



# POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS IN SERBIA: POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

(NOVEMBER 2025 – JUNE 2026)

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## KEY POINTS

- ◆ **Scenario 1:** Controlled repression, waning protests, and silent authoritarian consolidation.
- ◆ **Scenario 2:** The EU mediation leads to a fragile negotiated transition, including a technical government and early elections.
- ◆ **Scenario 3:** Intensified repression sparks chaos, risking collapse of governance and regional spillover.
- ◆ **Scenario 4:** Early elections provide an opportunity but risk electoral manipulation or regime orchestrated sabotage and violence.
- ◆ **Four Possible Outcomes:** Political vacuum, negotiated transition, regime collapse, or authoritarian consolidation – each capable of evolving into another depending on internal and external pressures.

## INTRODUCTION

### Serbia's Deepest Crisis in a Decade

Since November 2024, Serbia has been facing its deepest political, social, and institutional crisis since Aleksandar Vučić and Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power in 2012. The tragedy in Novi Sad – when the canopy of the railway station collapsed, killing sixteen people – ignited widespread outrage and mass protests against corruption and official impunity.

What began as demonstrations organized by opposition parties and student activists quickly evolved into a nationwide civic uprising. University-based student plenums and local citizens' assemblies soon took the lead, transforming the protests into a broader social movement defined by decentralized decision-making and the absence of formal leadership.

### The Rise of a Mass Movement

From the outset, protest turnout surged across Serbia. Demonstrations expanded rapidly from Novi Sad to Niš, and Kragujevac, culminating in Belgrade on March 15, where independent estimates placed attendance between 300,000 and 500,000 citizens – the largest public gathering of its kind in Serbia in three decades.

That same day, the crisis deepened further when regime forces allegedly used sound-based weapons against demonstrators during a fifteen-minute moment of silence<sup>1</sup> held in remembrance of the victims – an accusation the government swiftly denied. Shortly afterward, the regime released a report prepared by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), aiming to refute claims that any acoustic devices had been deployed. Despite this, in October 2025, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture [expressed concern](#) that experimental acoustic weapons may indeed have been used against protesters in Serbia. The government's reliance on the FSB [report](#) to counter international scrutiny only deepened public distrust, further isolating Serbian authorities both domestically and abroad.

### Escalation and State Repression

A new turning point came on May 5, when students publicly demanded early elections. The government responded with arrests and a categorical declaration from president Vučić that no elections would be held before the end of 2026 – closing-off all institutional avenues for dialogue or compromise.

Following the massive Belgrade protest on June 28, repression escalated sharply. Arrests, detentions and targeted violence against students and protesters became routine, peaking in Valjevo on August 15 and Novi Sad on September 5. According to [independent estimates](#), 967 citizens have been arrested since the protests began on November 1, 2024 – an unprecedented figure in Serbia's post-2000 political landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> The sixteenth victim of the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad, Vukašin Crnčević, passed away on March 21, 2025, from injuries sustained on November 1 of the previous year. Until his death, students and citizens had been marking the collapse with 15 minutes of silence; since his passing, the commemorative act has lasted 16 minutes. Other victims of the Novi Sad canopy collapse are: Sara Firić, Valentina Firić, Đorđe Firić, Milica Adamović, Nemanja Komar, Anđela Ruman, Miloš Milosavljević, Stefan Hrka, Sanja Čirić Arbutina, Goranka Raca, Vukašin Raković, Mileva Karanović, Đuro Švorija, Vasko Sazdovski and Anja Radonjić.

## International Reactions: Support and Ambivalence

The European Union (EU) initially responded with caution, calling for de-escalation, condemning excessive force, and urging inclusive dialogue. A turning point came with the May 2025 visit of Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos, which signaled growing EU sympathy for the student-led movement. During her Western Balkans tour on 15 October 2025, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen **called** for “freedom vs. repression, including the right for peaceful assembly of citizens”, urging Serbia’s leadership to show its “commitment ... in deeds as well as words.” She warned that Serbia now stands at a crossroads between democracy and autocracy, between Europe and Russia – pressing Belgrade to accelerate democratic reforms and align its foreign policy with EU positions, particularly on sanctions against Moscow.

The EU has since indicated readiness to closely monitor progress in key benchmarks, including reform of the media regulator (REM) and the Law on the Voter Register, as preconditions for re-energising Serbia’s stalled accession process.

