them in detention for up to 10 days for allegedly spreading false, alarming information and panic about the scope of the disaster. The three detainees had posted on Facebook that the consequences of the floods were much worse than what the authorities acknowledged and had caused a higher number of deaths. They were released in response to public outrage over their detention and calls for their release from the OSCE, among others. However, charges were filed against 9 of the 15 people interrogated. Prosecutors cited the penal code, under which causing panic through mass media during a national emergency is punishable with jail time. At the time of the flooding, social networks were not defined as means of mass communication—a distinction that was formalized with new media legislation in August.⁶⁴

Also during the floods, the Teleprompter.rs and Drugastrana.rs websites were blocked after publishing critical reports about the prime minister, and the online edition of popular daily newspaper *Blic* had to remove some critical content.

In the aftermath of these events, the International Federation of Journalists appealed to the Serbian government to respect media freedom and permit journalists to do their jobs: “We fear that the abuse of such law [against spreading false news and panic] will lead to self-censorship among journalists and media organizations. Journalists must be allowed to report freely without fear and intimidation,” the federation said in its appeal.⁶⁵ Dunja Mijatović, the OSCE’s representative on media freedom, expressed particular concern over the blocked websites. She urged the Serbian authorities “to put an end to this and stop interfering with the work of online media.”⁶⁶ In response, Prime Minister Vučić denied any involvement in the blocking and accused Mijatović of trying to smear him and the government.⁶⁷

Prominent news website Peščanik.net also suffered an anonymous cyber attack in June after running reports about allegedly plagiarized doctoral theses by prominent officials, including members of the ruling SNS party.⁶⁸ Vučić again denied any state involvement in the attacks and pledged a full investigation.

The nation’s most popular political talk show, “Utisak Nedelje” (Impression of the Week), was taken off the air in September under apparent government pressure on the program’s broadcaster, B92 Television. While B92 said it merely wanted to change the show’s time slot and shift it to another frequency, the show’s host, Olja Bećković, accused Prime Minister Vučić of pulling strings that led to the cancellation. Vučić was reportedly angered by his opponents’ frequent appearances on the weekly show.⁶⁹

According to a survey by the Independent Association of Journalists in Serbia (NUNS), in 2014 there were 20 physical and verbal attacks on journalists and six lawsuits, three of them

filed by people with criminal records.⁷⁰ In one particularly shocking case, Luka Bojović, a murder suspect held in Spain as the alleged leader of a criminal gang, sued award-winning investigative reporter Brankica Stanković for violation of honor and reputation. Stanković, whose series of documentaries “Insider” led to threats that landed her under around-the-clock police protection in 2009, published a memoir of these events in 2013 that included classified police records about Bojović, implicating him in three murders and an alleged plot to kill her.⁷¹

Davor Pašalić, the editor of the Belgrade-based FoNet news agency, was badly beaten by thugs near his home in July. There was no apparent motive for the violence, but the attackers made reference to his Croatian ethnicity. The government condemned the attack and pledged a swift investigation that had made no visible progress by the end of 2014.⁷²

A several-months-long survey of journalists by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in 2014 found a dispiriting decline in the professionalism of Serbia’s media. “It is increasingly obvious that media are drifting away from their main purpose to inform citizens and begin to merely run bulletins, becoming propaganda tools,” said Aleksandra Popović, the foundation’s project coordinator.⁷³

Serbia’s media regulatory framework, although adapted in coordination with the EU, also came under scrutiny in 2014 following a report that the Serbian media law had been changed to suit a cable provider looking to launch a joint venture with content producers.⁷⁴ The venture between U.S.-based CNN and the regional cable provider created N1 Television, operating in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia. According to the Media Observatory report, the media law adopted in August abandoned the standard requirement on unbundling related activities and allowed the distributor to produce content, which could lead to possible favoring of its own channel, contrary to free-competition standards.

NUNS also launched a petition, published in late September, warning that freedom of speech is in “serious jeopardy” in Serbia, with pluralism of opinions and ideas on the decline. According to the document, the implementation of media laws is to blame, rather than the media laws, themselves. It also noted that the number of political talk shows and investigative reports had decreased, while tabloid newspapers, inclined to ruling officials and interest groups, had begun to dominate the media market.⁷⁵

Local Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50

The only substantial local government structures in Serbia, a country of 7.2 million people, are in the autonomous northern province of Vojvodina. The rest of the country is divided into municipalities where local authorities are elected by local votes and their composition doesn't always reflect power balance at the central level. This system dates back to the onetime structure of Yugoslavia, which had six autonomous republics, including the Socialist Republic of Serbia, and two provinces—Vojvodina and Kosovo. The question of how much autonomy Vojvodina should enjoy in present-day Serbia remains a source of political friction and debate.

