

Working paper



D6.5: Trust, Social Cohesion and EU Democracy Promotion in Times of Acute Political Crisis – The case of Serbia



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WORKING PAPER

Trust, Social Cohesion and EU Democracy Promotion in Times of Acute Political Crisis

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SUMMARY

This paper examines the state of trust and social cohesion in Serbia during the ongoing political crisis in an endeavour to recognize new challenges that may arise for the EU's democracy promotion efforts. The aim of this paper is to assess possible impact that formation of Serbia's first "leaderless" movement against democratic backsliding of a hybrid regime may have had on the overall state of both horizontal and vertical trust, and consequently, on the trust of citizens in the EU and its efforts to promote democracy in Serbia. Therefore, this paper will present an analysis of the results of the Serbian micro-level survey-vignette study (n = 583) and of the project tracing process that were conducted in Serbia over the course of implementing the ReEngage project. Hopefully, these insights may prove themselves useful for both the scholars aiming to analyse the complex social and political reality of the contemporary Serbian state as well to the policymakers.

Key words: EU, trust, democracy promotion, political crisis, leaderless movement.



Introduction

Currently, the region of Western Balkans, and Serbia in particular, is at a crossing point, where the global rise of populism (Stojanović 2017) meets with local variants of hybrid governance (Bøås, Giske and Rieker 2024), thus creating a fertile environment for democratic backsliding. Effective engagement must therefore begin from an assumption that hybridity in this case is not a transient deviation from a democratic norm, but a durable mode of governance (Gueudet, 2024). After decades under the rule of hybrid regimes (Antonić 2002, Pavlović 2020), Serbia experienced a mass civic mobilization against authoritarian tendencies and corruption within the Serbian Progressive Party's government (Beširević 2025). However, it still remains uncertain what effect will the ongoing political crisis ultimately have on social cohesion. Results of the social survey conducted in Serbia between November 2024 and June 2025, coupled with the results of the project tracing part of the EU-funded ReEngage project, could potentially lead towards new insights on how current upheavals affect horizontal and vertical trust in Serbia and, therefore, what effect they could potentially have on the EU's democracy promotion efforts.

From a historical perspective, the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Serbia are almost as old as the chain of hybrid regimes that governed the country since the aftermath of political and economic transition in the 1990s (Buras, Dumoulin and Kelmendi 2024). These efforts range from financing innumerable educational or research projects, citizen initiatives, and non-governmental organizations, focused around assessing or raising awareness about the concepts of democratic governance and citizen participation to prompting the government to apply various measures in order to combat tendencies towards democratic backsliding. Various researchers assess the effect of these efforts differently (Dergisi 2025). Yet the results of similar assessments conducted elsewhere on the EU periphery indicate a correlation between levels of trust and the success of the EU's democracy promotion efforts. It appears as though the higher the social cohesion, defined as a measure of both vertical and horizontal trust (as well as trust in oneself according to some scholars - Consolini 2025), the more likely the successful democratic promotion (Novy, Swaitek and Mouleart 2012). Similarly, low social cohesion is likely to become one of the determining factors contributing to further democratic backsliding and strengthening of the hybrid regimes' resilience towards democratization (Justino 2024).

Current political and social reality in Serbia lends itself to an analysis of the complex relationship between horizontal and vertical trust, as social cohesion unexpectedly manifested itself in new forms of citizen initiatives against democratic backsliding. Namely, the Serbian hybrid regime is currently facing a massive popular movement that is nominally rallying against state capture but still lacks political articulation, long-term strategy, and a defined attitude towards the EU or the efforts of its institutions to combat democratic backsliding in the region (Jerkov, Bešlin and Radeljić 2025). Simultaneously, the hybrid regime seems to lack an effective strategy for defusing social and political tensions which, even in the absence of a formal political agenda, currently dominate the streets of the largest Serbian cities for well over a year (Balkan Talks 2025).

What has changed? All the parameters from the late 2010s and early 2020s (CRTA 2018, Jovanović 2016), were indicating a steady erosion of media liberties and institutional autonomy, Indexes of human rights and media freedoms were declining year after year (Freedom House 2023, Freedom House 2024). Erosion of rule of law, division of power and other facets of democratic life, which were undermined by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and its undisputed leader, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic (CRTA 2024). Atomisation and feelings of helplessness in the face of creation of political machinery also abounded (Banović 2015). Reflecting those tendencies, our reports written during the first phase of the ReEngage project in 2024 indicated a seemingly unstoppable downward spiral of both social cohesion and democratic backsliding (Mishkova, Hide, Filipović, Tučalo, Repovac-Nikšić and Petrović 2024).

However, not a month later after the submission of our October 2024 report about hybrid regimes and hybridity in the western Balkans (see the reference above), Serbia found itself deeply immersed in one of the largest political crises of its recent history. Though it is still early to make predictions about the possible political outcomes and their consequences on Serbia's internal and foreign policies, there is already research data that could help understand the complex relationship between social cohesion and forms of hybridity of the Serbian regime. Among those, the results of the social survey and project tracing process are harvested here to assess the levels of vertical and horizontal trust in Serbia during the first months of the ongoing political crisis, as well as the attitudes of Serbian citizens towards EU's democracy promotion efforts.

Unexpected mobilization of civic resistance against Serbian democratic backsliding

The unexpected chain of developments started with a collapse of the canopy of the Novi Sad railway station on November 1st, leading to sixteen fatalities and many severely injured. The outrage triggered by the inability of the government to take responsibility for the disaster led to the formation of Serbia's first "leaderless" movement: a movement without a formally defined ideology, long-term agenda, leadership or organizational structure (Reves 2025, Mylod-Vargas 2025). From November 2024 onwards, Serbian students and citizens showcased a surprising ability to foster mass mobilization in support of the rule of law and against democratic backsliding embodied in the personal regime of Aleksandar Vučić.

The number of the protesters as well as their determination contradicted numerous surveys by CRTA (2018, 2022), BIRN (Karrpi 2023) or Freedom House (2023, 2024) which indicated continuously declining interest in politics or activities of the civil society. The results of a survey carried out by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in 2020 indicated that the continuous decline of vertical trust among Serbian citizens was connected with increasing political defeatism and political apathy, accompanied by a growing number of young people leaving the country (WFD 2020). Completely conversely, it was exactly that youth which was spearheading the protests, launching a general strike at the biggest universities and inspiring the older generations to join.

Sudden and enormous legitimacy that the mass student movement clearly enjoyed in Serbia was made obvious in a continuously growing mass of protesters (for a detailed chronology coupled with an analytical perspective of the events that led to formation of the "leaderless" movement, see Balkan Talks 2025). Serbia witnessed violence on the streets and in universities, faculty blockades staged in response to police brutality, as well as attempts of government officials to "normalize" the tragedy in Novi Sad by creating a narrative that such tragedies are expected in times of infrastructural development and economic progress (Beširević and Filipović 2025). Despite their loose organization around plenums, decision-making bodies of different colleges in blockade characterized by autonomy and principle of direct democracy, the students were successful in articulating their clear demands - that captured institutions should start working efficiently, especially the prosecution and the judiciary (). As these events are well under way, even more than a full year since fall of the canopy, we do not aim to speculate about the direction they will take.

Instead, we will try to focus on their impact on concepts which are at the core of our research (horizontal and vertical trust, democracy promotion and geopolitical leaning of Serbia). While admitting that the events are in flux and our target keeps moving, it is clear that the months of relentless protests, strikes, arrests, upheavals, street and college blockades had significantly impacted social cohesion and both horizontal and vertical trust too.

The pronounced generational aspect of the protests is of particular interest, with some authors stressing that the Gen Z-led protests have weakened almost every authority, from state institutions and politicians to university professors and parents, while inflicting changes of existing hierarchies of social norms and system of values (Djolai 2025, Zanten 2025). Others argue that vertical trust has reached a very low point, as the student and citizen assemblies spearheading “leaderless“ protests opted to distance themselves not only from the regime, but also from the existing opposition parties, activists, non-governmental organization and all other known actors that have in one way or another taken part in the political life of the country. Those authors claim that nosediving of vertical trust is followed with an unprecedented rise of horizontal trust, indicated by the recent by the innumerable public gestures of solidarity made by various groups of citizens over the course of the leaderless demonstrations (Mustajbašić 2025, Simović 2025).

Such huge changes, be they permanent or not, have redefined the political field. There seems to be a consensus among the scholars regarding the crisis of the Serbian hybrid regime; after a year of switching between various strategies, Aleksandar Vučić’s administration has not been able to quell protests, blockades and various performative acts of civil disobedience (Cvijić 2025). The regime also tried to maintain a respectable face both internally and outside the country, avoiding excessive violence and at the same time attempting to show control of the situation (Brant 2025). Initial strategies of media targeting, parodying the protests, creating chaos by design, balancing between compromise and threats, and geopolitical shopping for support only recently gave way to an upsurge of police brutality and arrests (Caldin 2025).

After more than a year of living through an acute political crisis, there is no dialog between the government, the opposition or the leaderless movement, nor an implication that these two, or indeed three sides could establish some form of an informal compromise that could calm the raging social and political tensions. In addition, Vučić’s administration stubbornly ignores demands for early elections. Paradoxically, that was possible because the citizen and student assemblies spent

the first months of protests claiming that frequent and staged elections were in fact keeping the hybrid regime afloat. Hence the regime is able to now brush aside the election requests, preferring to settle this political battle “on the street”. This strategy of protests and counter-protests is very risky, and a score of incidents have occurred, fortunately without mortalities as of now.

The situation therefore moves toward a standoff. The weakened regime of the Serbian Progressive Party currently has no strong political alternative, aside from the “leaderless” movement itself (Burazer 2025). Hence one of the greatest advantages of the popular revolt at the same time appears to be its greatest weakness. The absence of any other political agenda of the movement other than demands for the rule of law contributes towards bringing together citizens with vastly different ideological preferences, representatives of different social classes, distant professional groups or atomized local communities (Putnam 2002). At the same time, the need for maintaining distance from politics for the sake of unity prevents the student and citizen assemblies from articulating a program and a long-term strategy of operating within the institutionalized political arena and cooperating with opposition parties, activist groups or non-governmental organizations. Even the proposition of demanding general elections caused internal splits within citizen and student assemblies and barely received a majority due to the movement’s decentralized voting procedures. Large groups of protesters still keep insisting that a radical change of the political system must come before any future elections (Milosavljević 2025).

