



BRIEF

ALERT



**The Biggest Government,
the Fewest Expectations:
Comment on the May Day Exposé of
Prime Minister Miloš Vučević**

Belgrade, May 2024



During the May Day holidays, after six months of technical mandate and right before the statutory deadline expired, Serbia finally got a new Government, bigger than ever. Of the 30 ministers, five do not have a portfolio. The former director of the Security-Intelligence Agency, still under the sanctions of the US Department of the Treasury, also found a position in the new Government. Namely, he will serve as Deputy Prime Minister without a ministerial position and without any clear formal responsibility. As there has been no explanation as to why the composition of the Government was increased yet again, the party combinatorics seems to be the main reason for these changes.

In this text, the prEUgovor coalition reacts to the content of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević's [exposé](#) presented on 1 May 2024, offering recommendations in selected key areas it regularly monitors with Serbia's European integration process.¹

Continuity in Delaying Reforms and Avoiding Responsibility

Vučević called his cabinet "the Government of Continuity". However, [coalition PrEUgovor's regular monitoring](#) over the past 11 years indicates a need for a complete change of direction when it comes to the implementation of reforms in the key areas of Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) of Serbia's accession negotiations with the European Union (EU) – justice, freedom of the media and the fight against corruption and organised crime. The report of the European Commission shows that Serbia has been [standing still](#) for years as regards the level of preparedness for membership, and the evaluation marks are still poor in Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), on which the overall progress in negotiations depends.

The very order of the areas mentioned in the exposé speaks of the new Government's priorities. The Prime Minister started with foreign policy (where he also mentioned European integration), defence (which used to be his department) and regional relations. He then talked about the economy and the standard of living, digitisation, infrastructure, sports, culture, tourism and agriculture. After that, he touched on the judiciary, human rights and democracy. Finally, after dealing with education and youth policy, health care and demographic policy, he also mentioned the relationship with the church and spoke about ecology and energy, leaving the fight against crime and corruption for the very end.

Full membership in the European Union was repeated as Serbia's strategic goal, but with numerous reservations and criticisms of the EU. For the Prime Minister, the door of the EU is still closed for the Western Balkans, and will be until the EU member states "overcome the so-called enlargement fatigue and implement internal reforms related to the decision-making process". Nowhere was there any mention of the poor results of the reforms that were implemented by the previous governments, which is why Serbia keeps receiving low evaluation marks from the European Commission even outside of the Chapters 31 (Foreign, Security and Defence Policy) and 35 (Other Issues – Normalisation of Relations between Serbia and Kosovo), which are particularly emphasised.

The exposé did not address the chronic problems in Cluster 1 at all, nor did it offer solutions or proposed changes in the course of action. Instead of describing the essential problems, he presented statistical data. In an attempt to paint the situation as better than it actually is, the evaluation marks of international bodies were presented selectively. The tragedies of May 2023 were mentioned only in the context of the anniversary, but the search for systemic answers to the problems they exposed did not find a place in the exposé. Human rights and democracy were mentioned curtly and in general, with many red lines regarding how far the enjoyment of those rights should be allowed to go. One such red line was, for example, the verbal attack on the President of the Republic Aleksandar Vučić, who was otherwise mentioned in the exposé 17 times by function and twice by name, as someone who provides guidelines for action and who should be credited with every positive result that was achieved.

In the same spirit, the "culture of remembrance" took on a twisted meaning in the Prime Minister's presentation. There was talk of bringing back national pride in the interpretation of history: "Today, at the level of the most important state events, we finally have the right to mourn our victims and celebrate our heroes". On the other hand, there was no reference to the need for re-examination of responsibility and constructive confrontation with the conflict-ridden past, the prosecution of war criminals and their marginalisation in the public space.

The position of women in society was wrapped in the narrative of traditionalism, protection of the family and increasing the birth rate. The judiciary was spoken of in the same curt and general way, emphasising stricter sanctions for the perpetrators of criminal acts and the responsibility of the holders of judicial functions, without mentioning the main declarative goal of the reforms

¹ During the drafting of this publication, Vučević's presentation was available only in the form of the parliamentary [shorthand notes](#), which are not authorised, while the [redacted document](#) was published only on 22 May in the "Exposé" section on the Government website. All quotations in the publication are taken from the shorthand notes.



that have been undertaken so far – strengthening the independence of the judiciary. “The judiciary is independent, and the prosecution is autonomous in its work”, states the Prime Minister as if the constitutional and legislative changes have magically removed all problems in this area. In practice, there is still a long way to go. The police reform was not mentioned, although it can be expected that the new government will continue drafting the Law on Internal Affairs, which previously caused numerous controversies. This is just one of the many topics that were left out despite the fact that they are crucial for the implementation of further reforms in the area of the rule of law.