On 22 October 2025, the European Parliament adopted an unprecedented **resolution** condemning repression in Serbia, while the European Court of Human Rights instructed Serbian authorities to prevent the use of acoustic weapons against peaceful assemblies. Unlike previous EU statements emphasising dialogue and reform, the new resolution sets the stage for proactive engagement with Serbia – including potential fact-finding missions, enhanced support for civil society, and the use of targeted sanctions under the EU’s Global Human Rights framework. Such steps would signal the Union’s genuine commitment to democratic principles and the rule of law, offering tangible incentives for reform while deterring further erosion of standards.

On 4 November 2025, as part of its annual Enlargement Package, the European Commission issued its most critical **report** to date on Serbia, effectively placing the country alongside Georgia and Turkey - the laggards in the EU accession process. Serbia’s EU accession process has been stalled for four years, as the government continues to avoid critical reforms – particularly in electoral law, media freedom, and foreign-policy alignment with the EU amid Russia’s ongoing aggression against Ukraine.

## A Nation at a Crossroads

The protests sparked by the Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse have evolved into Serbia’s deepest political, social, and institutional crisis in over two decades. This turning point is defined by five interlinked dynamics:

- **The collapse of public trust in state institutions** fully captured by the ruling regime;
- **The instrumentalization of the security apparatus**, now operating as an extension of the president and his party;
- **The emergence of a mass civic movement** that has articulated political demands but remains decentralised and leaderless;
- **The closure of all meaningful institutional channels** for dialogue and compromise between authorities and society;
- **The intention to capture remaining independent media**, as the regime seeks absolute control over public discourse and information space.

Together, these developments have pushed Serbia into a period of prolonged political instability and frozen European integration. Based on current trends, several plausible scenarios may unfold between November 2025 and June 2026.

## KEY DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS

### 1. The Role of the European Union

The European Union remains the most influential external actor in Serbia's crisis. Its engagement spans political pressure, mediation, financial assistance, and the potential use of targeted sanctions, as well as the activation of the balancing clause suspending the country's accession negotiations. Yet this leverage remains underutilised. The EU continues to oscillate between cautious ambiguity and the possibility of decisive intervention. Its stance – whether hesitant or bold – will decisively shape both the direction and the legitimacy of Serbia's path out of turmoil.

At the same time, the EU has a strategic interest in the emergence of a credible, well-defined political alternative capable of articulating positions aligned with the Union's key priorities: democratic reform, rule of law, and regional stability.

### 2. Socio-Political Mobilization

This driver encompasses the diverse ecosystem of protesters, opposition parties, civic organizations, student plenums, and broader social movements demanding systemic change. The strength and legitimacy of this movement depend on how effectively these actors can coordinate, sustain unity, and communicate a shared vision.

A central paradox defines the moment: while student demands have become well-defined, no coherent political alternative or structured collaboration among the key actors in the democratic camp has yet emerged. The regime, recognizing this weakness, actively cultivates fragmentation – using media control, infiltration, and selective repression to prevent coordination among opposition groups.

Whether this mobilisation matures into a sustained force for democratic transformation or disintegrates under pressure will be a key determinant of Serbia's political trajectory in 2026.

### 3. The Regime's Response

As a captured state, Serbia's regime controls the full spectrum of coercive and political institutions. This driver includes the use of police forces, paramilitary groups, and intelligence agencies to suppress dissent, as well as manipulation of the judiciary and electoral processes through restrictive laws or the refusal to call early elections. The regime's next moves – escalation or controlled de-escalation – will decide whether the crisis stabilizes or deepens.

#### 3.1. The Role of the Security Sector

The security apparatus stands at the centre of this equation. This encompasses not only the formal police force, but also para-security structures composed of criminal groups, hooligan networks, and party loyalists mobilised to suppress dissent. The intensity and frequency of their repressive actions directly influence the pace and severity of the crisis. A potential deployment of military units would signal a dramatic escalation, suggesting that the regime has turned to overt authoritarian control.

Meanwhile, Serbia's intelligence agencies – the military security agencies and the Security Information Agency – operate largely behind the scenes. Their activities include covert surveillance and the transfer of know-how from Russia's playbook on countering democratic movements ("color revolutions"), making them largely invisible yet highly influential actors in this unfolding drama.

## 4. The Influence of Foreign Powers: The U.S., Russia, and China

Serbia's political and institutional crisis is unfolding within an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment. External powers – chiefly the United States, Russia, and China – are seeking to shape outcomes in line with their own strategic interests. Their influence extends well beyond formal diplomacy, permeating media narratives, economic relations, security cooperation, and domestic lobbying networks.