Thus, both the actions of the regime and the student and citizen assemblies spearheading the “leaderless” movement indicate an overwhelming lack of vertical trust in Serbia. Aside from being potentially one of the key factors preventing the current political crisis from reaching a nonviolent conclusion in the foreseeable future, this lack of vertical trust could endanger both the already achieved results and the future prospects of the EU’s democracy promotion efforts in the country. Both the hybrid regime and the protesters are, for their own reasons, refusing to engage in conventional forms of political competition through elections, by democratic institutions, political parties and open debate in the media. Therefore, it seems that the lack of vertical trust among the general public has escalated to a point where a significant number of Serbian citizens doubt that the current crisis could be solved in a representative democracy by means aligned with the principles of representative democracy and with a peaceful transition of power that EU institutions are trying to promote in candidate countries. Thus, despite the

unexpected mass mobilization of Serbian citizens in support of a movement that has set as its main objective to push back against democratic backsliding, the future of the EU's democracy promotion initiatives in Serbia still remains uncertain.

Methodology and fieldwork

The survey methodology of the RE-ENGAGE project focuses on unpacking perceptions and trust among citizens concerning political institutions, media companies, contemporary EU engagements, external agency interventions, and general trust of local actors in communities. The survey-vignette module (n = 583) seeks to capture the relationship between vertical and horizontal trust on the micro-level, as well as between the general state of social cohesion and democratic backsliding. The results bring assumptions about Serbian resilience against hybridity, but also about how the ongoing EU engagements are viewed among ordinary citizens (Bjørkhaug *et al.* 2025).

Additionally, embedded a vignette section was embedded in the survey instrument where the interviewee is presented a fictive, yet plausible, story about an impending crisis harming the Serbian economy. The vignette story is replicated – though tweaked accordingly to contextual factors – in all the Western Balkans case countries (Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) as well as Moldova and Georgia. The fictive scenario illustrates an economic crisis affecting the country, including trade deficits, rising costs of living, rapid increase in inflation and possibility of state default. To assist the Serbian government, the EU alongside the ‘black knights’ (non-democratic external interventionists competing with the EU): Russia, China and Turkey, offer three plausible rescue packages respectively. The bundles range from economic support packages to membership in the EU or BRICS, as well as debt relief plans or removal of certain tariffs. For each vignette, the respondent is requested to rank the support packages offered by each geopolitical player on a scale from "1" to "5" in terms of the perceived impact the support packages may play to address the economic crisis (i.e., from “very good impact” to detrimental impact”). Part II of the vignette allows the respondent to select three of the most preferable rescue packages of their choice offered by the geopolitical actors.

The vignettes seek to measure both implicitly and explicitly, perceptions of four different geopolitical actors in a crisis situation. The vignettes yield assumptions about how much traction the different geopolitical players have among Serbians, and how people see hybrid actors competing for influence on the expense of the EU.

Further, RE-ENGAGE implemented a method of tracking down important projects in Serbia funded by the EU institutions in order to conduct interviews and focus-group meetings with people who were, in one way or another, engaged in the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Serbia. The process of project tracing was concluded by hosting focus-group sessions, which provided data about the EU's engagement in Serbia and of factors that might have influenced perceptions of contemporaries about those engagements. The data thus gathered was subsequently analyzed by using techniques of quantitative data analysis (Kitzinger 1995). Results from both of these research "branches", the social survey and project tracing, were intended to be compared, combined and subjected to critical analysis with the hope that they could yield new insights about how trust, social cohesion and current developments of local regime's hybridity correlate with the aims and results of EU's democracy promotion efforts (Bøås, Giske and Rieker, 2024).

When teams engaged in implementing the project were developing the vignette surveys during the summer of 2024, a crucial challenge for the Serbian case was designing the survey in a way which would provoke the interest of those seemingly indifferent and uninterested respondents. Researchers expected to encounter at least a certain number of those who would just follow the dominant media narrative and declare cooperation with any given foreign actor as beneficial for Serbia (Kapidžić *et al.* 2024). Consequently, a vignette survey was constructed around a hypothetical scenario that urged respondents to make a clear choice: if Serbia found itself in a state of detrimental crisis, who among the foreign actors would be most likely to offer aid? By implementing this method of questioning, researchers were hoping to discover who among the presented foreign actors (European Union, Russia, China or Turkey) is in fact most trusted by those who claim that they support their country's endeavours to keep collaborating with everyone, even in times of increased geopolitical tensions. This method was also used to create a distinction between trust and stated geopolitical or ideological "orientation". Such an approach has been judged by the team conducting the survey as especially important in the case of Serbia, a country where a substantial number of publicly active pro-Russian advocates own vast estates in Western European countries or school their children in the United States (Petrović 2024). Also, the team that was conducting a survey expected to find a lot of citizens that would restrain from "picking a side" between Brussels and Russia for the sake of a belief that maintaining neutrality is morally superior (Magurean 2017), unless they are not put in a position where they must decide who are they going to turn towards for help when they happen to need it the

most. As it turned out, most citizens are not expecting to be actually delivered from possible future peril by neither Brussels nor Moscow.

Project process tracing proved to be quite challenging in Serbia. Firstly, it was not possible to get reliable data from the EU or Council of Europe about the entirety of the funds allocated to projects in this area. Also, given that individual EU embassies are giving significant assets in the same direction, the entirety of the EU promotion in Serbia remains elusive. Exploring the list of projects obtained in Brussels, we eventually opted for the Pulse of Europe and Media Europe projects. Our choice was also influenced by availability, since numerous individuals involved in some of the EU projects considered for potential subjects of this research refused to cooperate. Among those who did, on the other hand, many displayed unwillingness to actively participate in the interviews, focus groups and other activities organized by the team that was implementing this part of the RE-ENGAGE project in Serbia. However, after the focus groups were finally assembled, the research team witnessed an unexpected phenomenon: almost all of the participants agreed that funds invested by the EU institutions in their respective projects could have been better spent. Interviewees were then motivated by the interviewers to further explain their critical stances on the course that their own EU funded projects took and asked to elaborate on how they believe that the overall impact of their work on these projects could have been improved. Almost all participants showcased a certain amount of enthusiasm towards actively participating in similar projects in near future while cooperating with EU institutions in the endeavours to improve their methods and relevance of the EU funded projects within the currents of social and political reality in Serbia. However, their critical insights were helpful for providing information that could potentially help both the native researchers, administrators and the EU institutions to solve current practical and conceptual problems that are limiting the impact of the EU funded projects in Serbia.

Methodology and survey implementation

A quota sampling design was implemented, with sample allocation stratified by **gender** (male and female), **age group** (18–29, 30–54, and 55+), and **educational attainment** (primary education or below, secondary or vocational training, and higher education). To address the non-proportional allocation applied in this approach, whereby certain subgroups were oversampled, post-stratification weights were applied. Post-stratification weights were computed using the raking procedure in SPSS version 27.0.

To mitigate potential clustering effects arising from interviewers or fixed survey sites, we randomized the assignment of sample quota characteristics across survey locations and interviewers. This procedure helps ensure that no single interviewer or site becomes disproportionately associated with specific demographic profiles, thereby reducing bias. By dispersing quota characteristics in this way, the sample better approximates random variation and enhances the representativeness of the data. Additionally, we applied a filter criterion for choosing interviewees, that the respondent must be a passport holder of the country (**citizenship**).

The recruited interviewers were operating in urban areas for practical reasons (i.e. easy access to interviewees), but in two different cities: the capital city Belgrade and a secondary city Novi Sad. Survey was conducted in two cities, the Serbian capital city of Belgrade, which contains one of the most populated urban areas in the region of Western Balkans, and the ‘secondary city’ of Novi Sad, the regional capital of Vojvodina, Serbia’s most developed and urbanized province, as well as a place where the tragedy that led to the recent civic mobilization occurred. Novi Sad fit the conception of a ‘secondary city’ very well (see Markusen *et al.* 1999), given its peripheral metropolitan location from Belgrade and its cultural distinctions from the capital.

In total, **397** samples were collected in Belgrade and **186** were completed in Novi Sad (i.e., $n = 583$). We re-allocated quotas from Novi Sad to Belgrade, given the outbreak of the mass uprisings in the wake of the collapse of the canopy. Hence, to minimize the impact of jeopardizing the validity of the data, we increased the total sample size slightly to cover up for the remaining unfulfilled quotas in Novi Sad. Therefore, the Serbian survey dataset has 23 more samples than the other RE-ENGAGE case countries.

Considering the mixed and diverse nature of urban residencies in Belgrade and Novi Sad, the potential for convenience-location bias based on social economic segmentations was considered minimal. The locations were first randomized using GIS/boundary data retrieved from the National Statistics Office and tweaked accordingly to reflect the population distribution in the two cities. For example, in Belgrade, five locations were selected from the city centre, and five were selected in the “New Belgrade” borough. Each interviewer received automatically a certain number of quotas to be completed on the different locations.

We combined data collected from both cities for analysis, thus mitigating the bias of only collecting data in the capital and *vice versa*. The census data (retrieved from the

Statistical Office of Serbia) was collected by ICH and subsequently delivered to NUPI for quota stratum calculations. Accordingly, the quotas were randomly assigned to the different urban data collection sites.

CAPI Tools and Implementation

The Computer-Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) system was developed using CSPro 8.0.1, with data collection conducted via CSEntry version 8.0.1 on Android devices. Sample allocation data was preloaded into the CAPI, allowing interviewers to locate selected areas through Google Maps and identify eligible respondents using a built-in menu system. Interviewers were restricted to conducting interviews within a 500-meter radius of the designated locations.

When starting a new questionnaire, CAPI has a pre-installed control mechanism that controls whether the respondent fits the quota. The interviewer must confirm before proceeding towards the questionnaire.

The CAPI was installed on mobile devices, with data initially stored offline in encrypted SQLite databases. After a completed interview, the enumerators were trained to safely upload data to a secure Dropbox server administered by NUPI via the CSEntry application.

