



Keeping Focus: Reporting developments in Serbia

Pressure from the EU mounts as the Serbian government attempts to further curtail judicial independence

Overall assessment:

- ⊕ The adoption of controversial amendments hindering judicial independence provokes protests and criticism from the European Commission
- ⊕ The European Parliament mission to Serbia exposes worrying developments and is met with anti-EU campaign by the government
- ⊕ The government formed a new coordination body for EU accession, aiming to show devotion to the process at the time of increasing criticism by the European Commission
- ⊕ The dismissal of professor Jelena Kleut highlights pressures and revanchism against the academic community

Continued pressure on the academic community – the case of Jelena Kleut

Political, financial and administrative pressure on the academic community has intensified over the past year. The strong support by universities to the student protests in Serbia since November 2024 has been followed by sustained measures of pressure from the executive branch.

The most recent case involving Jelena Kleut, a professor at the University of Novi Sad, has once again brought to the fore concerns about political retaliation against members of the academic community.

The dismissal of [Jelena Kleut](#), an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Novi Sad, has prompted criticism from segments of the public and accusations that the move sets a troubling precedent for the university sector.

Critics argue that the termination of her employment was a consequence of her public support for student blockades and protests. She was formally served with a notice of dismissal on 21 January 2026.

The dispute over Professor Kleut's status dates back to November 2025, when the Senate of the University of Novi Sad declined to appoint her to the rank of full professor,

despite positive assessments by all preceding bodies, including the Expert Council for the Humanities, which had determined that she met all formal criteria.



Professor Jelena Kleut; Photo: FoNet

The stated reason was a subsequent objection that her monograph had not been verified by the relevant academic board. According to colleagues, however, such verification is required for researchers employed at institutes, not at faculties.

Professor Kleut's appeal against the decision was rejected by an enlarged composition of the University Senate on 15 January, following a secret vote and without a detailed explanation. Proceedings have since been initiated before the Administrative Court seeking annulment of the Senate's decision and her reinstatement, alongside parallel legal actions alleging violations of her labour rights.

Students of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad organised protests and called for an indefinite boycott of classes. Speakers at the rally argued that the case reflects an attempt to establish mechanisms for sanctioning public engagement and warned that it raises broader concerns about academic freedom. In the days that followed, students and professors at several faculties in Belgrade joined solidarity protests.

Kleut has [cautioned](#) that her case may signal the beginning of a dangerous practice whereby academics who speak out publicly and criticise the authorities could be removed from their positions.

She maintains that university regulations were violated and has announced that she will pursue all available legal remedies. According to her, some colleagues who have also taken public positions are already expressing concern that their own promotion reports may soon be reviewed by what she described as "politicised bodies."

Continued pressure on the judiciary – adoption of the so-called “Mrdić laws”

On 28 January, the National Assembly adopted a package of amendments to five judicial laws at the initiative of Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) MP Uglješa Mrdić. The laws were passed under an urgent procedure, without public consultation and without obtaining opinions from the competent bodies, as the proposer was an individual MP rather than the Government.

President Aleksandar Vučić promulgated the legislation on 30 January, despite criticism from the professional community, civil society organisations, Serbia's highest judicial bodies and warnings from Brussels that the changes represent a “significant step backwards” on Serbia's European path.

The amendments [affect](#) Law on the Seats and Territorial Jurisdictions of Courts and Public Prosecutor's Offices, Law on the High Prosecutorial Council, Law on the Organisation of State Authorities in the Suppression of High-Tech Crime, Law on the Public Prosecutor's Office and Law on Judges.

One of the most contentious [provisions](#) concerns a new procedure for the temporary secondment of prosecutors to other offices. While such secondments previously existed, the decision had been taken by the Supreme Public Prosecutor.



Ruling party MP Uglješa Mrdić (standing), initiator of the controversial judicial laws; Photo: FoNet

Under the new framework, that competence is transferred to the High Prosecutorial Council, acting upon proposals from chief prosecutors. In addition, all prosecutors currently seconded to other offices must return to their original posts within 30 days.

The Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime has warned that this provision could seriously undermine work on organised crime and corruption cases, as more than half of its prosecutors are seconded from other offices. According

to the Office, the amendments risk paralysing proceedings in the most complex and sensitive cases.

For several months, the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime has been the target of an aggressive campaign by pro-government tabloids and sharp criticism from ruling party officials, who have accused it of being "detached from the people" and under the influence of "foreign centres of power."