While the EU vacillates between passive observer and reluctant mediator, other powers are filling the resulting vacuum. The United States prioritizes regional stability and, in the context of its broader global agenda, often favors short-term pragmatism over long-term democratic transformation. Like the EU, this transactional posture reflects a calculation that, in the absence of a viable democratic alternative, engagement with incumbent political elites – illustrated by the lifting of sanctions against Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina – remains the most expedient means of advancing immediate geopolitical goals.

Russia, meanwhile, exploits the crisis to reinforce its anti-democratic narrative and delegitimise popular movements, often framed as “color revolutions.” It bolsters the regime through security cooperation, intelligence sharing, and propaganda support. China maintains a pragmatic, business-oriented approach, focused on preserving continuity in infrastructure and investment projects that secure its economic foothold.

In this sense, Serbia's internal turmoil mirrors the dynamics of broader great-power competition – one in which domestic actors instrumentalize foreign partnerships to safeguard their own survival or legitimacy.

## SCENARIOS (NOVEMBER 2025 – JUNE 2026)

### Scenario 1: “Prolonged Impasse”

The government fails to meet the demand for early elections voiced by students and the broader public within the timeframe envisaged in this scenario. Protests continue to flare up sporadically and spontaneously but gradually lose momentum. The regime adopts a strategy of controlled repression – targeted retaliation against universities, educators, students, and members of the judiciary.

Prominent protesters and student leaders identified as organizers are arrested, and often held in arbitrary detention, serving as both punishment and deterrent. In the absence of sustained street mobilization, the government consolidates its control over key institutions. Large numbers of high school teachers, university staff, and professors are dismissed, while a “silent purge” unfolds within the security apparatus through internal repression and forced loyalty tests.

## The Shrinking Space for Civil Society and Opposition

Targeted attacks on civil society organizations (CSOs), smear campaigns, and the lack of consistent support from protest groups have left civil society increasingly isolated. While most CSOs refuse cooperation with the authorities, their influence on political developments remains limited. Civil society continues to engage in dialogue with the EU, yet these efforts lack coordination, strategic clarity, and visible impact – partly due to mixed signals coming from Brussels.

Opposition parties have likewise failed to articulate a unified front, and their cooperation with the student movement remains virtually nonexistent. The divide runs deep – not only because students distance themselves from formal politics, but also due to ideological fragmentation with the opposition itself. Some parties advance a clear pro-EU agenda, others adopt a more nationalistic stance, while the student movement remains politically heterogeneous.

Moreover, a number of opposition parties hesitate to demand elections under current, non-competitive conditions. As this fragmentation persists – and in the absence of further escalation or repression – the movement’s strength gradually wanes. As protests fade, overt repression subsides as well; yet this silent erosion of civic resistance enables the regime to accelerate Serbia’s drift into full autocracy.

Despite the regime’s apparent consolidation, this scenario remains inherently unstable. Its sustainability depends on the government’s capacity to deliver outcomes that satisfy key international stakeholders – particularly the EU, and to a lesser extent the United States – even without genuine reform. Symbolic gestures, such as renewed cooperation on energy issues or limited distancing from Russia, may temporarily appease external partners. However, the equilibrium is fragile: any domestic shock – such as a new incident triggering mass mobilization – or an external disruption in the increasingly volatile geopolitical environment could swiftly propel the country toward renewed repression or a fresh phase of crisis escalation.

## External Actors

**European Union (EU):** Maintains communication with Belgrade but avoids taking decisive action or imposing meaningful conditionality. Expressions of concern have effectively replaced sanctions or accountability mechanisms, enabling the continuation of the status quo. Brussels’ reluctance to confront democratic backsliding meaningfully further erodes its credibility among pro-democracy actors.

**United States:** Washington continues to pursue a policy of strategic ambiguity, prioritizing regional stability over democratic reform. The U.S. refrains from direct involvement and avoids openly supporting the protests. The Serbian regime leverages its ties with Israel and influential American lobbying networks to secure neutrality from the Trump administration. Simultaneously, it seeks to discredit the protests by presenting them to Trump-aligned circles as a “liberal establishment plot,” while framing them elsewhere in the West as an alleged instance of Russian interference.

