



# THE (GEO)POLITICS OF DEMOCRACY IN WIDER EUROPE

edited by

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# Geopolitical Autocratisation in Serbia

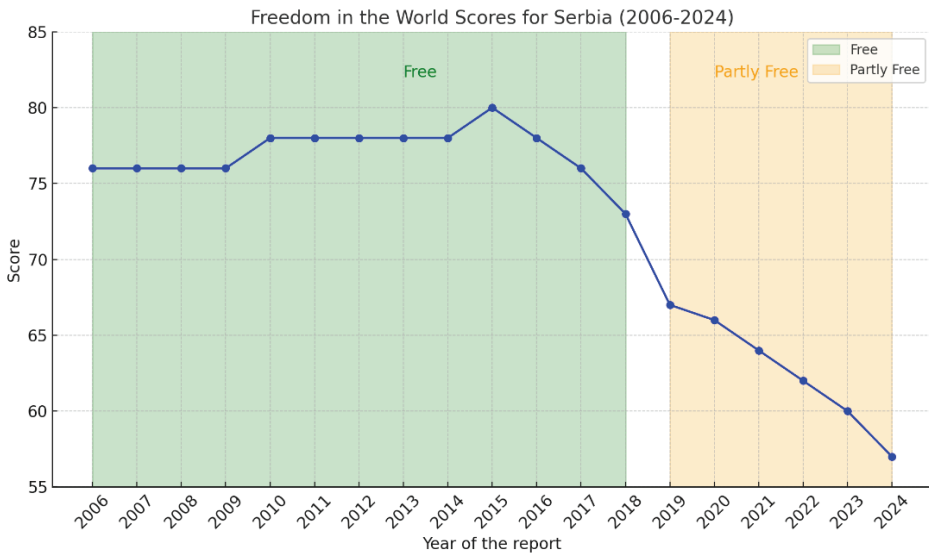
Filip Ejodus\*

Since the mid-2010s, the world has undergone a twin process of geopolitical deterioration and democratic decline. As tensions between countries rise, nationalist and authoritarian impulses have grown stronger. Serbia is a glaring case in point of this ‘geopolitical autocratisation’. After the fall of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, Serbia embarked on a decade of democratisation that transformed the country’s political system from a hybrid regime into an unconsolidated liberal democracy. This process began to slow down around the time of the global economic crisis in 2009. However, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, Serbia became caught in the crossfire of the growing geopolitical rivalry between the West and other global powers. Its vulnerability stemmed from a combination of the Western-backed, slow-motion secession of Kosovo and Serbia’s own delicate balancing act between pursuing European Union (EU) membership and maintaining strategic partnerships with Russia and China, both of which supported Serbia’s territorial integrity.

What followed was a decade of geopolitical deterioration, marked by a series of crises, including the migration crisis, Brexit, COVID-19, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Within Serbia, this wider deteriorating geopolitical context facilitated the gradual entrenchment of the authoritarian regime led by Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party. According to Freedom House, Serbia was classified as a hybrid regime for the first time in 2019, and since then, authoritarian tendencies have continued to speed up unabated (see Graph 1).

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**Chart 1: State of freedoms in Serbia according to the Freedom in the World index 2006-2024**

The political landscape of the country reflects these tendencies at several levels. Elections in Serbia are held but lack fairness, as the political landscape heavily favours the incumbent, making outcomes predictable (Pavlović 2024). Although the country formally upholds the principle of separation of powers, actual authority is captured by President Aleksandar Vučić and his party (Petrović 2021; Keil 2018). Instead of adhering to the rule of law, governance often reflects rule by law (Kmezić 2021). While the freedom of speech is officially recognised, the media remains under tight regime control, with dissenting voices suppressed through disinformation, illicit surveillance, smear campaigns, SLAPP lawsuits, and other forms of intimidation (Vladislavljević 2019; Burazer 2021; Amnesty International 2024).

Although democratic backsliding after accession to the EU is not entirely uncommon, Serbia is unique in that it has substantively regressed during EU accession negotiations (Richter and Wunsch 2020). Authoritarian tendencies in Serbia certainly have strong domestic ideological, institutional, political, and economic drivers. However, Serbia's autocratisation is linked to the geopolitical deterioration in at least five interconnected ways.



First, the worsening global geopolitical situation has allowed Serbian political elites to increasingly restrict or suspend democratic principles under the pretext of safeguarding national security. The most recent example is the situation after the parliamentary and local elections held in December 2023 and June 2024, which both international and domestic observers characterised as neither free nor fair. The regime repressed the post-election protests with the pretext that the opposition wanted to create a Maidan in Serbia (Informer 2023). Some of the most vocal criticism of the rigged elections initially came from the German government (Euronews Albania 2023). In July 2024, this criticism was silenced when President Aleksandar Vučić and Chancellor Olaf Scholz signed a cooperation agreement promising Serbia's lithium – a mineral critical to Europe's green transition and independence from China – to the EU (Federal Government of Germany 2024).

