

A Balkan Balancing Act: EU Migration Deals, Lithium Dreams and Serbia's Future

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Abstract:

The November 2024 collapse of a newly renovated train station canopy in Novi Sad sparked nationwide protests in Serbia, exposing deep public frustration with corruption, authoritarian governance, and the erosion of democratic institutions. While the protests began in response to a domestic tragedy, they quickly evolved into a broader indictment of both the Serbian government and the European Union's role in enabling democratic backsliding. Central to this critique is Serbia's growing role in EU migration management. A series of agreements, most notably the deployment of Frontex personnel and enhanced border operations, has made Serbia a key partner in the EU's externalization of migration control. This strategic cooperation has bolstered President Aleksandar Vučić's image as a guarantor of regional stability, even as internal reforms stall and authoritarian practices deepen. The EU's prioritization of border security over democratic accountability has led many Serbian citizens to view Brussels as complicit in the country's democratic decline, fueling Euroscepticism and weakening the credibility of the EU accession process.

Keywords: Serbia–EU relations, Democratic backsliding, Migration cooperation

From Collapse to Nationwide Resistance

The collapse of a newly renovated train station canopy in Novi Sad in November 2024 triggered a wave of public outrage that quickly evolved into a nationwide protest movement. Initially led by university students, the demonstrations rapidly expanded, drawing hundreds of thousands of participants across more than 400 towns and cities throughout Serbia. The tragedy, widely seen as a symbol of deep-rooted systemic issues, sparked the unifying slogan "Corruption Kills" and mobilized approximately 5% of the country's population in mass protests demanding accountability and reform (De Launey, 2025), converging with the ongoing public outrage over a controversial lithium mining agreement signed between the Serbian government and the European Union. Critics argue that the deal not only threatens Serbia's environment but also erodes democratic accountability, as it was negotiated behind closed doors without adequate public consultation (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2024).

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While Serbia's cooperation with the EU on migration control has boosted its strategic relevance, it has also exposed a troubling contradiction. Serbia's regional importance is rising even as its democratic institutions backslide. In its pursuit of border security and migration control, the European Commission with the approval and political backing of the Council of the EU has moved forward with operational and funding agreements that sidestep growing concerns about democratic erosion. This approach risks undermining the EU's own stated commitments to the rule of law and democratic governance, particularly in candidate countries (European Commission, 2024).

Impact on Serbia's Domestic Politics

The European Union's strategic cooperation with Serbia has significantly contributed to the centralization of power under President Aleksandar Vučić. He presents himself as a guarantor of European stability and has built a tightly knit network of political allies and business elites, leveraging clientelist practices and exerting substantial control over media narratives. He has also faced credible allegations of enabling corruption and fostering connections with organized criminal networks, all while projecting a pro-European image abroad (Vascotto & Morina, 2025). Despite claims of alignment with EU values, internal democratic reforms have stagnated. Analysts argue that the EU's selective engagement has, whether intentionally or not, legitimized authoritarian tendencies by prioritizing regional stability and resource access over democratic accountability. In their analysis of Serbia's foreign policy, Jović-Lazić and Ladjevac (2023) describe this approach as a "small state" strategy where Serbia maintains relations with both the EU and Russia to navigate international pressures and domestic vulnerabilities. However, the war in Ukraine has strained this balancing act, placing Serbia in an increasingly untenable position between East and West.

This geopolitical ambiguity is particularly visible in Serbia's lithium deal with the EU. While vital for the EU's Green Deal and transition to electric mobility, the agreement has sparked significant backlash at home. Critics argue that the deal reflects a transactional and extractive relationship, reinforcing Serbian public scepticism toward the EU. Many citizens view such partnerships as benefiting elite interests while sidelining public participation and environmental protection (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2024). Together, these dynamics suggest that the EU's current mode of engagement is inadvertently empowering autocracy in Serbia, deepening the gap between pro-European rhetoric and democratic realities on the ground.

Serbia's Role in EU Migration Management

Serbia has emerged as a pivotal partner for the European Union in managing migration flows along the Western Balkan route. Over the past two decades, this cooperation has been formalized through a series of agreements aimed at aligning Serbia's border and migration policies with EU standards, effectively outsourcing parts of the EU's border control to a non-member state. One of the earliest such arrangements, the Readmission Agreement (2007), allowed for the return of individuals residing irregularly in EU member states back to Serbia, thereby reinforcing EU migration control mechanisms (Refworld - UNHCR's Global Law and Policy Database, 2024). In 2021, the Status Agreement enabled the deployment of Frontex personnel on Serbian territory during migration emergencies, marking Serbia as the first Western Balkan country to permit such cooperation (European Council on Refugees and Exiles [ECRE], 2024). This collaboration was further expanded with the Operational Cooperation Agreement, which entered into force in March 2024. It authorized the EU's Frontex Standing Corps to operate across Serbian territory, including its borders with non-EU countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia (European Commission, 2024).