**Russia:** Moscow amplifies the regime’s narrative of a “color revolution,” offering symbolic, media, technical, and political support. Through this, Russia reinforces its broader campaign against democratic movements and portrays Serbia as part of a global struggle against Western interference.

**China:** Beijing maintains a low profile, emphasising stability and the continuity of infrastructure and investment projects. President Vučić uses relations with China as both a source of financing and a tool of domestic propaganda, while Beijing remains cautious – aware that Chinese companies were involved in the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station, the site of the tragedy.

## The Pivotal Moment: One Year Anniversary of the tragedy in Novi Sad and the Standoff at the National Assembly

The protest in Novi Sad marking the anniversary of the railway station tragedy turned into a massive public demonstration, delivering a significant reputational blow to the government. The turnout far exceeded expectations, and the event drew extensive coverage from international media outlets, with television crews from around the world documenting the scenes on the ground. The sheer scale of participation and global attention undermined the regime’s narrative of control and further exposed the depth of public discontent.

In the aftermath, the epicenter of the crisis has shifted to Belgrade, where tensions are now concentrated in front of the National Assembly. A makeshift pro-government camp – hastily established by the authorities to project an image of popular support – has become a flashpoint for confrontation. The emotional and moral weight of the crisis has been amplified by the hunger strike of Dijana Hrka, mother of one of the victims, who has begun her protest on the site.

Given this volatile environment, the risk of violent repression by police forces and regime-linked groups – resembling *titushki*-type formations known from the post-Soviet space – remains high. The regime’s handling of the situation in Belgrade will likely determine the next phase of the crisis.

If the government manages to contain the movement without major escalation, public energy may dissipate and the opposition weaken (outcome: **Scenario 1**). However, if violent clashes erupt, the unrest could spread nationwide, triggering a harsher wave of repression both during and after the events (outcome: **Scenario 3**).

## Socio-Political Dynamics

Public mobilization weakens as protests lose coherence. Divisions deepen – between students and opposition parties, between pro-EU and right-wing opposition groups, and within society more broadly. Disillusionment spreads among young people, prompting a growing wave of emigration.

At the same time, the regime's increasing reliance on imported labor fuels anti-migrant sentiment, reinforcing far-right and pro-Russian narratives. This dynamic further polarizes the public sphere and erodes the already fragile foundations of social cohesion.

## Institutional and Legal Repression

While overt violence diminishes, covert pressure and institutional purges persist. Individuals deemed disloyal – across the civil service, judiciary, universities, and public administration – are systematically removed. Repression becomes increasingly *legalized* through a series of incremental legislative amendments rather than consolidated in a single “anti-terrorism” law.

Elections do not take place until June 2026. The regime adopts a strategy of low-intensity repression and time-buying. The police remain instruments of political loyalty, while intelligence agencies focus on surveillance and communication monitoring.

Government control over the security apparatus expands through accelerated recruitment of loyal personnel. The rule of law continues to erode, with prosecutors and courts routinely ignoring state abuses. Independent and professional media operate under severe pressure – marginalized, ghettoized, and effectively excluded from mainstream discourse.

Despite periodic statements of concern from Brussels, the absence of concrete EU pressure allows the regime to preserve and even legitimise its authoritarian status quo.

## Scenario 2: “EU as Broker”

Following President von der Leyen's visit to Serbia, the European Union advances a concrete proposal for dialogue aimed at resolving the country's political and institutional crisis – one that goes beyond its current limited engagement with issues such as the media regulator (REM), elections, or accession negotiations. The EU introduces a set of extraordinary instruments and measures to overcome the crisis, positioning itself as the principal external actor in managing Serbia's political impasse.

This scenario could unfold under two conditions: either after violent clashes following the hunger strike of Dijana Hrka and the standoff in front of the pro-regime encampment in front of the National Assembly in Belgrade, or if Serbia remains mired in the stalemate described in Scenario 1 – where the regime clings to power at any cost, political system is paralyzed and formal political processes have ground to a halt. In both circumstances, the erosion of public trust in institutions and the near-total paralysis of formal political life render genuine dialogue impossible, leaving the situation inherently volatile.

In both cases, the regime emerges weakened and compelled to welcome EU mediation – whether urgent need for access to EU funds or in search of external legitimacy to stabilize the domestic situation. Against this backdrop, the EU's role expands beyond mediation between government and opposition: it becomes instrumental in rebuilding the political process itself – reviving channels of communication among fragmented actors and reestablishing minimal institutional conditions necessary for credible elections.