Throughout 2014, the ruling SNS party tried to take full control of the Vojvodina government but failed to oust DS leader Bojan Pajtić from the governorship. Attempts to trigger early elections for the 120-seat Vojvodina assembly failed, as Pajtić maintained crucial support from the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, even after a reshuffle of the province’s government

on 4 November.⁷⁶

A revised statute for Vojvodina was approved in May as a result of collaboration between the national parliament and the provincial assembly; a December 2013 Constitutional Court ruling had struck down some provisions in the previous document.⁷⁷ A law on Vojvodina's resources, however, is yet to be adopted as prescribed by the Constitution. In October, dozens of local activists from the Novi Sad-based Vojvodjanski Klub held a rally demanding legislative, judicial, and executive powers for the province, which would create a de facto state. Upgrading Vojvodina to the status of a "republic" would turn Serbia into a federation of Vojvodina and the rest of the country—a solution that is not acceptable to the central authorities.

According to the European Commission's 2014 progress report on Serbia, administrative and management capacity at the local levels remains weak, with "significant disparities" among municipalities. The National Council for Decentralization and the inter-ministerial Municipal Finance Commission remained inactive and none of the tools needed to monitor functions delegated to municipalities has so far been developed. Still, the report found that Vojvodina "continued to provide a high degree of protection for minorities and the interethnic situation remained generally good, despite sporadic incidents."⁷⁸

Many ethnic Albanians in the three southern municipalities feel more loyal to neighboring Kosovo than to Serbia, and integration of the community remains a major challenge.⁷⁹ Some locals hung up banners with a map of Greater Albania after it appeared during the soccer match in Belgrade and warmly greeted Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama in October, indicating they consider him their leader rather than any Serbian official. Fourteen years ago, the area saw an armed insurgency in a bid to secede from Serbia and merge with Kosovo. After the conflict was defused with international support, an amnesty opened the way for former guerrillas to become representatives of the community. One of them, Jonuz Musliu, made statements in November 2014 calling for unimpeded use of Albanian flags in the area and the use of Kosovo-published textbooks in schools.⁸⁰ A study by the Education Ministry, conducted from February to July in 16 schools in the area, showed that only 5 percent of pupils speak Serbian.⁸¹

Among other issues, locals' refusal to acknowledge Serbian authorities and institutions resulted in significant nonpayment of utility bills. The state-owned power producer and distributor, Elektroprivreda Srbije, said on 1 August that households and business in the three southern municipalities owed 2 billion dinars (€16 million) in uncollected payments. Attempts to cut off electricity to customers who did not pay their bills led to physical attacks on Elektroprivreda employees.⁸²

During the year, the government established new scholarships for university and high-school students in this region and made investments in infrastructure and grants to local entrepreneurs. All but one ethnic Albanian party boycotted the March parliamentary elections.

Another troubled but more peaceful area is the historical region of Sandžak in south-central Serbia. The community, which prefers to be referred to as ethnic Bosnian since the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, remains underrepresented in local administration, the judiciary, and the police, according to EU findings.⁸³ The area also remains one of the most underdeveloped in Serbia. Classes in the Bosniak language started to be held in primary schools during the year to meet the demands of the local Muslim population.

The SNS and allied groups won landslide victories in several early municipal elections in 2014, including in Mionica and Lučani.⁸⁴ They garnered 64.7 percent of the votes cast in Mionica (more than twice the 27 percent they had won in the previous elections) and 51.9 percent in Lučani, a huge increase from the 11.6 percent they had won in 2012. Opposition party

Dosta je Bilo (Enough is Enough) and a local group of ethnic Vlachs each demanded new elections in the municipality of Majdanpek on the grounds that the local election commission had given SNS sole control of ballot printing and distribution.⁸⁵

Judicial Framework and Independence

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
4.25	4.25	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50

Serbia's judicial system continues to suffer from inefficiency, judicial bias, and a major case backlog. The judiciary's track record of convictions is particularly weak in corruption cases. The EC progress report for 2014 also condemned the practice of "publicly commenting on trials and announcing arrests and detentions in the media ahead of court decisions" and noted that Serbia still needs to implement a comprehensive system of regular individual and periodic evaluation of judges and prosecutors.⁸⁶ The court system made moderate progress on a few fronts in 2014, including the adoption of a law on protection of whistleblowers from retaliation, discrimination, or criminal proceedings.⁸⁷ In other areas, it regressed, particularly with a months-long strike by lawyers that began in September and nearly paralyzed the system.

