

Keeping Focus: Reporting developments in Serbia

Tensions in Serbia Continues as the Government Struggles With US Sanctions and Resorts to Violence in Local Elections

Key points:

- ⊕ 1 November anniversary held peacefully, but tensions and continued near the “Ćacilend” pro-government camp in Belgrade
- ⊕ Serbia’s economy seriously threatened as solution for the US-sanctioned Russia-owned Serbian Oil Company (NIS) remains distant
- ⊕ The appointment of REM Council members – necessary for moving EU integration forward – not fully implemented
- ⊕ Ruling parties achieve a pyrrhic victory after narrowly winning local elections in 3 municipalities on 30 November marred by violence

Multiple incidents around “Ćacilend”

A commemorative protest took place on 1 November 2025 in Novi Sad to mark the first anniversary of the tragedy that claimed 16 lives and triggered the largest wave of protests in Serbia’s recent history, as well as the formation of a student movement that has since evolved into a political actor.

On the anniversary, students stated that their demands for justice had not been met. One year after the tragedy, an indictment filed by the prosecution against public officials for endangering public safety has still not been confirmed by the court. The gathering itself was one of the largest in the city’s history.

While 1 November was peaceful, tensions rose again in the following days. Dijana Hrka, the mother of Stefan Hrka, one of the victims of the railway station collapse, gave a speech at the commemorative event in Novi Sad, announcing that she would begin a hunger strike the next day. She demanded that those responsible for the collapse be brought to justice, that illegally arrested students be released, and that an early parliamentary election be called, something the student movement had already demanded in May.



Entrance area near the National Assembly in Belgrade, where the Čacilend camp has been stationed since March 2025. Photo - FoNet.

Hrka carried out her hunger strike in front of a camp of ruling party supporters, known as “Čacilend”, which has stood outside the National Assembly of Serbia since March. Members of the ruling party and pro-government media initially responded harshly, insulting Hrka and playing music at her from within “Čacilend”.

This provoked outrage among parts of the public and sparked a series of gatherings in support of Hrka, one of which included people throwing objects at each other from both sides of the camp. Several days later, the ruling party shifted its tone: personal attacks on Hrka stopped, and President Aleksandar Vučić publicly called on her to end her hunger strike. On 17 November, Hrka announced that she would end the strike but would remain in a tent in front of the National Assembly.

On 5 November, the investigative journalism network KRIK published a database of individuals seen in “Čacilend” camp (named after the nickname “ćaci” that the student movement gave to the ruling party supporters). According to KRIK’s database, at least 16 people who had been charged with or convicted of serious crimes – including murder – had been seen at the camp in recent months.



Aerial view of the commemorative protest in Novi Sad, 1 November 2025. Photo - Arhiv javnih skupova / Facebook.

The camp was originally set up in front of the Presidency by students close to the ruling party who opposed the then-ongoing university blockades. However, not only was the camp not removed once the blockades ended, it expanded to the area in front of the National Assembly, permanently blocking one of the main streets in the city center. The ruling party has not explained why it maintains the camp after the blockades ended. Public interpretations mostly point to the party’s unwillingness to cede the space in front of the parliament, where future protests could take place.

Tensions around “Čacilend” escalated again in the last week of November, when opposition MPs demanded free access to the parliament through the front entrance, claiming it was obstructed by the camp. On 26 November, they removed one of the fences and walked to the entrance of the parliament, where they were assaulted and verbally attacked by a group of ruling party supporters, with the situation coming close to physical violence. In the days following the incident, MPs continued to enter the parliament through the same route, where they were routinely jeered and, in some cases, even threatened by people in “Čacilend”.

Mounting opposition to the construction project of Jared Kushner’s company

On 7 November, the ruling majority adopted a special law (“lex specialis”) that allows the demolition of the Army General Staff Building in Belgrade, a prominent architectural landmark. The General Staff was heavily damaged during the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and, in the 2000s, it was declared a cultural landmark by the Government of Serbia. That status has now been repealed.

The area around the General Staff Building, according to a contract which was signed non-transparently in 2024, will be leased to an investment company Atlantic Incubation Partners LLC led by Jared Kushner, the son-in-law of American President Donald Trump. The company is supposed to build an apartment complex, luxury hotels and a small memorial to the NATO bombing on the site. The ruling party members lauded the deal as a way of “improving the relations between Serbia and the United States” and as an economic opportunity for the country.

The plan triggered strong negative reactions from large parts of the public, with many arguing that the General Staff Building should be renovated rather than demolished. A more nationalist segment of the opposition criticized the symbolic implications of awarding the project to a company from the United States. The parliamentary opposition, as well as the student movement, voiced their objections to the plan, and opposition parties filed

a complaint with the Constitutional Court, requesting a review of the constitutionality of the special law.

Offensive of the ruling party against the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime

In addition to the potential political consequences of the Army General Staff contract, the case has also raised the issue of possible criminal responsibility on the part of the Minister of Culture and high-ranking member of the ruling party, Nikola Selaković. The clash between the ruling party and the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime (TOK) over this matter reached dramatic proportions in November.

In November 2024, the Government of Serbia adopted a decision removing the General Staff Buildings from the register of cultural properties. However, TOK subsequently charged three public officials responsible for cultural monuments with abuse of office, on suspicion of forging a document proposing the revocation of the buildings' cultural heritage status.