The EU-mediated process culminates either in the organisation of early elections or the formation of a technical transitional government, marking a temporary but significant recalibration of Serbia's political landscape.

## A New Framework for Dialogue

Through the EU's mediation, the opposition and student representatives gain indirect recognition, while part of the energy driving the protests is redirected from the streets into institutional channels. Demonstrations continue, but now function as a complement to the dialogue process – serving to sustain public pressure and support negotiations rather than replace them.

Civil society organizations become directly involved in monitoring the establishment of minimum electoral standards, participating in the work of REM, and contributing to the creation of an oversight mechanism for police conduct – key institutional outcomes of EU mediation. The protest movement becomes more coordinated, strategically channeling its demands through structured, EU-facilitated negotiations.

The viability of this scenario depends above all on the EU's readiness to create an extraordinary framework for dialogue – a step it has so far resisted – and even more critically, on the readiness of students to participate. Given the intensity of repression and mutual distrust, students are unlikely to engage. By contrast, only the pro-EU opposition appears prepared to enter the process, primarily to negotiate improved electoral conditions.

## Role of External Actors

- **European Union (EU):** The EU adopts a more decisive stance – actively engaging in mediation, applying political conditionality, and offering a credible pathway out of the crisis.
- **United States:** Washington avoids active mediation but supports EU initiatives, emphasizing stability and the containment of Chinese and Russian influence in strategic sectors.
- **Russia:** Moscow initially denounces EU mediation efforts but quietly reassesses its position, recognizing that a negotiated outcome could preserve elements of its influence in Serbia. Should it perceive the regime as unsalvageable, Russia begins discreet contacts with nationalist and populist factions as potential successors.
- **China:** Beijing maintains discretion and a low profile, focused on protecting its economic interests. It uses the situation to reinforce its image as a reliable partner through ongoing infrastructure projects and targeted public diplomacy.

## Socio-Political Dynamics

The student movement becomes more structured and politically articulate, channeling its demands through institutional dialogue. Protests continue, but in a controlled and goal-oriented form.

The regime, while offering limited concessions, retains overall control. The security apparatus refrains from overt repression, yet security services persist in covert operations – surveillance, blackmail, rumor campaigns, and intimidation – intended to sow division among opponents and undermine opposition cohesion ahead of potential elections.

The EU introduces a North Macedonia-style framework reminiscent of the Pržino Agreement. With the EU and OSCE as mediators, an oversight mechanism is established for the security services, and modest progress is achieved on rule-of-law and democratic reforms. This creates space for technical political dialogue, leading to two main outcomes:



- **A transitional technical government** tasked with unlocking the political process and beginning the partial dismantling of state capture; or
- **Early elections** under improved conditions, restoring public confidence through visible action against high-level corruption and organized crime, including cases tied to the Novi Sad tragedy.

In parallel, the EU prioritises key elements of the Reform Agenda: cleaning up voter lists, appointing new members of the REM Council, and reforming criminal and internal affairs legislation.

## The EPP Factor and Political Conditionality

Within this framework, the European People's Party (EPP) intensifies internal scrutiny of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), initiating a process that could culminate in suspension or expulsion. The EPP leverages this pressure to push the regime toward constructive engagement with EU mediation.

The media environment improves marginally – pluralism expands through enhanced monitoring mechanisms, though regime dominance persists. The EU applies its conditionality tools more rigorously, linking financial assistance to measurable democratic progress.

Civil society assumes a central oversight role, helping to ensure transparency in the process. Discussions begin on forming a technical government to prepare for early elections by the end of 2026 – elections conducted under significantly improved democratic standards.

## Scenario 3: “Intensifying Repression and Unrest”

The government resorts to harsher repression – beatings, mass arrests, and violent dispersal of protests. Rather than crushing dissent, these tactics fuel further escalation and mass mobilization. Protests swell in size but remain chaotic and leaderless. Civil society retreats into a defensive posture, though its symbolic significance grows, serving as a moral counterweight to state violence.

Russia reinforces the regime through its anti-democratic “color revolution” rhetoric, providing security, logistical, technical and media assistance, while encouraging the mobilization of far-right groups. The EU shifts its focus from reform to crisis management.