A proposed tax hike on lawyers and legislative changes in 2014 introduced the use of notaries and made them mandatory for checking and certifying contracts. As this took a considerable chunk of work away from lawyers, the Bar Association of Serbia organized a strike in mid-September, threatening to disbar members who did not take part. They also demanded a reduction in the proposed tax increase and the resignation of Justice Minister Nikola Selaković, who had supported both the tax and the controversial Law on Notaries. The strike caused delays in an estimated 200,000 court cases, including in criminal proceedings, according to the Supreme Court of Cassation.⁸⁸

The strike also brought proceedings for more than 1,600 people in detention, including 166 foreign nationals, to a standstill. Milan Stevović, the Justice Ministry official in charge of the penitentiary system, told a parliamentary committee on 1 December that the strike had threatened detainees' rights to a lawyer and trial. He also warned of possible prison riots over delays caused by the strike.⁸⁹ The government rolled back the proposed tax hike in December but the lawyers' strike was ongoing at year's end.

Serbia's judiciary already suffers from a vast backlog of cases. Every year, hundreds of cases are delayed beyond the statute of limitations, leading to acquittals, even on serious charges.⁹⁰ In 2014, these included cases against family members and close allies of late president Slobodan Milošević, at least two businessmen accused of tax evasion and involvement in a Ponzi scheme, and a Serbian Orthodox Church official accused of pedophilia.⁹¹

The backlog of cases remained in excess of 2 million in 2014, according to the High Judicial Council. Resolving these may take years, due to persistent differences in the workload among judges and a lack of adequate premises and equipment, according to the EU report, which also called for a unified case management system in Serbia and a functional system of compensation to victims of crime through criminal and civil proceedings. The authorities drafted a special law on protection of the right to trial in reasonable time in July 2014, but its implementation remains in question.⁹²

Serbia's judiciary also had to deal with decades-old issues, such as the Communist-era confiscation of private property. By the end of 2014, assets worth more than €1 billion had been

returned, usually to descendants of the original owners, as the long-delayed restitution finally began to take off. Some 75,000 claims had been filed, some for the same property, and most still await resolution.⁹³ The assets consist mostly of residential and commercial buildings and land. Claimants often faced difficulties in gaining access to their property even after rulings on restitution, as current occupants were able to delay moving out through various legal motions.⁹⁴

The year saw some progress in processing war crimes cases related to the 1990s conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, including through cooperation with EULEX, the EU's rule of law mission in Kosovo, and with the authorities of neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Serbia opened investigations in three cases and brought charges against 10 people; five judgments were rendered in first instance, with 13 convictions. A lower court ruling in a complex case of war crimes in Kosovo against Albanian civilians acknowledged for the first time the responsibility of members of the Yugoslav army, who were sentenced to up to 20 years in prison.⁹⁵

To better reintegrate the hundreds of judges and prosecutors who lost their jobs under a controversial reappointment procedure in effect during 2009 and 2010, the government announced plans in October 2012 to roughly double the court network, in what was also described as an effort to improve citizens' access to justice following a 2010 judicial overhaul that merged the country's 138 municipal courts into just 34 basic courts. In 2013, the parliament then approved legislation by which the court network would be expanded to 66 basic courts in January 2014.⁹⁶ Rules for appraisal of judges and prosecutors were adopted by the High Judicial Council and the State Prosecutorial Council in July 2014, and dozens of court presidents were appointed on a permanent basis a few months later.⁹⁷ However, the recruitment and appointment of magistrates remained governed by "unclear criteria," according to an EU assessment, and the new court network had yet to demonstrate increased efficiency at year's end.

In 2014 the Constitutional Court struck down a requirement that only graduates of the so-called Judicial Academy, established in 2010, could become judges.⁹⁸ The EU, which supports the academy, called for changing the relevant law to make it comply with the ruling and beefing up the academy's training capacity and expertise, so that it eventually becomes the "compulsory point of entry" to the judicial profession.

The authorities resorted to "preventive detention" during Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Belgrade in December. They detained 11 foreign members of the dissident Falun Gong movement, who had presumably come to Serbia in order to use Li's visit to draw attention to human rights violations in China. Their detention was criticized by European Parliament member Eduard Kukan, who demanded their immediate release and an explanation from the Serbian government.⁹⁹ All were freed after the Chinese officials left Belgrade on 18 December.