According to the suspects' testimonies, it was Minister Selaković who pressured them into committing these acts. At the end of November 2025, media reported that Selaković, who was confirmed as a suspect in the case, refused to appear before TOK for questioning – a decision described as scandalous by legal commentators.

After years of relative inactivity despite numerous reports of potential criminal wrongdoing by members of the ruling parties, TOK intensified its work in recent months. In August, it charged and ordered the arrest of two former SNS ministers for abuse of office and damaging the Serbian budget by at least 115 million US dollars in connection with the reconstruction of the Hungarian–Serbian railway line, part of which is the collapsed Novi Sad railway station. This case, together with the General Staff case, represents the most serious set of legal proceedings initiated against high-ranking members of the ruling party since 2012.

The outcomes of these cases, however, remain uncertain, as the ruling party has recently floated the possibility of restructuring TOK and placing it under the authority of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, which is widely regarded as loyal to the SNS. The proposed legal changes have not yet been submitted to parliament.

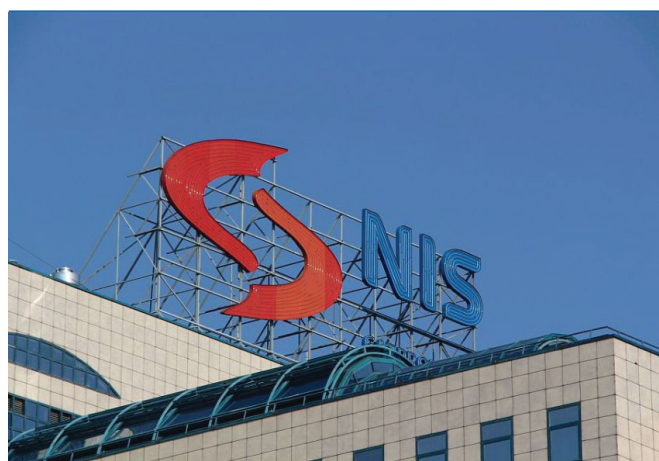
Meanwhile, pro-government media have intensified their campaign against TOK, with high-ranking public figures – including President Vučić – attacking the institution and alleging that it is part of a foreign plot against Serbia. In two separate public statements – highly unusual for the Serbian judiciary – TOK condemned these comments as an attack on its independence.

Government delays actions on NIS as the danger to energy supply grows

Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS) ended up on the United States' sanctions list at the start of this year due to the Russian majority ownership stake in the company, which dates back to 2008. The sanctions came into effect at the start of October, forcing Serbia to start spending its oil reserves and have brought NIS's oil refinery, which supplies the majority of the country's market, on a verge of a shutdown.

Russian owners of NIS have so far not sold their share in the company, while Serbian Government has not decided to nationalize the company. There are different interpretations for the behaviour of Serbia, which include unpopularity of being seen as breaking away from Russia, as well as Russian leverage in a form of a long-term gas supply contract with is yet to be negotiated. However, the urgency to solve the problem increases as the weeks pass by without an operational license for NIS, which prevents it from receiving supplies.

Speculations about potential buyers of Russian share in NIS include Hungarian company MOL and ADNOC, a company from United Arab Emirates. As of 1 December, there has been no formal confirmation of an agreement to transfer the ownership. On 25 November, President Vučić announced he would give the Russian side 50 days to resolve the problem, after which Serbia will, according to him, initiate a management takeover of the company, with a generous compensation to Russia. On that day, he also asked for the United States to grant NIS an operating license until the deals relating to ownership have been finalized. As of 1 December, there has been no green light from the US.



NIS headquarters in Belgrade. Photo - FoNet / 021.rs.

Electoral reform on paper, collapse of electoral conditions in practice

Following recent stronger criticism from Brussels and other state capitals, the authorities also made steps to formally implement long-overdue reforms, some of which are conditions for the release of funding under the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

On 9 November, the parliament adopted a new Law on the Unified Voter Register. The law should enable a full revision of the voter register, the accuracy of which remains highly controversial. The implementation of the law is still pending and many actors who are expected to participate in it, including opposition and civil society actors, are sceptical of the government's genuine willingness to reform.

The National Assembly also elected, more than a year after the legal deadline, eight out of nine members of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). The election of the remaining member was blocked by the ruling majority, which denied a majority vote to all nominees.



*A polling station in Negotin on 30 November 2025.
Photo - FoNet.*

According to observers, if the ninth member had been elected from among the nominated candidates, the REM Council would have had a 5-4 majority independent of the ruling party. They accused the ruling majority of attempting to maintain control over the country's media regulator, and four independent members announced that they would resign in protest. Their resignations have not yet been formally submitted, as it appears they are waiting for the repeat vote on the ninth candidate.

Nevertheless, a growing gap persists between the formal implementation of reforms and the reality on the ground. While the government continues to assure the EU that it will implement the OSCE/ODIHR electoral recommendations, only one of which is the revision of the voter register, electoral conditions in practice continue to visibly deteriorate.

Local elections held on 30 November in three small municipalities featured numerous reported irregularities, including vote buying and abuse of public resources, as well as serious violence and intimidation targeting observers and participants. Although the ruling coalition retained control of the municipalities considered their strongholds, the drop in their support compared to previous election cycles was met with optimism by opposition actors, including the student movement.

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