## Role of External Actors

- **European Union (EU):** Initially condemns the repression but stops short of imposing the sanctions invoked in the 22 October 2025 European Parliament Resolution, due to lack of consensus within the Council. There are two possible outcomes within this scenario. Either the EU's response remains limited to rhetorical pressure and crisis monitoring. Or, if the situation deteriorates further, this scenario could transition into **Scenario 2** (“EU as Broker”).
- **United States:** Washington expresses concern but avoids direct punitive measures. Its primary objective remains regional stability and the prevention of wider conflict. Conflicting signals from U.S. officials allow the regime in Belgrade to interpret American restraint as tacit approval. The government intensifies lobbying efforts in Washington to discredit the protests, portraying them alternately as liberal subversion or foreign destabilisation. The U.S. becomes more directly involved only if internal instability threatens to spill over into neighboring states.
- **Russia:** Moscow openly supports the regime's crackdown, activating propaganda networks, expanding security cooperation, and strengthening ties with regime-aligned far-right groups. Should the government lose control, Russia swiftly adjusts its narrative, establishing new contacts with nationalist and populist factions as potential successors.

- **China:** Beijing maintains silence, avoiding public statements and adhering to a posture of pragmatic detachment focused on safeguarding its economic interests.

## Socio-Political Dynamics

The protests grow in scale but remain disorganized and fragmented. The judiciary becomes fully captured, and repression is institutionalised. The regime enacts a new package of “anti-terrorism” and “anti-extremism” laws modeled on Russian and Chinese precedents – ostensibly targeting unrest but effectively criminalizing CSOs and opposition activity.

The government pursues a strategy of revenge against its perceived enemies: brutal repression, mass detentions, and show trials targeting activists and student leaders. Russia reinforces this trajectory by promoting the narrative of “Western-engineered uprisings,” offering logistical and intelligence support, and empowering far-right paramilitary structures.

The security sector becomes the regime’s central pillar of control, enforcing pervasive surveillance and coercion. Loyalist paramilitary and criminal groups operate as auxiliary enforcers, spreading fear and ensuring compliance.

If police and paramilitary forces fail to contain the unrest, the regime escalates further – deploying the military and declaring a state of emergency. The rule of law collapses into vengeful authoritarianism. Independent and professional media outlets are shut down or taken over, while propaganda and disinformation dominate the airwaves. Cyberattacks targeting journalists and activists become routine.

## Breakdown of Control

As repression intensifies – mirroring the ongoing situation in Georgia or Turkey in 2016 – mass arrests and violent clashes trigger nationwide unrest. In municipalities where the ruling SNS has lost legitimacy, local governance collapses. Citizens do not seize power, but the state effectively withdraws; institutions disintegrate amid violence and delegitimization.

## Possible Outcomes

This scenario has **three potential outcomes**:

- **EU Intervention (Shift to Scenario 2):** Determined to prevent Serbia’s complete destabilization and regional spillover, the EU steps in as mediator, initiating crisis dialogue and stabilization efforts.
- **Prolonged Repression and Regional Instability:** The EU limits itself to condemnation without action, reinforcing the regime’s sense of impunity and deepening the crisis. Lawlessness spreads, and violence risks erupting in northern Kosovo – either as a deliberate distraction orchestrated by Belgrade or as a reaction to an unpredictable move by Pristina. This outcome primarily serves Russia’s interests, discrediting the West as a security guarantor and highlighting its inability to manage Balkan instability. The regime exploits such incidents to divert attention from domestic turmoil.
- **Collapse of the Regime:** Mounting unrest and elite fragmentation lead to the disintegration of the security apparatus and the eventual fall of the regime. The aftermath brings a power vacuum marked by a fractured security sector, legal paralysis, and competing actors struggling to define the post-Vučić order.

## Scenario 4: “Early Elections”

Under mounting pressure – and once President Vučić assesses that the protest movement has lost momentum and that both his personal approval ratings and those of the SNS – have recovered, he calls early elections. The vote is framed as a confirmation of stability and a return to normalcy, allowing the government to reassert control over the political narrative.

The opposition now faces a critical strategic choice: whether to contest the elections as a united front or in fragmented blocs. The key question becomes whether the pro-EU opposition and the student movement can establish a platform for cooperation – and whether all opposition parties will attempt to unite under one umbrella or accept the student invitation to refrain from participating in this election. As the elections dominate public attention, students and citizens shift enter a more passive phase, and the campaign replaces the streets as the main arena of political struggle.