For the vignette section, three sequence orders were pre-assigned. During each interview, the CAPI program randomly selected one of the sequences for each respondent. This reduces potential order bias in the responses, i.e., that the interviewer tends to favour the first rescue package on the expense of the last one, or vice versa. The CAPI system also captured metadata, including GPS coordinates of interview locations and duration.

Accordingly, twice a week (Mondays and Fridays), the NUPI team distributed monitoring reports with a summary of the collected data and reported the progression. The rationale behind this scrutinization of preliminary data was to enhance the validity of the dataset. We utilised SPSS and R analysis tools to read data.

Challenges and the onset of mass uprisings

The outbreak of faculty blockades and mass demonstrations in these two cities prolonged the field work in Serbia from November of 2024 until June of the following year, but all the planned interviews were eventually concluded due to the efforts of

trained student interviewers from Belgrade and Novi Sad who worked under the supervision of researchers from NUPI and ICH.

Hence research done over the course of implementing the ReEngage project in Serbia could potentially help fill an important gap. As Serbia witnessed mass civic mobilization against democratic backsliding that has thus far failed to articulate itself into a political alternative to the current hybrid regime, the outcome of the ongoing political crisis remains uncertain, and public opinion is predictably volatile. A survey done by the Institute for Social Sciences (IDN) discovered that there has been a certain rise in horizontal trust among the citizens (IDN 2025). However, the same research concluded that out of more than 80% of Serbian citizens who support the student movement, only 43% of voters would actually vote for a list endorsed by the students in the elections (Novaković and Radonjić 2025).

This implies that a large portion of Serbian citizens experienced a detrimental loss of trust either in the capacity of the student assemblies to select trustworthy and competent people for their electoral list, or in the current political system and elections themselves, or maybe in both. In a turbulent time when the horizontal trust increases while the vertical trusts continue to spiral down, following analysis of the results yielded by the ReEngage survey will aim at answering the question of what such a state of social cohesion means for the future of the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Serbia.

Social cohesion: reliance of informal networks, generational differences and escalating political conflict

The results of the ReEngage survey are mostly aligned with the results of the previous research which detected very low levels of vertical, but high levels of horizontal trust in Serbia. In order to uncover which particular groups and institutions Serbian citizens trust the most or the least, interviewees were presented with numerous options, ranging from friends and family to political parties and state institutions, and asked whether or not they believe that each singular group or institution can be trusted. In addition, they were subsequently asked to whom they would turn to for help in an imaginary situation when they would happen to lose income, become victims of violent crimes, etc. This was done in order to more accurately determine the trust in competence or importance of the stated individuals and institutions. Namely, it is simultaneously possible for people to

mark politicians, religious leaders or institutions as untrustworthy, but to still consider them or their services instrumentally important, especially in a time of crisis.

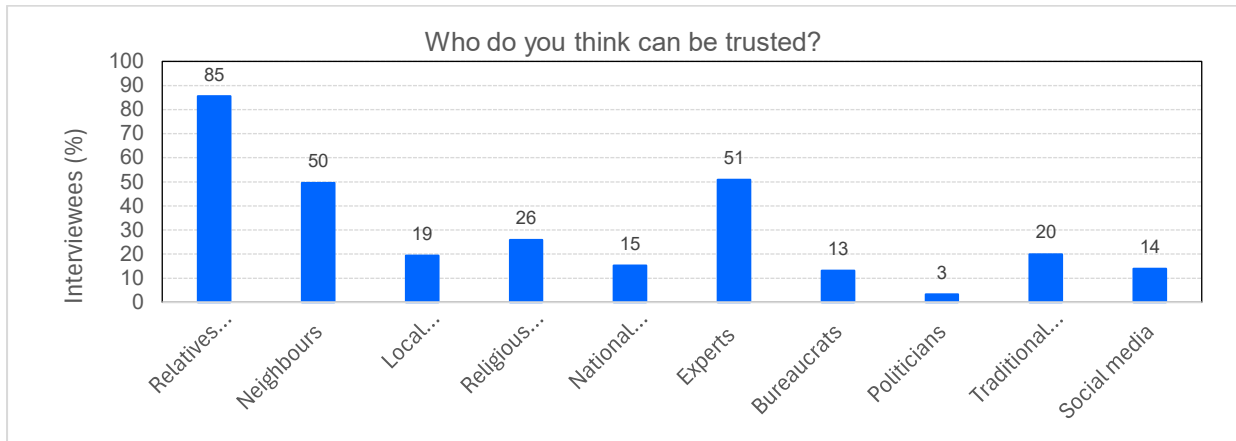


Diagram 1.1. What groups and institutions can be trusted according to Serbian citizens?

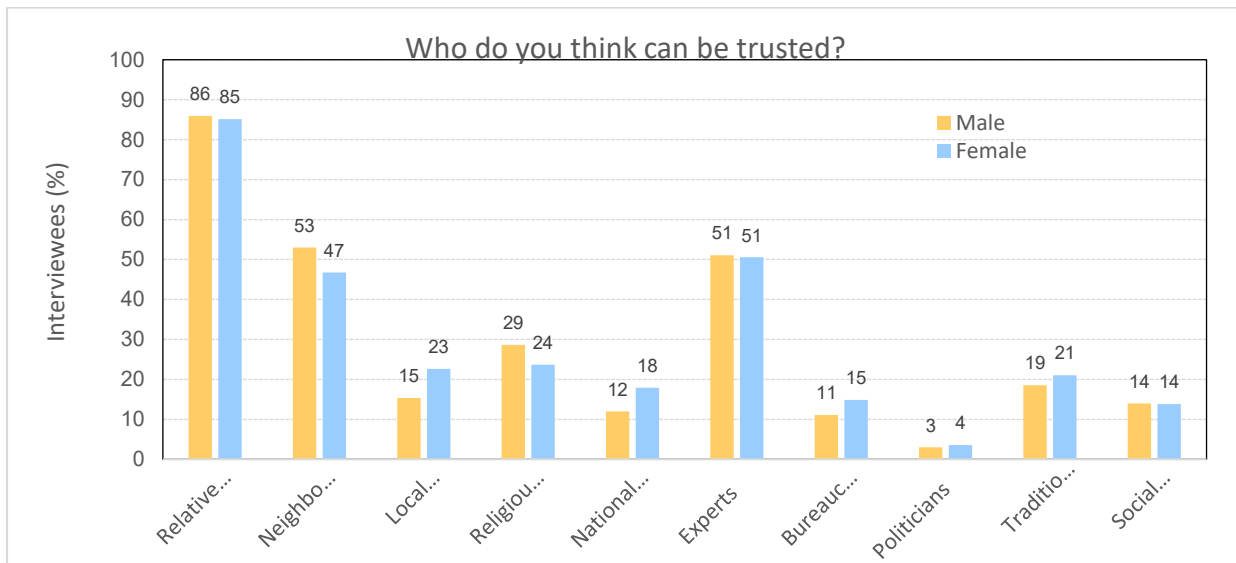


Diagram 1.2. Stratification of trust in accordance with gender

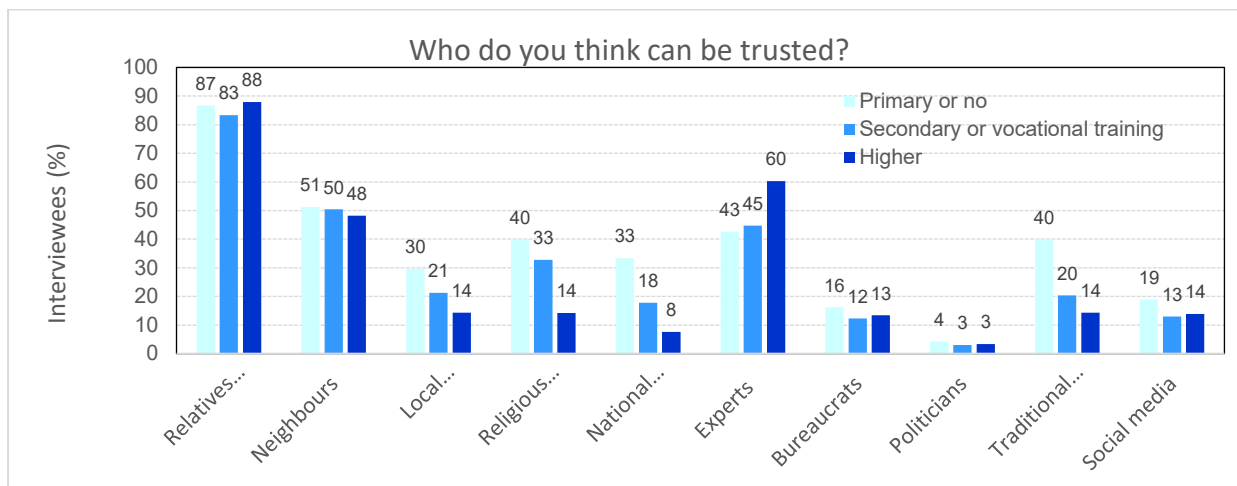


Diagram 1.3. Stratification of trust in accordance with education.

Since the survey conducted during the course of implementing the ReEngage project in Serbia was basically interrupted by the outbreak of the leaderless protests, it remains difficult to assess to what extent the new movement influenced attitudes of interviewees towards cooperation with relatives and neighbours. However, if compared with results of some previous social surveys, results of the recent ReEngage survey indicate that a slight increment in the overall trust of individual citizens towards their immediate social surroundings did occur. That is hardly surprising in a country noticeably nurturing informal relations, but also traditional collectivist political field (Drndarević and Protić 2025). The survey conducted in Belgrade and Novi Sad shows that even in the two of the richest and most urbanized areas in contemporary Serbia, people still cling on to their informal networks and place much more trust in their relatives and neighbours than they do in the official state institutions, political actors and civil society. More than 85% of the interviewees in both towns declare that they consider their relatives to be trustworthy, while more than 50% says the same for their neighbours. On the other hand, bureaucrats (13%), national government (15%), religious leaders (26%), the social (14%), as well as traditional media (20%), are considered trustworthy by a relatively small percentage of citizens.