In addition to these formal frameworks, Serbia's cooperation with the EU is embedded in the Action Plan for Chapter 24: Justice, Freedom, and Security, part of Serbia's ongoing EU accession process. Progress in areas such as border control and migration management are highlighted, although concerns remain regarding democratic backsliding and limited media freedom (Serbia Report, 2023). Collectively, these agreements have bolstered President Aleksandar Vučić's image as a stabilizing figure in regional security. However, critics argue that the EU's prioritization of migration management over democratic norms has facilitated Serbia's authoritarian drift and weakened the EU's normative influence in the Western Balkans.

Recent Protests and Public Discontent

What started as student protests following the collapse of the Novi Sad train station canopy quickly grew into a national movement under the banner "Corruption Kills", mobilizing millions across the country and highlighting deep systemic failures (De Launey, 2025). Protesters demand government accountability, educational reform, a stronger rule of law, and an end to systemic corruption. Notably, this protest movement is ideologically diffuse and distinctly non-aligned. Unlike recent protests in Slovenia, Romania and Georgia, the Serbian demonstrations are not explicitly pro-European. Many citizens, while rejecting authoritarianism, also express profound disillusionment with the European Union. A growing number believe that the EU has prioritized stability, migration control, and economic interests over the defence of democratic norms and civil society. As a joint statement by over 100 Serbian civil society organizations warned, the EU risks "losing Serbia" if it continues to ignore the ongoing democratic crisis (Ewb & Ewb, 2025). This erosion of trust is apparent in public opinion. According to a survey conducted by the

Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA), 60% of Serbian citizens support the current wave of protests and blockades. More tellingly, the same research found that citizens place greater trust in independent activists and civil society than in political parties or international actors (Stankovic, 2025). This suggests that the protest movement is not only a rejection of domestic governance but also a rebuke to external powers perceived as enabling authoritarian consolidation.

Intersection with Domestic Challenges

Serbia's geopolitical balancing act between the European Union and Russia continues to complicate its policy trajectory. Although Serbia applied for EU membership in 2009 and began accession negotiations in 2014, its parallel alignment with Russia, particularly in military cooperation and energy trade, casts doubt on the credibility of its European integration path (Jović-Lazić & Lajevac, 2023). The Serbian government has stated its intention to conclude EU accession talks by 2026, but this timeline is increasingly viewed as unrealistic, given Serbia's dual-track diplomacy and weak democratic reforms. Russia's support for Serbia's stance on Kosovo further complicates Belgrade's EU aspirations. Moscow's role as a diplomatic counterweight to EU pressure has reinforced Serbia's reluctance to fully align with the Union's foreign policy. While Serbia's "small state" strategy balancing both Western and Eastern powers has yielded short-term political flexibility, it appears less sustainable in an increasingly polarized international environment (Jović-Lazić & Lajevac, 2023).

Meanwhile, the EU's willingness to accommodate Serbia's democratic backsliding to preserve migration cooperation and secure critical raw materials has drawn sharp criticism from civil society organisations in Serbia. Recent surveys show that while public frustration with the Serbian government is growing, trust in the EU is also eroding due to perceived complicity in enabling authoritarianism (Ewb & Ewb, 2025). These dynamic risks to turn Serbia into a case study of how strategic engagement can inadvertently undermine long-term regional stability when decoupled from value-based conditionality.

Uncertain Future

The contradiction at the heart of Serbia–EU relations lies in persistent policy incoherence. While the EU formally demands legal reforms, media freedom, and respect for human rights as part of Serbia's accession process, it simultaneously reinforces illiberal trends by prioritizing strategic cooperation on migration control and raw materials. The EU's willingness to externalize border security through Serbia, despite recurring allegations of pushbacks and abuses by local enforcement actors, exemplifies this selective engagement. These patterns have not gone unnoticed. Domestic protests, growing Euroscepticism, and a breakdown in public trust signal that many citizens now view the EU as complicit in

Serbia's democratic backsliding (Ewb & Ewb, 2025). Serbia's engagement with the EU, particularly on border externalization and resource extraction, may yield short-term geopolitical benefits, but it also exposes the fragility of both Serbia's internal governance and the EU's conditionality mechanisms. Without meaningful leverage linked to democratic benchmarks, the EU risks reinforcing authoritarian tendencies and enabling President Aleksandar Vučić's consolidation of power, thereby contributing to the state capture of Serbian institutions instead of promoting genuine democratic reform. To chart a more sustainable path forward the EU must reassess its engagement model. Strategic cooperation must not come at the cost of democratic erosion. True partnership requires that Serbia's accession be made contingent on measurable progress in rule of law, environmental protection, and citizen participation. Only by centering internal transformation can Serbia credibly move toward EU membership and only then can the EU live up to its own values.

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