Fundamental Rights in a Distorted Mirror

Based on the exposé of the new Prime Minister, it is unclear whether Serbia plans to remain on the European path in the area of fundamental rights. The key recommendations of the European Commission in relation to the Action Plan for Chapter 23, as well as those of international treaty bodies, which should be applied consistently and efficiently, remain unanswered in the new Government’s programme.

Anti-discrimination policy boils down to the rights of national minorities to freely use their languages and alphabets, profess religion, preserve traditions and customs and express themselves as they wish, which also applies to those who believe in the teachings of traditional churches and are guaranteed freedom of religious practice. Nothing was said about reducing prejudice, or about tolerance, non-discrimination, more effective protection, or participation and appropriate representation in the public sphere and public sector. There was no mention of measures to improve the position of Roma men and women, to reduce racism, discrimination and poverty, greater involvement in regular education and employment, or the improvement of health and housing. There was no mention of LGBT+ people, except to confirm that “marriage is a union between men and women established by law”, and will so remain (which “does not mean that any minority, including sexual ones, will be endangered”). Nothing was said about civil partnership, the right to peaceful assembly, discrimination, hate speech and violence against members of the LGBT+ community.

Gender equality was not mentioned, but neither were the rights of women who are reduced to objects (something holy, a symbol, a being) that bear children, and who only in that role can count on being respected, protected and empowered by “any patriot”. They will have “the same rights and the same initial positions as men”, but not equal incomes, because this government will not be “promoting the idea of equalisation and self-governing socialism” (which illustrates the extent to which the Prime

Minister does not understand structural discrimination). There was mention of measures that should ensure a balance between family life and work, of flexible and reduced working hours (but nothing was said of the fact that this reduces the competitiveness of women on the labour market and has long-term negative economic effects). There was nothing about work, employment, entrepreneurship, education, sports, political and public life, health or sexual and reproductive rights of women.

Without disputing the bad demographic indicators and the need for the state to address the problem, women’s rights were replaced by family rights and the problem of low birth rates. A series of announced measures are aimed at childbearing and the “survival of our people” (we assume that the same measures apply to women from other national and ethnic communities living in Serbia).

There was no announcement of measures to combat violence against women, except for the promise that the state will always be “vigilant, uncompromising and strict” in protecting women, everyone who is someone’s mother, sister or daughter, especially if the abuser tries to take the life of “she who brings new life to the world”, regarding which “a nationally conscious individual cannot and must not have any compassion”. There was no mention of the need to adopt – albeit three years late – the action plan for the implementation of the strategic document for the prevention of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence, nor have financial resources been allocated for the implementation of the planned measures.

The exposé also contained nothing about the rights of children – although they were mentioned as “the future of modern Serbia” and “our greatest wealth” if they are talented and gifted – or in connection with the treatment of children with rare diseases, for whom the state will provide innovative medicines, or in relation to the information system “Find Me” and investments in the renovation and construction of kindergartens and schools, which happens to be a constant but rather poorly fulfilled promise of every Government. Children are merely numbers in the extensive “positive birth policy” measures. A year has passed since the tragedies at the “Vladislav Ribnikar” Experimental Elementary School in Belgrade, in Malo Orašje and Dubona, but there was not a word about the ineffective measures of the previous government or the violence that has continued, “exploding” among children of an ever-lower age. There were promises to invest in education, in teaching children to think, be creative and form new ideas and values, which is to be achieved through dual education as “one of the most important steps in that direction”. It seems that the Prime Minister is not informed about the level of [functional literacy](#) of students in Serbia, especially those in three-year vocational schools. There was also mention of the preservation of “identity socialisation” in textbooks for primary and secondary schools, as “there will be no



mucking around with the most important topics" with which we "strengthen our roots and our foundation". There was no mention of civic education, but the status of religious education is set to be improved.

Fighting Crime and Corruption with Platitudes and Statistics

Towards the end of his three-hour May Day address to people's deputies, Prime Minister-designate Miloš Vučević dedicated approximately 3% of the time to the topic of "fight against crime and corruption". This part of the presentation consisted of a few undoubtedly correct observations that constitute the usual anti-corruption rhetoric, a few unsubstantiated claims, and some information about police work in the previous period. However, the main problem with the Prime Minister's exposé in this part was not that he said something, but that he said almost nothing about what the Government will be doing in the next (perhaps) four years.