Interestingly, politicians are scoring astonishingly low results in terms of trust, with only around 3% of citizens declaring that anyone from the political class can be trusted. Low trust in politicians from the entire ideological spectrum, be them from the government or the opposition may have influenced the tendencies of the current leaderless movement to distance from all political actors, if not from politics as such (Mandić and Vinokić 2025). Another interesting discovery of the ReEngage survey

was a high percentage of trust of the general public in experts and academic elites, who are considered trustworthy by more than 51% of the interviewees. Traditionally, the intellectuals and experts enjoyed a position of authority in Serbian society, however, this level of trust is here heightened, probably due to the vocal reaction of many academics to the fall of the canopy and the cooperation of many university professors with self-organized groups of student protesters. It could have been the outbreak of the university movement which subsequently contributed to the rise of general trust in scholars over the course of those first months of protests during which ReEngage survey was implemented (Hasa 2025).

Confirming the importance of informal connections in Serbia, our research detects a peculiar phenomenon. On the one hand, the hybrid regimes throughout recent Serbian history could count on informality in order to trigger democratic backsliding and to sidetrack legal and other institutional procedures. However, a ReEngage survey shows that a large percentage of Serbian citizens would either turn to relatives (81%) or friends (57%) in the case of the loss of income. Only 12% percent of interviewees believe that seeking help from the institutions would be an effort worth making, while another 5% percent would turn to their informal contacts within the local or national government. Simultaneously, a large portion of the participants in the survey declared that they would seek help both from the police and from friends and relatives if they were to become victims of a criminal offense: while 81% of all interviewees would indeed seek help from police, 59% reports that they would immediately contact relatives, 40% would rely on friends, while an astonishing 11% percent claims that their “connections” of criminal or governmental nature would also be a viable source of help.

Thus, it can be concluded that in perceptions of the Serbian public, informal sphere of social reality seems to provide protection and security. The same sphere, however, often dictates certain counter favours in return, which creates power dynamics that facilitate different forms of patron-client relationships. That is where hybrid regimes can find a substantial backing, planting on an already fertile grounds of informal mechanisms of reproducing power. However, if the regime fails to deliver its end of the bargain, its legitimacy is likely to diminish quickly.

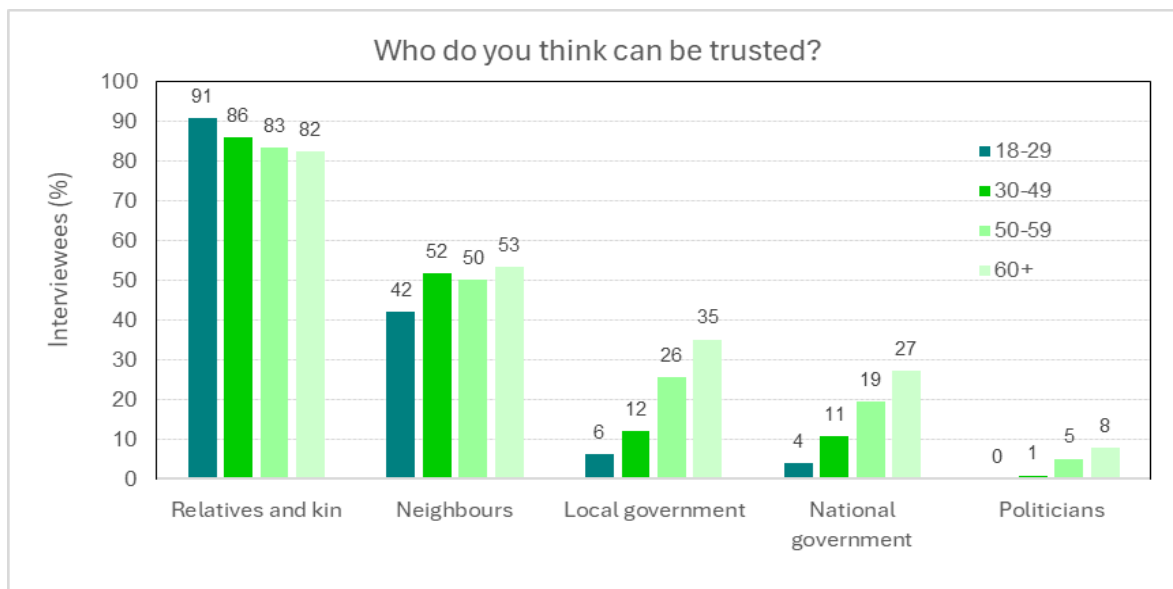


Diagram 1.4. Disparity of trust in Serbia among different age groups.

In the light of the recent outbreak of a Gen Z led mass movement, it is also important to highlight those findings of the ReEngage survey that could provide more insights into the way Serbian youth reflects on their political system, their hybrid government and experienced political reality. Trust of the young generations in politicians and political parties is at all-time low. Not even a single interviewee in 18-29 age group opted for politicians, governmental or oppositional, as an example of a trusted entity. Same age group demonstrated the lowest trust in national government (4%), local governments (6%), bureaucrats (10%), traditional media (6%) and religious leaders (19%). Somewhat surprisingly, the youngest interviewees showed the highest trust in family members among all other age groups, which may be linked to the fact that a large number of the young Serbs are financially dependent on their families (Mirić 2022). At the same time, it turns out that young people have lower trust in their neighbours than any other age group, which may be indicative of social atomization within local communities in Serbia (Radovanović and Vasiljević 2022). On the other hand, it should be noted that representatives of the same generation are now creating online spaces in which they act with high levels of tolerance and cooperativeness, which may lead to a conclusion that we are in fact witnessing a new social phenomenon (Maksimović and Popović 2025); Socialization of the young generations is gradually moving on

from their immediate social and cultural surroundings into online spaces, with an unprecedented 18% percent of youngest interviewees declaring social media as sources of trustworthy information. At the same time, outstanding inclusivity and cohesiveness of those new virtual, social environments may be a consequence of the fact that young Serbs are compensating for the feelings of belonging, solidarity and empathy, as well as social status equality, that they otherwise lack in their everyday life.

These findings are very relevant for the future of EU's democracy promotion efforts in Serbia, yet they are also ambiguous. Some scholars, as well as EU MEPs Irena Joveva and Helmut Brandstatter (Nikolaeva 2025), are assessing that Serbian Gen Z led protests are defending the same values that EU institutions advocate (Gomez 2025). However, results of the ReEngage survey are suggesting that younger generations of Serbian citizens are losing trust in state institutions, political parties, politicians, and perhaps, even in elections and other fundamental structures of a representative democracy. Such a loss of vertical trust can be detrimental for the EU's democracy promotion efforts, which aim to empower the citizens to take part in reforming the existing democratic apparatus and making it resilient to democratic backsliding, not to lose faith in the entire political system.

Another important insight arrived from the focus group about the rule of law that was staged at the end of the project tracing process. Interviewees who participated in those projects which were aimed at strengthening the rule of law in Serbia and funded by the EU institutions testify that they have encountered numerous Serbian citizens who are either detrimentally uninformed or, in some cases, misinformed about what the independent judiciary represents, how it is supposed to operate and how the citizens can help the institutions to fulfil their intended role. One of the interviewees assessed that such state of general lack of knowledge about basic concepts regarding the rule of law or personal experience of interaction with functional institutions, coupled with the low trust in institutions, creates an "enchanted circle" where both the trust in judiciary and understanding of it are bound to decline in general population. Other participant of the same focus group argued that the current rise of socio-political tensions makes it less likely for ordinary citizens to commit themselves to "sine ira et studio" learning about judiciary procedures or cooperating with institutions without a political bias that can only be expected to be further aggravated by the constantly accumulating frustration that many citizens feel about the current state of affairs in both judiciary and other institutions of the "captured" state.

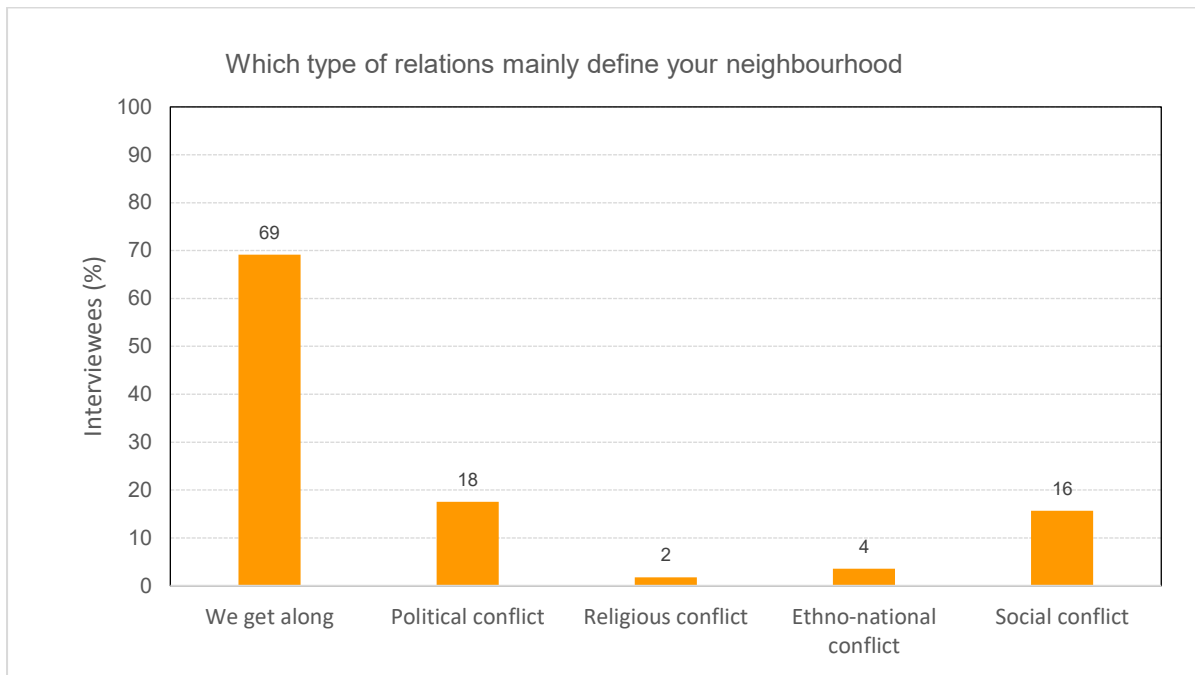


Diagram 2.1. Which type of relations Serbian citizens see as mainly defining their neighbourhood.