Continuing challenges to the judicial system include the need to deal with juvenile delinquents amid rising violence by children under the age of 14. Serbia's current system allows almost no measures against them, despite frequent cases of robbery and physical attacks by young perpetrators.¹⁰⁰

Corruption

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
4.75	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.50	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25

After years of coalition cabinets prone to internal disputes, the SNS-dominated government was

in a position to enforce laws meant to reduce corruption. Results in 2014 remained patchy and the country still needs to build up a track record of concrete successes, including a better ratio of convictions to indictments. Serbia declined by six ranks in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index, from 72 to 78 among 175 countries and territories; TI noted that "anti-corruption measures are still not convincing enough."¹⁰¹ Serbia continued to implement recommendations of the Council of Europe Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), which should strengthen institutions dealing with corruption.

Corruption in public procurement and state-owned companies are a major source of financial drain on public resources, according to TI in Belgrade.¹⁰² The government also commonly makes arrangements for large infrastructure projects through bilateral agreements with other countries, rather than using open-market tenders that provide better transparency. In December 2012, a Chinese company was awarded a major contract for the construction of two highways in Serbia,¹⁰³ which finally began in December 2014.¹⁰⁴ Serbia and China also signed an agreement on Chinese capital investment in the construction of a thermal power plant in Kostolac.¹⁰⁵

According to Serbia's own Anti-Corruption Agency, nearly half of the government bodies on the central and local level were late in reporting to the agency on implementation of the national anticorruption strategy in their field of competence. The agency stepped up asset declaration checks among state officials and filed 168 requests for misdemeanor proceedings relating to asset declarations in 2013, of which 142 were for failing to submit reports on time. It filed 14 criminal charges in the first four months of 2014, according to the most recent available data, of which nine were due to suspicion that a public official did not report property or gave false information to conceal facts.¹⁰⁶

Most corruption cases that began in the previous year went unresolved in 2014, including the embezzlement and tax evasion indictment against the owner of Delta Holding, Miroslav Mišković, and his son and nine associates. There was also no substantial progress in shedding light on 24 suspicious privatizations for which the EU demands clarification. However, in August the government launched a probe into the sale of oil and gas company Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS)—one of Serbia's biggest assets—to Gazprom Neft in 2008.¹⁰⁷ The investigation had made no visible progress at year's end. Meanwhile, the government continued to negotiate cheaper Russian gas deliveries to local chemical companies.¹⁰⁸

Taxpayers' money was used to cover losses of two banks in 2014—Univerzal Banka and Srpska Banka—amid accusations of corruption and mismanagement from the regulator, the central bank, and shareholders.¹⁰⁹ These are the latest among several banks whose assets appear to be dwindling due to questionable lending practices. Miroslav Bogićević, the owner of diversified conglomerate Farmakom, was arrested on 24 November on charges of taking bank loans without providing appropriate collateral,¹¹⁰ including from Univerzal Banka, in which he had a stake. Bogićević was close to the Democratic Party, which led the government prior to 2012. Goran Perčević, the owner of the Interkomerc trading company and a former ranking official of the Socialist Party, Goran Perčević, was arrested on 15 November, accused of taking 1.4 billion dinars (around €13 million) in loans from Univerzal Banka, also in violation of regulations concerning creditworthiness.¹¹¹

Political influence is the root cause of such abuses, even on privately owned banks, according to Miroslava Milenović, Serbia's only forensic accountant, who worked at the Economy Ministry until June 2014. Milenović quit, citing a lack of political will to fight corruption, days after giving an interview to the *Danas* daily newspaper in which she spoke

about ties between the political elite and banks.¹¹²

The problem of bad banks has contributed to the mounting public debt, as the government takes out foreign loans—including from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development—to replenish its Deposit Insurance Agency funds. All savings deposits of up to €50,000 are guaranteed by the state.¹¹³

A December 2014 survey by Belgrade-based Mreza za poslovnu podršku (Business Support Network), found that corruption was most common in local utilities and land registries/cadastrals. Almost 40 percent of construction companies polled said they encountered corruption when applying for site and construction permits in Serbia. A breakdown showed that the officials soliciting bribes asked for cash in 55 percent of cases, followed by merchandise (18 percent), services (17 percent), and contributions for political parties (10 percent). The most corrupt geographical area was southern Serbia (56 percent of cases), followed by central Serbia (32 percent), Belgrade (25 percent), western Serbia (24 percent), and Vojvodina (17 percent).¹¹⁴

AUTHOR: MISHA SAVIC

Misha Savic is a reporter for Bloomberg News in Belgrade. A Knight International Journalism Fellow, Mr. Savic also worked for the Associated Press for 15 years, reporting on the breakup of Yugoslavia and post-conflict developments in Southeastern Europe.

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