The central point of the speech was the following statement: "The President of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of Serbia have shown full determination in the fight against corruption and organised crime, and have shown that there is zero tolerance, a political will, and a clear political goal – a country that is free of corruption and crime, as clearly shown by the results". As the presentation continued, there was an attempt to show something that would support this. However, not a single situation where the President or the Government showed "full determination in the fight against corruption" or "political will" was selected to serve as evidence. In a country where corruption is dealt with *institutionally*, the Government and the President would not even be in a position to have any influence on who will be prosecuted and who will not. Instead, the Prime Minister presented the following statistical indicators, which obviously came from the police:

1. That the "lowest possible" [sic] number of criminal offences in the past 12 years was recorded in 2023, and that this trend continued in the first quarter of 2024;
2. That a total of 219 organised criminal groups were "processed" and approximately 1,500 of their members arrested in the period from 1 January 2012 to 1 April 2024. However, it remained unclear what exactly was meant by stating that these groups were "processed" (Were they discovered, were their members indicted, or were they convicted?);
3. That, in order to fight corruption more effectively, an "anti-corruption department" was formed in March 2018 (it was not expressly stated, but this implies the department within the Criminal Police Directorate, not the four special departments of the higher public

prosecutor's offices). "Since the establishment of this department, some 2,500 criminal charges have been filed and more than 2,500 thousand people have been arrested for causing damages in the amount of almost RSD 30 billion, in which you participated as well" (the latter remark referred to an opposition deputy.) In connection with all these data, it should be clarified that it is almost certain that they have to do with the reports that were filed by the police, not about *all the criminal reports* that were filed due to corrupt criminal acts. On the other hand, it is almost certain that they do not involve only corrupt criminal acts, but also all other offences that are under the jurisdiction of the same police unit (e.g. "money laundering" and "illegal production").

4. Various other things that have nothing to do with corruption, but relate to other crimes: how many narcotics were seized, i.e. how much more than in 2012; that the number of criminal offences against property is in constant decline and is twice lower than in 2012; that 58% more high-tech crimes were detected compared to 2012 (the latter is not exactly something to brag about since the possibilities of committing this type of crime have increased many, many times due to technological development).

Vučević presented statistical data since the reorganisation from March 2018 until the end of 2023, which he said has led to a more effective fight against corruption. According to the presented total, criminal reports were filed against 22,137 persons, information against 1,796 persons, direct indictments against 109 persons, while indictments were filed against 923 persons following an investigation. He also stated that 596 persons were sentenced to a prison term, and 1,021 to suspended sentences. Without doubting the accuracy of the presented data, attention should be drawn to the fact that these data probably also include some cases that are not necessarily corruption-related, but fall under the jurisdiction of authorities that prosecute corruption. Be that as it may, although it is certain that the new legal mechanisms (plea agreements) enabled greater efficiency, the number of convictions certainly **did not increase** compared to the period 2012-2017 (with which no comparison was made).

Speaking about "high level corruption" (that is, the acts and perpetrators that fall under the jurisdiction of the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime), Prime Minister-designate boasted of criminal reports that were filed against as many as 618 persons, 14 information and 78 indictments following an investigation. Here, the number of convicted persons was higher than the number of indicted persons (116 were sentenced to prison terms and 17 received suspended sentences).

For those who are not in the know, the Prime Minister-designate's bragging about the evaluation marks of GRECO, "the most relevant advisory body" in the field



of preventing and fighting corruption, will probably sound wonderful. "Having fulfilled the recommendations referring to judges, public prosecutors and people's deputies, the Republic of Serbia [was] positively evaluated within the framework of the fourth evaluation round". First, in the GRECO's [conclusion](#) from December 2023, it literally says that "Serbia has satisfactorily fulfilled or satisfactorily addressed ten of the thirteen recommendations", and that "three recommendations remain partially fulfilled". Second, we are talking about recommendations from 2015, and the first deadline to fulfil them was the end of 2016. Third, Serbia should have already fulfilled the recommendations from the fifth evaluation round, but it [did not](#), only GRECO has not announced this yet.

Finally, at the end, we heard that the "firm commitment of the new Government" will be "to continue with the policy of zero tolerance and the fight against crime and corruption in which no one will be protected, either by

their party card or in any other way". There have been no concrete plans for the fight against corruption in the exposés for a long while now. The Prime Minister-designate did not mention the expected adoption of the new anti-corruption strategy or the amendments to the Law on Prevention of Corruption, which have been pending since last summer. The regression in relation to the era of a decade ago, when we provided a [critical review](#) of the proposed solutions, and the fact that many important issues *were not covered*, is quite obvious. All that remains is to wait for the moment when it will no longer even be mentioned, because in the meantime it will be announced that the goal has been achieved and that there is no more corruption.

Consequently, there is almost nothing that needs to be removed from the list of [recommendations](#) that we submitted to the Government in 2022. We can only add some new ones, concerning problems that have become more obvious in the meantime.