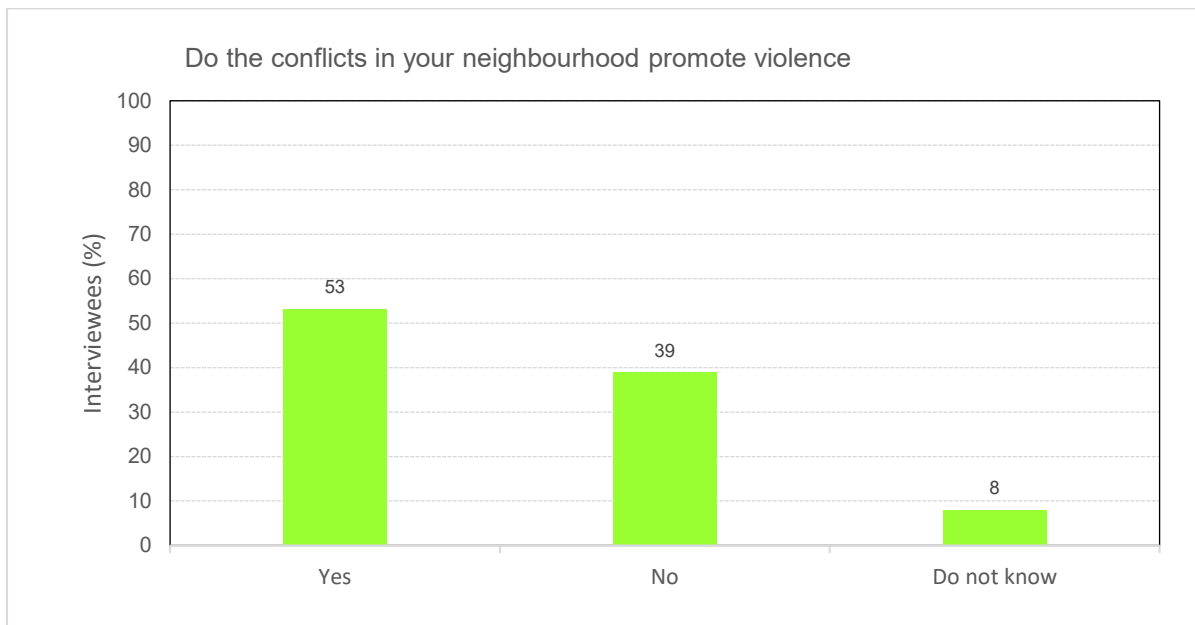


Diagram 2.2. How do Serbian citizens view the ongoing conflicts in their local communities in terms of promoting violence?

Results of the ReEngage survey may lead scholars to question the level of atomization experienced by Serbian society and its local communities after more than three decades of neoliberal economic reforms (see Putnam 2000). These results also show how, if at all, a society manages to preserve its cohesion in a current time

of immensely increased political tensions. More than 69% percent of the interviewees would describe their neighbourhood as a place where people get along, while out of those who find their neighbourhood to be a place of conflict, only 2% and 4% attribute those conflicts to religious differences or ethnic nationalism respectively. On the other hand, 18% percent of total interviewees find their closest social environment to be a place of a raging political conflict, with 16% defining social class inequalities either as the main or as one of the causes for the conflicts they perceive in their everyday lives. This finding alone testifies that Serbian citizens, aside from being politically passionate, still preserve a certain degree of consciousness about social class differences.

However, in regard to one of the few questions within the ReEngage survey that did not allow for interviewees to pick multiple options, the answers appear to be quite alarming from the perspective of contemplating the future of the EU's democracy promotion efforts. When asked to provide an answer to the question of whether or not they view the conflicts in their area as promoting violence, 53% stated that they do, 39% answered that they do not, while 8% answered that they don't know. This perception of violent tendencies could be linked to the recent developments in Serbia, and could reflect the rising tensions caused by the ongoing political crisis. Also, it could be hypothesized that at least a certain number of citizens is anticipating a violent outcome of the current turmoil. Such an outcome would be detrimental for the EU's democracy promotion efforts, as well as from the prospects of Serbia to restore and rebuild its own democratic institutions.

Geopolitical representations and preferences

Geopolitical representations can be defined as a way in which citizens perceive and interpret regional and global political actors. They can be influenced by the actions of foreign political actors, media narratives and propaganda, attitudes of local political elites, and numerous other factors which influence perceptions of common citizens about the geopolitical position of their country (Cap 2023). Contemporary Serbia displays a rather complex mixture of various geopolitical imaginaries and preferences. It is important to note that Serbian citizens share a certain perception about geopolitical significance of their country that is drastically out of balance with the country's current importance for the interests of the geopolitical actors who have economic or strategic stakes in the region. Numerous scholars are pointing out

that large portions of Serbian citizens tend to view their country with a highly inflated sense of self-importance, and portray it as an important regional, and even geopolitical player. Many display a tendency to fall back toward unrealistic perceptions about the perceived international influence of former Yugoslavia, projecting it into an imaginary picture of Serbia as a great regional power and basing their perceptions of contemporary reality on these premises (Mihaylov 2024). Playing on these “geopolitical imaginaries”, almost all of Serbia’s hybrid regimes tended to present their foreign policy dilemmas as an important part of a complex geopolitical balancing. In doing so, Serbian hybrid regimes are able to maintain the narrative that people should worry less about their current material reality or their discontent with authoritarian tendencies of the current regime. They should instead aspire to signal their moral virtue by “suffering for the good of the entire world”, as Serbian advocates for close cooperation with Russia and China stated on numerous occasions. This narrative is formed around an idea that citizens should tolerate authoritarian leaders, providing that foreign policies of those leaders are somehow beneficial for the “global game” in their preferred geopolitical imaginary (HCHRS 2023, Jović-Lazić 2023).

Serbia’s current president Aleksandar Vučić has on numerous occasions stated that he follows a foreign policy that can be defined as the “four pillars doctrine”, the pillars being the United States, the European Union, Russia and China (Ciborek 2021). This doctrine, deeply influenced by the socialist Yugoslavia’s position in the Cold War, relies on strengthening the international standing of the country through balancing between the global superpowers (Dimitrijević 2021). In that respect, Serbia stands out from all other candidate countries, which are unequivocally setting EU membership as a cornerstone of their foreign policy. In contrast, in order to achieve a greater degree of independence from the same international institutions they claim to be eager to participate in, Serbian governments simultaneously emphasizes their close relations with Russia and China (Jovanović 2023). While the hybrid regime is engaged in “geopolitical shopping”, in the sense of attempted bargaining with all the major geopolitical players in an attempt to secure support for its domestic governmental style, propaganda of the Serbian Progressive Party’s administration reduces country’s foreign relations to an image of personal relationships and dealings between Aleksandar Vučić and important world leaders, such are Donald Trump, Emanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, etc (Miljković 2025). That allows for the Serbian hybrid regime to keep sending a message to its citizens that they are in a state of permanent danger, caused by conflicting geopolitical interests in the region, and that the only

way to survive the geopolitical “great game” is to have a strongman in power, a capable negotiator and a strong leader able to personally protect the country’s vital interests, often even despite its own institutions.

Simultaneously, student and citizen assemblies, who are spearheading the movement against the government's authoritarian tendencies, are showing no apparent geopolitical preferences. In their proclamations and statements, student assemblies have emphasized that this silence is due to the need to preserve the internal unity of the movement instead of losing it to geopolitical leanings of its participants. They are also trying to avoid providing the government's propaganda machinery with material, as the regime media keep switching between presenting the movement as a “coloured revolution” backed by the US and/or EU, or as a nationalist uprising backed by Russia and/or China (EWB 2025). Some scholars have estimated that the “leaderless” movement is indeed moving away from government’s “four pillars doctrine”, not in a sense of defining clear geopolitical preferences, but rather through slowly drifting towards isolationism (Shormaz 2025). These tendencies may come from negation of government’s insistence on preserving the image of Serbia as highly engaged in international affairs. It is likelier, however, that this isolationism is connected to perception that all four major geopolitical players are, in different ways and to a different extent, enabling Vučić’s authoritarianism. At the same time, foreign companies that are continuously increasing their presence are becoming perceived as Serbian government’s partners in corruption affairs (Duvnjak and Bruni 2025). Also, unlike their Ukrainian or Georgian counterparts, Serbian leaderless protesters do not experience the pressure of living in a warzone or in an actual proximity to Russia, and are subsequently able to keep developing critical attitudes towards both Moscow and Brussels, while insisting on a need for Serbia to replace its presumed high level of international engagement with an introspective view on its own social and economic problems.

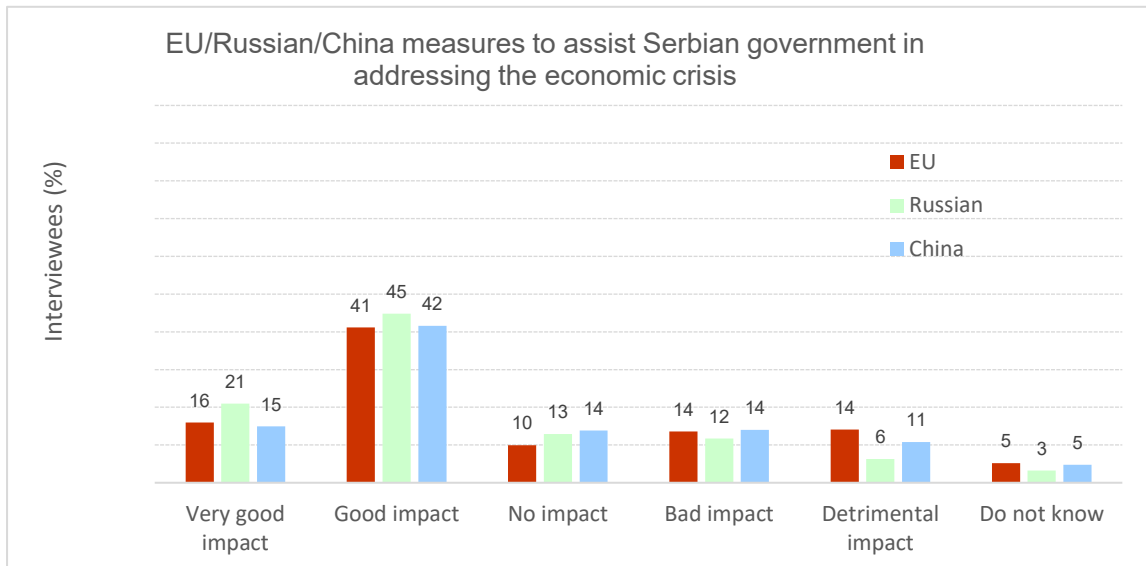


Diagram 2.1. How do Serbian citizens assess EU/Russian/Chinese measures to assist Serbian government in addressing economic crisis?