### Role of External Actors

- **European Union (EU):** Supports elections as a path out of crisis but insists on minimum democratic conditions and the presence of international monitoring.
- **United States:** Endorses elections as the pragmatic way forward. Washington prioritizes stability and continued economic cooperation, avoiding direct confrontation with the regime.
- **Russia:** Deploys its disinformation channels to back the ruling party and amplify anti-Western narratives. While discreetly signaling openness to dialogue with certain opposition segments, Moscow simultaneously works to prevent meaningful political change.
- **China:** Maintains an apolitical stance, emphasizing its investment-driven narrative. Beijing seeks to preserve existing infrastructure and business contracts regardless of the election outcome.

### Socio-Political Dynamics

The student movement evolves into a structured political actor, shifting from protest-based mobilization to electoral engagement. Civil society remains active, but public attention largely turns to the campaigning.

Once the regime concludes that public dissent has been neutralized, it calls snap elections under its own terms. Security services withdraw from overt repression, focusing instead on controlling the electoral process. Paramilitary and criminal groups loyal to the regime are deployed to intimidate opposition activists and maintain discipline within the ruling party’s own ranks.

The rule of law undergoes only superficial technical adjustments, without genuine reform. The media environment enters a phase of “controlled pluralism”: opposition voices gain limited visibility, yet the overall narrative remains tightly curated in favor of the regime. To fragment and disorient the opposition forces, pro-government media amplify pseudo-oppositional nationalist movements – formally critical of Vučić, but effectively under his influence.

Simultaneously, the government intensifies efforts to secure editorial control over independent outlets owned by United Media, aiming to enter the elections with near-total dominance of the media landscape.

## The Role of the EU and the Road Ahead

The EU cautiously supports early elections as a potential exit from crisis while insisting on transparent oversight, credible monitoring, and adherence to baseline democratic conditions. However, absent deeper structural reforms, these elections risk legitimising rather than resolving Serbia's political impasse. Even if Vučić miscalculates and the student list and opposition win the election, the regime is unlikely to accept defeat – either manipulating the vote count to secure victory or, upon realizing it is losing, provoking unrest to prematurely end the electoral process.

As the campaign unfolds, public protests recede into the background, but the risk of post-election escalation remains high – particularly if credible evidence of electoral fraud emerges.

## POTENTIAL OUTCOMES OF THE CRISIS

Beyond the four main scenarios, all variations of the crisis could ultimately converge toward one of four key outcomes:

1. **Political Vacuum:** The regime loses its capacity to maintain control, institutions cease to function effectively, and neither the opposition, students nor civil society succeeds in articulating a viable alternative. The result is a period of prolonged instability and uncertainty.
2. **Negotiated Transition:** A peaceful transfer of authority achieved through an agreement on a technical transitional government and new elections under EU mediation. Such a transition could create space for the restoration of the rule of law, institutional integrity, and media freedom.
3. **Collapse of the Regime:** Escalating violence and repression fail to suppress dissent, instead galvanising civic resistance and ultimately triggering the regime's downfall. However, the abrupt fall of the government carries the risk of security sector fragmentation, legal paralysis, and a political vacuum in which multiple actors compete for control of the post-Vučić order.
4. **Regime Consolidation:** Through a combination of repression, tightened control over key institutions, and successful narrative management, the regime manages to weather the crisis. Opposition forces, including the students, become fragmented or discredited; civil society space narrows further, and international actors revert to a policy of pragmatic engagement. While stability may be restored, it would come at the cost of deeper authoritarian entrenchment and diminished prospects for democratic renewal.

These are not separate scenarios, but rather potential endpoints that could arise from any of the preceding four paths – depending on how the key drivers interact and the choices made by principal domestic and international actors.

## CONCLUSION: A CRISIS IN MOTION

Serbia's political crisis remains a living, mutable process rather than a linear progression toward resolution. None of the four scenarios exist in isolation: a prolonged impasse may harden into authoritarian consolidation; repression and unrest may spiral toward regime collapse; or the exhaustion of confrontation may compel an EU-brokered transition. Conversely, even early elections – hailed as a democratic remedy – could devolve into renewed conflict or institutional paralysis if their outcome is manipulated.

At its core, Serbia stands at a crossroads where every pathway carries both risk and opportunity. The direction the country takes will depend on three interlocking forces: the endurance of civic mobilization, the regime's capacity for repression or compromise, and the resolve of the European Union to act not as a distant observer but as a decisive guarantor of democratic principles. Whether this crisis ends in negotiated transformation or entrenched autocracy will hinge on how these dynamics converge in the critical months between November 2025 and June 2026.



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