Recommendations

- The new Government should pave the way for essential reforms by contributing to the creation of an environment that is stimulating for critical thinking and constructive dialogue with those who think differently, with tolerance of criticism and taking responsibility for both good and bad results. It is necessary to stop abusing institutions to attack and intimidate civil society organisations (CSOs), activists and the media, and to clearly condemn and sanction such attacks;
- In the area of anti-discrimination and gender equality policy, Serbia should act in accordance with accepted international standards and recommendations of international bodies; it should prevent the growing trend of intolerance, pressure, prejudice, hate speech and violence towards dissenters and representatives of minority groups, including activists of human rights organisations, journalists and media. It should prevent the clericalisation of public education, and especially attacks on gender equality and women's rights;
- Additional efforts are needed to improve the efficiency and sustainability of the adopted strategic documents, to ensure the adoption of action plans within the statutory deadline and appropriate financial means for their implementation;
- In the area of preventing violence against women, it is necessary to implement amendments to the Criminal Code and harmonise the Code with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, as well as to establish a sufficient number of easily accessible and geographically well-distributed general and specialised support services for victims of all forms of gender-based violence, which would enable their recovery, empowerment and independence. It is necessary to fully implement measures in the area of sexual and reproductive rights and health of women, as these are an integral part of their human rights and freedoms;
- If children are truly the future of Serbia, then all attention should be focused on the implementation of planned activities that include amending laws, monitoring of the implementation of strategic measures, and the development of the capacities of service providers in accordance with the processes of deinstitutionalisation and decentralisation;
- As regards procedural guarantees, it is necessary to ensure funds that will finance the provision of free legal aid, including services provided by citizens' associations;
- As for the fight against corruption, all the general principles and recommendations that prEUgovor had submitted to the previous Government are still valid (except for the part of the recommendation that refers to judicial reform). Among other things, the Prime Minister should start from the following:
 - He should refuse to sign retroactive and otherwise illegal decisions on the appointment of acting officials in the state administration;
 - He should include the consideration of the report of the Anti-Corruption Council in the agenda of the Government sessions;
 - He should ask the relevant ministries to start/finish work on changes to laws that are essential for the implementation of all GRECO recommendations (lobbying, access to information, the Criminal Code);
 - He should make sure that the "programme" "Leap into the Future", which he mentioned 15 times in the exposé, really gets written, discussed and adopted, as required by the Law on the Planning System, since such a document currently does not exist;
 - He should make sure that the Government complies with the Law on Electronic Administration and that it publishes documents in machine-readable form (and not as zipped attachments), or to at least automatically deliver confirmation of receipt to e-mail senders.
- As regards the fight against organised crime, it is necessary to strengthen the integrity and capacities of the competent authorities – the police, the prosecutor's office and the court – and to enable them to independently perform the work provided for by law without the influence of politics. Data on the performance of these institutions should be publicly available and comparable so as to reduce the possibility of manipulation and selective presentation. It is necessary to announce, as soon as possible, a public competition for the position of Police Director, which has been vacant for more than two years now, and to abandon changing the criteria that would allow a person from other security services to be appointed to this position.

About prEUgovor

Coalition prEUgovor is a network of civil society organisations formed in order to monitor the implementation of policies relating to the accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU, with an emphasis on Chapters 23 and 24 of the Acquis. In doing so, the coalition aims to use the EU integration process to help accomplish substantial progress in the further democratisation of the Serbian society.

Members of the coalition are:

Anti-Trafficking Action (ASTRA)

www.astra.rs

Autonomous Women's Centre (AWC)

www.womenngo.org.rs

Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP)

www.bezbednost.org

Centre for Applied European Studies (CPES)

www.cpes.org.rs

Centre for Investigative Journalism in Serbia (CINS)

www.cins.rs

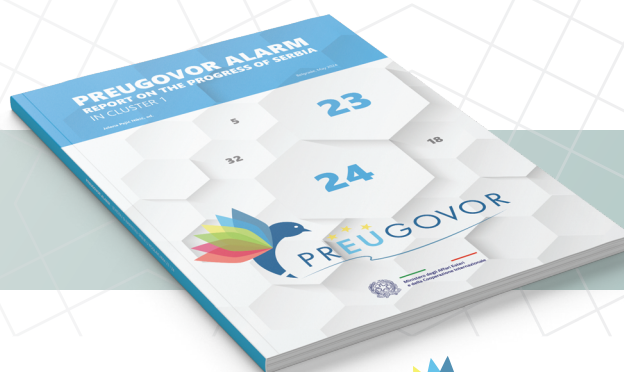
Group 484

www.grupa484.org.rs

Transparency Serbia (TS)

www.transparentnost.org.rs

PrEUgovor's key product is the [semiannual report](#) on the progress of Serbia in Cluster 1.



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