Results of ReEngage survey indicate that most Serbian citizens within our sample assess the EU's measures to assist the Serbian government in a time of economic crisis as either good or very good, but the result remains almost the same if the same group is asked about Russian or Chinese measures in the same regard. As much as 41% of all the interviewees assessed EU's measures to assist Serbia as having a good impact, with another 16% marking it a "very good impact". However, in the case of Russia and China, these percentages differ only slightly, with Russia taking the overall lead with 45% of citizens from the sample assessing its measures as "good", and a surprising 21% as "very good". On the other hand, the fact that Chinese measures managed to score 42% and 15% in the same categories respectively may indicate an increased awareness of the growing Chinese influence in the country as well as in the entire region. Even more importantly, only a small percentage of the sample assessed an impact of any one of the three superpowers as "bad" or "detrimental" (14% and 14% in the case of EU, 6% and 3% in the case of Russia, and 14% and 11% in the case of China). Subsequently, such results imply that the main characteristics of geopolitical preferences of Serbian citizens is not the openness for the possibility of their country expanding cooperation with all the important geopolitical actors, but the fact that a significant number of respondents are not passionately against cooperating with anyone.

Apart from the three out of four "great powers" that Serbian "four pillars doctrine" is focused on, we investigated the case of Turkey, which was included in the survey

as the rising regional power. Only 23% of the interviewees assessed Turkish measures as having a “good impact” and only 12% would describe that impact as “very good”, while an astonishing number of 37% believes Turkey’s actions to have no impact at all, and another 10% claiming that they do not know what impact are they asked to judge. Consequently, it can be concluded that Turkey’s role as an important regional player is largely ignored by large segments of Serbian citizens. There are numerous potential explanations for that outcome. Apart from the obvious “historical” animosities, there is also the aforementioned understanding among a large number of Serbian citizens that their country is regionally, if not globally very important. This makes Istanbul far less relevant in their geopolitical imaginary than it is in reality. For in such a geopolitical imaginary, Belgrade itself is important enough to worry only about the highest authorities in Moscow, Washington, Brussels or Beijing.

Concerning the attitudes of Serbian citizens towards the perceived help from EU, Russia and China, it seems that opinions do not significantly differ between the lowest and the highest income groups of the interviewees. For example, both 23% of those with income below 300 EUR and 23% of those who assess their own monthly income to be higher than 2000e are judging the impact caused by EU efforts to assist the Serbian government in the time of crisis as detrimental. On the other hand, most favourable ratings of the EU engagement in that regard comes from the middle and upper middle class, whose income ranges from 300 to 999 EUR. In this batch, 13% judges the EU's impact as “very good” and 38 as “good”, while out of those who have their income in range from 1000 to 2000e, 22% rates EU’s engagement as “very good” and 48% as “good”. In the case of Russian impact, the results are completely reversed: it is the very poor and the very rich who give the highest rating to Russian engagement in Serbia, while the middle and upper middle class of Serbian citizens remains unconvinced.

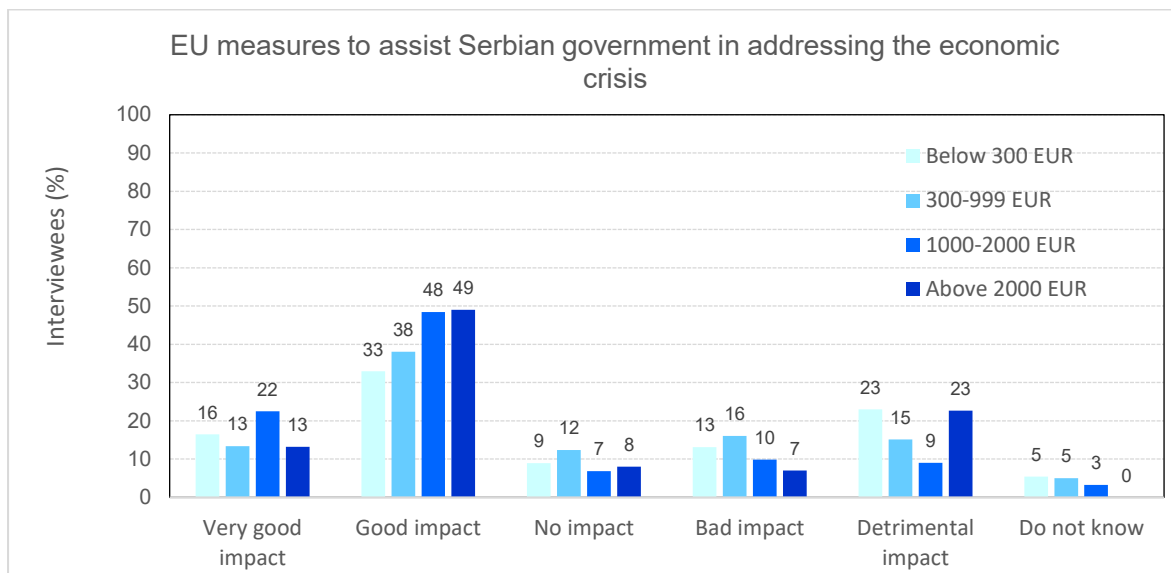


Diagram 2.2. Class stratification of the respondents who were asked to judge EU’s efforts in providing aid to Serbia in the times of economic crisis.

As it turns out, political affiliation of the interviewees is an important factor when determining their stances on the impact of the measures applied by foreign actors in order to help Serbia in a time of economic crisis. A significant percentage of those who identify as liberals (45%) and social-democrats (23%) assessed the EU’s efforts as having a “very good impact”, while a vast majority of conservatives (26%), or right-wing (45%) assessed it as “very bad”. When it comes to support for Russia, on the other hand, the numbers are almost the same, but in reverse – liberals and social-democrats largely remain critical about Russian efforts to help Serbia, while conservatives and those who identify as right-wing of the political spectrum are enthusiastically supportive of Russian aid.

Aside from a typical division between the “left” and “right” that support neoliberal economic model but argue over social and cultural norms or about the questions regarding human rights, Serbia has a large percentage of people who still identify as socialist or communist. They are likely to put the class inequalities above all other issues, believing that all other forms of repression originate from material reality, not from a value system. In regard to socialist and communist elements among Serbian citizens, we can discover a split among those who assess EU’s efforts as being “good” (34% and 25% respectfully) and “detrimental” (24% and 42%). These results signal that not even Serbian communists and socialists are united in their geopolitical preferences. While some of them appear to be even more enthusiastic towards cooperation with the Western capitalist centres than with (nominally) communist Chinese ones. Another interesting “postmodern” anomaly which

actually has its historical roots is represented by an astonishing 59% of royalists/monarchists who judge Russia's measures as "good" and another 39% who would describe them as "very good". Thus, it appears as though modern day monarchists are much closer to those who openly identify themselves as conservatives or right wing in their geopolitical preferences than it was the case with their historical forefathers, who used to count on the support of the "collective" West during the Cold War era, with majority of them being educated in Western Europe and often showing nothing but a disdain for the perceived "russophilia" of the lower social classes, back then presumed to be connected with ideologically motivated sympathies towards Eastern Bloc. However, it needs to be taken into account that the largest number of interviewees (136) identified themselves as moderates, and that overall, all the three out of four major geopolitical actors received a similar average "grade" of their perceived measures to help Serbia during the time of economic crisis.

During the focus group about the freedom of media, participants of the Pulse of Europe project pointed out that one of the aspects of the EU's funded projects in Serbia that they found particularly useful was the opportunity to travel and to visit other European countries. Aside from knowledge about the practices that most EU member states use to protect the freedom of media, they also brought home valuable experiences from other countries on the EU's periphery, where journalists face pressures from the authoritarian leaders, informal structures of power and hybrid regimes engaged in democratic backsliding. However, a significant number of our interviewees found the current situation with freedom of media in Serbia to be a "case for itself", that follows global trends only in certain aspects. Unlike in the cases of Ukrainian, Georgian, Hungarian, Bulgarian or Turkish mass movements against democratic backsliding, it seems as though supporters of the Serbian "leaderless" movement don't trust those media companies that are perceived as being endorsed by the EU in one way or another as much as that they don't trust Russian media companies that operate in their country.

In sum, Serbian citizens in general appear to harbour almost equal levels of trust, or rather, distrust, towards all the major geopolitical actors. In a hypothetical scenario in which there is a regime change in Serbia, and the new government starts radically shifting from the "four pillars" doctrine towards fostering close cooperation with EU and Russia, US or China, it is far from certain that such a policy would find a large number of supporters, but could also face significant opposition from the population. Results of the ReEngage survey indicate that on the one hand Serbian

citizens live in a geopolitically sharply polarized society, but at the same time shows a growing indifference toward any and all geopolitical preferences. Therefore, future developments of geopolitical preferences in Serbia are likely to be influenced by actions and attitudes of geopolitical actors toward its current internal political crisis.

Representations and perceptions of the EU and democracy promotion assistance

Numerous new insights appeared over the course of discussions held during the focus group sessions which analysed the projects related to combating discrimination and hate speech in Serbia. Almost all participants agree that EU's assistance in this regard was extremely valuable, but not nearly as extensive as it would need to be in order for a significant progress to be achieved. However, most discussants are considering such an outcome to be a consequence of an unfortunate misunderstanding; EU institutions continuously expect to find cooperative partners in institutions captured by a hybrid regime, while those institutions are continuously placating them with symbolic shows of effort that are rarely related to the actual progress that could be witnessed in social and political reality of the country. Our interviewees were worried that consequently, this phenomenon reflects badly on the average citizen's perception of the EU's efforts to provide assistance, as even those who desire to see changes in the overall state of human rights and legislative efforts to protect citizen's dignity are now beginning to view EU institutions as more or less willing enablers of corruption and inefficiency within their own captured state institutions.