Second, the global geopolitical instability has also led major Western powers to shift their focus toward securing strategic interests, maintaining stability, and ensuring geopolitical alignment in the Western Balkans, often at the expense of democratisation efforts. A case in point has been the prioritisation of the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina over the democratic transition in Serbia. In line with Article 12 of the Brussels Agreement signed in April 2013, Serbia invited the Kosovo Serbs to take part in municipal elections in Kosovo in November of the same year, in accordance with the Kosovo law. When the turnout was too low, Belgrade sent masked thugs to storm the key polling station in Kosovska Mitrovica, invalidating the elections there (RTV Vojvodina 2023). When the elections were rerun, the regime in Belgrade coerced the Serbs from northern Kosovo to vote for the Belgrade-sponsored Srpska Lista, increasing the turnout and granting legitimacy to the elections. Soon thereafter, through a combination of propaganda, coercion, and intimidation, Srpska Lista became virtually the only political party representing Kosovo Serbs in the parliament of Kosovo (Radosavljević and Ničić 2021). Once prototyped in Kosovo, this model of imposing a *de facto* single-party system was later exported to the rest of Serbia, where the Serbian Progressive Party elbowed out all other political parties and became the dominant actor on the political scene (Spasojević 2021). Meanwhile, the US and the EU, preoccupied with growing geopolitical challenges elsewhere, turned a blind eye to these undemocratic methods, for as long as these methods delivered stability in the region in times of amplified global uncertainty (Radeljić 2019).

Third, the relative decline of Western influence and the EU's enlargement fatigue have opened the door for authoritarian actors to strengthen their presence in the region. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the EU was overwhelmed with its own challenges, China rushed to assist Serbia with vaccines and other medical aid, while President Vučić declared European solidarity to be a fairytale (Drajić, Bjeloš, and Stakić 2020). The 'ironclad friendship' between Belgrade and Beijing, as it was dubbed, which only deepened since COVID-19 pandemic, turned Belgrade into one of the key European partners in the Belt and Road Initiative. Over the past decade, the Kremlin has also capitalised on growing disillusionment in Serbia with the never-ending EU accession process. Russia traditionally enjoys the highest level of public trust in Serbia, which has not eroded even after its full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Vuksanović, Sterić, and Bjeloš 2022).

Fourth, Serbian political elites have actively fostered ties with non-Western actors, viewing them as alternative sources of economic and political support, which, in turn, has enhanced their ability to resist Western pressure for democratic reforms. Like other governments caught in the geopolitical hybrid war between the West and Russia, Serbian elites have been attempting to profit from both sides (Orenstein 2019). The Russian and Chinese influence in Serbia is therefore neither imposed nor driven by genuine amity but rather by the pragmatism of local elites (Bechev 2017; Vuksanović forthcoming). Following the fraudulent elections in December 2023, and amid criticism from the German Foreign Ministry and the European Parliament (European Parliament 2024) among others, the regime in Belgrade immediately tilted toward Moscow, allegedly thwarting a Western-sponsored coup with the help of shared intelligence from the Russian intelligence services (N1 News 2023).

Fifth, the growing geopolitical turmoil has, in some cases, driven non-Western actors to openly or covertly support non-democratic forces and processes in Serbia, further deepening the country's democratic backsliding. Russia openly opposes the democratisation of Serbia, not only directly through the bilateral working group on the fight against "colour revolutions" (Associated Press News 2023) but also indirectly by endorsing various far-right organisations with illiberal agendas. While China is not known to directly support non-democratic forces in Serbia, it has also done so indirectly. For example, during the anti-government protests over the controversial lithium mine in western Serbia in the summer of 2024, the Chinese Foreign Ministry published a report that singled out the US-funded, Belgrade-based NGOs as key protagonists behind

the protests. This report was immediately used by pro-regime tabloids in Serbia to launch a smear campaign aimed at delegitimising the protests, which were unrelated to the organisations mentioned. Moreover, since 2017, China's model of digital authoritarianism has spread to Serbia, and a Chinese-made smart surveillance system was introduced en masse in public spaces, violating both domestic and European privacy regulation (SHARE Foundation 2019).

In sum, Serbia is not the only country whose democratic backsliding has been influenced by escalating geopolitical tensions over the past decade. However, the intensity of the geopolitical pressures it has faced, combined with the severity of its democratic erosion, makes its 'geopolitical autocratisation' one of the most pronounced in Europe. To be sure, not all drivers of Serbia's backsliding are external, and this paper could not fully address domestic factors such as recent conflicts, illiberal networks, ideology, political culture, or the unjust transition to a market economy. Future studies could also explore the role of other external actors – be they states such as Hungary, the Gulf States, or Turkey, or various other entities such as donors or international organisations – which have also played a role in the processes described above. Finally, an intriguing avenue for future research could involve analysing the geopolitics of corrosive capital and its influence on state capture and democratic decline in Serbia and beyond.

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