The backdrop to these attacks are ongoing investigations involving three ministers from the ruling party in connection with cases linked to the collapse of a railway station canopy in Novi Sad and the General Staff building.

Another controversial [provision](#) concerns the reorganisation of the Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime, which under the new rules becomes a special department within the Higher Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade.

Some legal experts have warned that this restructuring could increase executive influence over the prosecution of online offences and lead to a rise in proceedings related to social media posts.

Furthermore, the amendments require the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office responsible for international legal cooperation to obtain prior consent from the Ministry of Justice, a measure critics describe as an additional constraint and a potential narrowing of prosecutorial autonomy.

Both the High Prosecutorial Council and the High Judicial Council publicly called for the withdrawal of the legislation. The European Union also [reacted](#) immediately after adoption, with Brussels describing the laws as a serious setback in the field of rule of law and urging Serbia to suspend their implementation pending an opinion from the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.

European Parliament mission to Serbia, establishment of a new EU accession operational team

Between 22 and 24 January, a delegation of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) paid a visit to Serbia. The nine-member delegation met with selected representatives of the authorities—senior state officials declined to attend—as well as with opposition representatives, media, civil society organisations, members of the academic community and students.

Discussions focused on issues highlighted in two European Parliament resolutions adopted last year on Serbia, including the state of democracy, media freedom, electoral conditions and the repression of protesters. Opposition

representatives called for targeted sanctions against individuals in government whom they allege are implicated in violence and corruption.

MEP Marta Temido, head of the delegation, stated that members of the European Parliament had received "worrying reports" concerning repression. During the visit to Novi Sad, delegation member MEP Vladimir Prebilič laid flowers at the railway station before meeting students, activists and university representatives, including Professor Jelena Kleut.

According to Prebilič, the delegation received from the Rector of the University of Belgrade a concise overview of the financial, political and social pressures faced by the academic community, which he indicated would be reflected in a report to the European Parliament.



Members of the EP mission in the Serbian parliament; Photo: FoNet

The visit was also marked by [controversies](#). In the lobby of the National Assembly, the delegation was greeted by an exhibition titled "Jasenovac – A Lasting Warning." Exhibition was assessed as instrumentalising the memory of one of the gravest crimes against Serbs for day-to-day political purposes, given the Croatian ethnic background of delegation member Tonino Picula, who was specifically targeted by pro-government media outlets. Pro-government media claimed that the MEPs had sought to avoid the exhibition; the delegation denied these allegations and visited it.

At the same time, Speaker of Parliament Ana Brnabić accused the mission of conducting a "political mission in support of the blockaders," referring to the months-long student protests. Pro-government outlets mounted a sustained media campaign against the delegation.

In its report following the visit to Serbia, European Parliament delegation noted a deeply polarised political landscape and called on authorities to ensure prompt, transparent and impartial investigations into allegations of unnecessary and excessive use of force, as well as unlawful

surveillance of demonstrators. The report expressed concern over judicial reforms then under consideration and highlighted worrying accounts of pressure on academic community and restrictions on media freedom.

While the European Parliament delegation heard extensive criticism regarding developments in Serbia, authorities sought the following week to send a different signal to the European Union by establishing a new Operational Team for Serbia's EU accession process.

The Government adopted its decision at the initiative of President Aleksandar Vučić, who had publicly called for the creation of a special body to accelerate European integration. Proposal was adopted almost verbatim, despite the President having no formal competences in the accession process.

Team is headed by Serbia's Head of Mission to the EU, Danijel Apostolović, and includes ministers of finance, justice, agriculture and interior, minister for European integration, Speaker of Parliament and several advisers.

Its inaugural meeting was held on 30 January. Stated priorities include opening Cluster 3, meeting interim benchmarks for Chapters 23 and 24, preparing for the opening of additional clusters and implementing recommendations from the European Commission's report.

Critics [note](#) that this represents the third reorganisation of Serbia's accession structures in just over four years, with none of the previous reforms resulting in measurable acceleration. The former Coordination Body for the Accession Process has now been replaced by the Operational Team, even though, according to analysts, the principal obstacles to Serbia's EU path are political rather than technical.

Observers also [point](#) to the unusual composition of the team - absence of the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, coupled with the inclusion of Speaker of Parliament - as further blurring the line between executive and legislative branches. Moreover, the team is chaired by an ambassador who is hierarchically junior to several of its members.

In this context, some analysts view the establishment of the team as an attempt to signal reform commitment to European partners while sidestepping core concerns raised by Brussels. As one assessment put it, new Operational Team risks becoming little more than "a bandage that does not cover the wound."

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