Results of the ReEngage survey indicate that Serbian citizens still possess rather high level of awareness about the EU's importance for Serbia, despite experiencing years, if not decades of democratic backsliding, influx of Russian and Chinese influence, as well as periodical populist attempts by some domestic elites to paint the path of EU integrations as historically archaic and surpassed. Almost 70% of the interviewees responded that they regard the EU as important for the Serbian economy. Of course, neither ordinary citizens nor even experts can be expected to assess the share of each EU member state in Serbian foreign exchange, or the exact number of foreign direct investments coming from EU and elsewhere. The same

goes for the amount of loan grants and projects in Serbia financed by the EU institutions. Interestingly, the EU delegation does not do much in order to raise awareness about the EU's investments in Serbia.

Still, the answers indicate that Serbian citizens remain somewhat realistic in their judgment of their country's economic reality, regardless of their geopolitical leanings and preferences. More than 32% of the interviews acknowledge that the EU is important for Serbian defence, which is significant, given the governmental propaganda efforts to convince them in the military strength and independence of their own army. Even more important for assessing the outcome of the future EU democracy promotion efforts are those percentages that are indicating awareness of the EU's importance for democracy and for the rule of law: more than 52% of respondents answered that EU is important for maintaining democracy, and 50% views the EU as equally important for the rule of law. This appears to be a rather significant insight at a time when the entire county is deeply shaken by the rise of a leaderless movement which champions rule of law and defending democracy against authoritarianism. This could imply that it is not too late for EU institutions and Serbian leaderless movement to find common ground, as it eventually happened in the cases of similar movements in Georgia, Ukraine, Turkey and Hungary.

However, there is also a significant percentage of those citizens who believe that cooperation with the EU is detrimental for Serbia. That percentage seems to only slightly differ across all categories in which Serbian citizens consider EU's influence to be detrimental: 42% believes EU to be detrimental for Serbia's security, 39% for democracy, another 38% for the rule of law and just below 30% for its economy. Similarity of these numbers indicates that there is a well-defined group of respondents (30-40%) that is continuously marking anything EU-related as "detrimental" for Serbia.

There could be multiple factors influencing such perception of the EU - democratic backsliding, governmental propaganda directed against the EU, widespread belief that EU is on the losing end of the new geopolitical power shift, a gradual change of geopolitical preferences, or simply a loss of trust in the path of European integrations after the years of stalling. Other factors which may contribute to erosion of enthusiasm towards cooperation with the EU could be a widespread belief that the EU institutions have somehow provided a certain form of a silent support for authoritarian tendencies of Vučić's hybrid regime (Imeri 2025). For example, EU flags began to disappear from the ongoing Serbian protests after the reception of Serbian protesting students in Brussels and Strasbourg failed to meet the

expectations of protesters (Buras and Tcherneva 2025). Another important factor that seems to be deepening the distance between EU institutions and Serbian protesters arrives from differences in understanding of rethorics and terminology: whenever Ursula von der Leyen expressed concern about corruption affairs surrounding the Novi Sad accident of 2024, she did so in a diplomatic language deprived of direct and harsh terms. To an average Serbian protester, such terminology tends to sound like a silent endorsement of Vučić (Baccini 2025, Stanković 2025). Yet another misunderstanding arises from the fact that some citizens are not well informed about roles and internal complexity of various EU institutions, and thus tend to view EU policies and attitudes as considerably more integrated than they actually are. It seems as though, despite of all the efforts and means invested into EU's democracy promotion efforts, EU funded projects in Serbia did not really achieve the role of informing the public what is EU and how its institutions work.

This was confirmed during the project tracing part of the research in Serbia. Participants of the focus groups who took part in implementation of the two chosen projects, Pulse of Europe and Media Europe, expressed concerns about numerous bureaucratic, legislative and practical obstacles that prevented them from realizing these projects to a desired effect. Although they did manage to achieve the stated project goals, most of the interviews were displeased with not being able to take their plans one or more steps further, or to organize actions and activities which would, according to their own estimates, have a potential of yielding results beyond merely filling out the given objective quotas and deliverables. These strains were arriving both from Serbia's national legislation and the EU implementation practices, but also revolved around those problems that are hardest to fix through legislative procedures: lack of imagination, perceived indifference and even incompetence. These were the same problems that the Serbian project tracing team encountered when trying to get answers and interviews from numerous scholars, government officials and representatives of various industries.

Interesting results came from analysing the transcripts of the focus groups and interviews with the people involved with the media projects: Serbia is truly a country that suffers from a continuous erosion in freedom of the media. Yet, despite frequent interventions from the EU institutions, it seems as though nothing can stop the downward spiral of state control and self-imposed censorship. Most journalists who took part in this research agree that EU efforts against democratic backsliding in regard to freedom of the media often end up in delicate warnings directed towards

the Serbian government, which remains ignored. In some cases, Vučić's administration was also known to respond to such criticism with a wave of propaganda directed against the EU, only to stand down and apologize after a performative "show of force". Another problem arises stems the fact that the Serbian regime is actively building its own "loyalist" civil society, with academic institutions, non-governmental organization, human rights activists and allegedly "free" media companies. These institutions and individuals are then often seen applying for the same EU funded projects that are meant for democratic promotion and for countering attempts of authoritarian leaders to suppress the freedom of press and media.

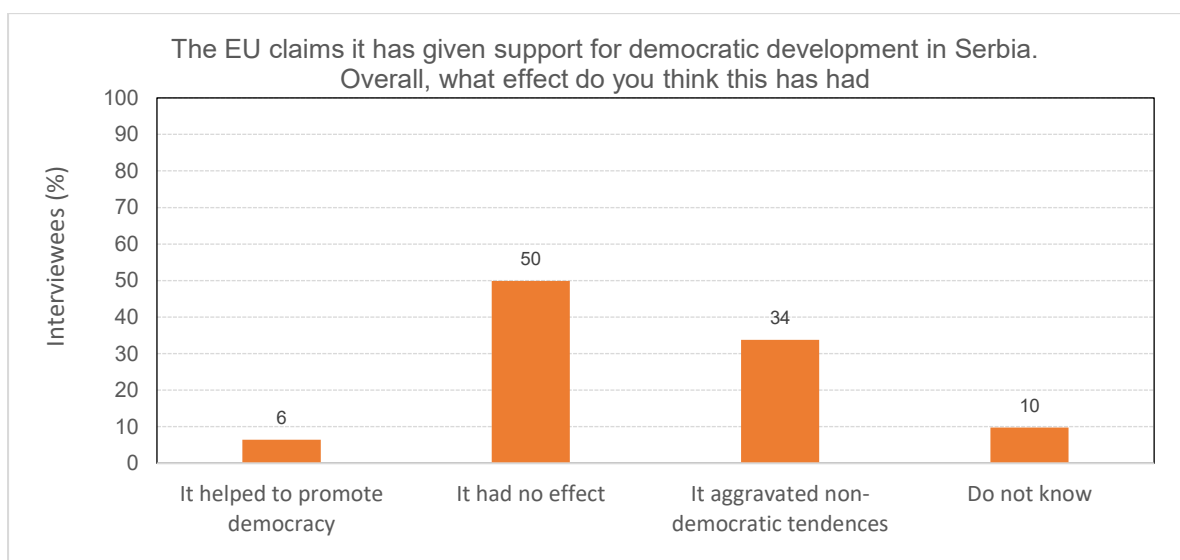


Diagram 4.1. What do Serbian citizens think about the EU's support of democratic development in Serbia?

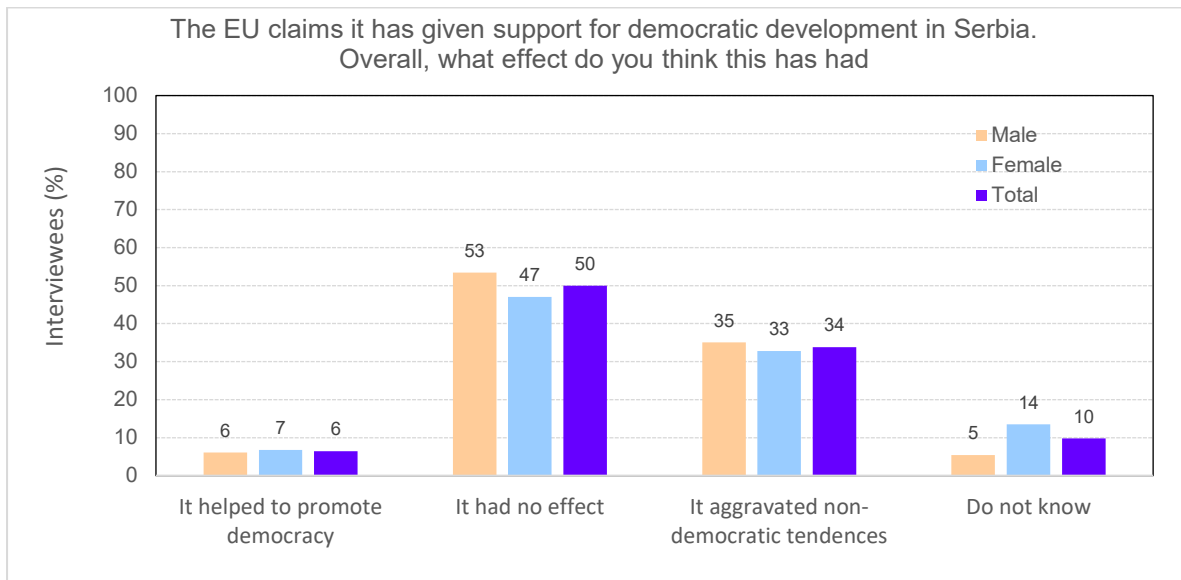


Diagram 4.2. How do Serbian citizens assess EU’s democratic promotion efforts in correlation with their gender?

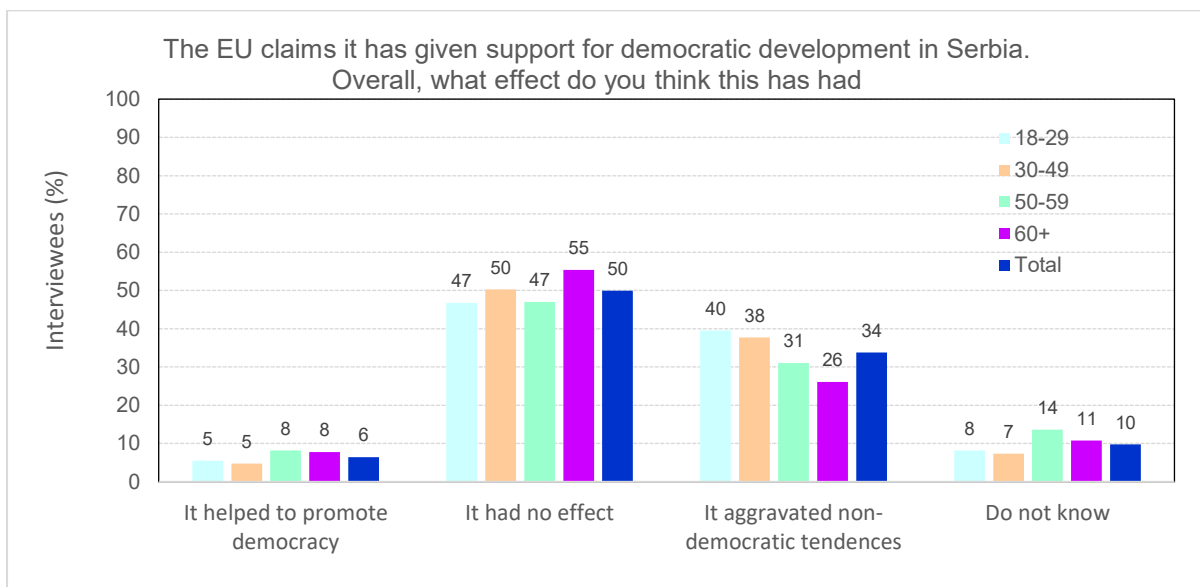


Diagram 4.3. Discrepancy in perceptions of EU’s democratic promotion efforts among different age groups.

When discussing the long-term impact of the EU's democratic promotion efforts, it is necessary to draw attention to a surprising way most Serbian citizens answered the question "in general, do you think EU support to Serbia is well placed?". Almost 69% of citizens answered "no, it is not", while another 20% answered that they don't know, leaving only about 11% of Serbian citizens who believe EU support to Serbia is well placed. However, it needs to be taken into account that among those who believe that EU support to Serbia is not well placed, there is at least a certain percentage of those who believe that Serbia does not deserve support in its current state. More importantly, these results seem to indicate that even those who are in favour of EU integrations and who support EU's democracy promotion efforts in Serbia have a problem with perceived recipients of the EU support. A significant number of critics of the current regime are also convinced that the EU is passively contributing to the resilience of the informal mechanisms of governance in Serbia through legitimizing its current political system. On the other hand, there are those who question the viability of those projects, organizations and institutions in Serbia that are receiving support from the EU, even among those who are not objecting to the EU investing resources and efforts in Serbia. All of those complaints seem to be echoed in one of the crucial survey questions - when we look into how Serbian citizens answered the question of whether or not the EU contributed towards democratic development in Serbia. As much as 50% of the respondents answered that EU efforts in that regard had no effect, while only 6% of the interviewees answered that they find EU's engagement helpful for promoting democracy in Serbia. Very interestingly, a surprising 34% of respondents feel that the EU's investments in democracy promotion in Serbia is actually counterproductive. They answered that, in their perceptions, the EU has only managed to aggravate non-democratic tendencies in Serbia. Summing up the research results on EU democracy promotion in Serbia, it is safe to assume that a substantial percentage of the citizens who view EU's engagement counterproductive for Serbian democracy are those who are critical of the current hybrid regime's democratic backsliding, but view the EU as an enabler of the regime's authoritarian tendencies.

In light of generational breakdown of respondents, the most alarming finding of the ReEngage social survey is the fact that a larger percentage of Serbian citizens under the age of 29 is sceptical about the effects of EU's democracy promotion efforts. A surprising 47% of Serbian Gen Z answered that they think that EU's effort to promote democracy in Serbia has no effect, while another 40% answered that EU engagement has strengthened non-democratic tendencies. A surprising percentage of Gen Z respondents who have low trust in the EU and its institutions is immediately

followed by their millennial counterparts, as 38% of those aged between 30 and 49 agree that EU's democracy promotion so far only yielded counterproductive results. Consequently, it can be concluded that the EU's attempts to promote democracy in Serbia are gradually losing trust of the youngest generations.

This development is alarming on several levels. It challenges an unspoken, but widespread assumption, that euro-scepticism is a residual trait of the older generation, whereas it is clearly on the rise among the generations which are expected to define Serbian geopolitical leaning in the foreseeable future. Since exactly this generational cohort is currently most active in spearheading the leaderless movement against democratic backsliding of Serbia's hybrid regime, it could as well be that absence of unequivocal EU support for their efforts to combat corruption and reclaim institutions captured by Vucic's oligarchy is alienating the youth from EU. It could also be the case that disappointment with the EU is triggered exactly by high expectations it raised in these respects. Lastly, it could also be that recent developments have completely diminished vertical trust, both in national and international institutions.

Conclusion: Studying social cohesion, trust and EU democracy portion in a turmoil

We learned the hard way from our last report about hybrid regimes and hybridity in the Western Balkans (Mishkova, Hide, Filipović, Tučalo, Repovac-Nikšić and Petrović 2024) that the topic of our interest remains a moving target, hence we will continue to monitor important developments and restrain from definitive conclusions, as the situation remains in flux. However, many interim conclusions stem from observing Serbian society during one of its politically and socially most eventful years. On the face of it, the entire landscape of vertical and horizontal trust went through a tectonic shift during 2025, significantly affecting social cohesion and creating qualitatively new conditions for democracy promotion efforts. Naturally, it is difficult to say now which of those changes are overemphasized in the heat of the moment, and which ones will have deep and long-range effect. However, given that it also depends on the actions taken by domestic and foreign actors during this period of turmoil, some pointers are worth underscoring here.

ReEngage survey, reinforced by our participant observation, indicate strongly that vertical trust in Serbia is nosediving. On the face of it, this seems to be a challenge mostly to the hybrid regime of Aleksandar Vučić and the clientelist network of his Serbian Progressive Party. However, this drop has a strong generational aspect and is not necessarily delegitimizing only the government. Since the students have been, and still are, in the forefront of the demonstrations, it seems that the voice of this generation challenges not only Vučić, but also his opposition and party politics as such. Furthermore, the trust in domestic institutions is clearly diminished, but is not necessarily supplemented by the trust in international organizations or foreign factors. Mass protests which brought Slobodan Milosevic down were clearly supported from the West and embraced by the protesters as such. These current protests are conspicuously silent about their geopolitical leanings, pointing out to a conclusion that vertical trust in European institutions is also diminished, especially among the younger generation.

Changes in horizontal trust are more subtle and difficult to catch, but here again the generational aspect prevails. As the older generation is mostly informed through traditional or electronic media, the younger one creates their own systems of communication, relying almost solely on social networks of different kinds. It is likely that in this case lack of vertical trust is not supplemented by increased trust in the family, neighbourhood, schools etc, but is directed toward the peers, especially among the protesters, whose successes made them growingly self-aware. It is also very interesting that the protests among the citizenry, are not just heavily aligned with the student protests, but are actually waiting for their cue, which is a curious reversal in a society in which traditional and patriarchal norms strongly favoured the older generation as a source of information, guidance and trust.

It comes as no surprise that social cohesion cracks under these pressures. Namely, as the protests are continuing and the elections are nowhere in sight, both sides are 'circling their wagons' and entrenching through heavy rhetoric. The regime and its supporters, which are not negligible in numbers, are perceiving the protestors as a blood-thirsty minority of destroyers of Serbia. Likewise, the protesters see the regime as a destructive force and they want to get rid of it altogether, either institutionally or on the street, if institutions turn out not to provide an adequate channel for the overthrow of the government and the prosecution of the regime top each alone, assumed to be neck deep corrupt. So, cohesion among these two polarized groups is significant, but is built on viewing political opponents as a dangerous enemy. In that respect, overall social cohesion suffers tremendously, the

country occasionally seems to be at the brink of very serious unrests, and it is a beautiful miracle that there were no mortalities within the past year, given such a heavily charged atmosphere.

What does it all mean for the EU and its democracy promotion agenda? To our best assessment, it is currently on a crossroad which might have long-term consequences. While Aleksandar Vučić bets that this crisis will blow over, the protestors hope for an increasing momentum that would lead to his downfall. As neither happened for over a year, foreign factors seem to be at a loss in placing their bets. Throughout the year the EU was carefully wording its criticism of Serbian democratic backsliding, especially in bilateral meetings between Ursula van der Layen and Aleksandar Vučić. On the other hand, a score of EU parliamentarians took a strong stance supporting the students. However, some of the European leaders, notably Viktor Orban, are very voiceful in their support for Vučić. Frequently not understanding that Europe does not speak with one voice, protests are listening to these confusing signals and trying to decipher them, but it is indeed difficult to say whether the EU is supportive toward Vučić's stabilocracy, which is clearly not stable any more, or whether it stands behind its fundamental rights, most of which are on the list of demands of the protesters.

Making a clear stance while the situation is in flux would definitely create better preconditions for democracy promotion. Actually, there are even signs that this is coming to pass. The EC's annual progress report from November 2025 was explicitly detecting backsliding in the area of fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and rule of law (EC, 2025). The manoeuvring space for Vučić toward the EU seems to be shrinking. For the first time ever, he decided that neither he nor any other Serbian official will attend the December 2025 annual EU-Western Balkans Summit (Politico, 2025). It is getting more and more difficult for the regime to sit on several geopolitical chairs, as the US is at the same time banishing Russian investments from Serbia, which would create havoc in the area energetics and weakening the Vučić regime significantly. In such circumstances, it is becoming growingly difficult for the EU to conceptualize and implement a coherent democratic promotion strategy without recognizing Vučić's reign for what it is - a hybrid regime in turmoil, if not decay.

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ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).