



Youth on the Brink:

Rising Right Wing Shift and EU Dilemma



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Responsible

Peter Hurrelbrink, Director
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Belgrade
Tel.: +381 11 3283 285
serbia.fes.de

Contact

office-serbia@fes.de

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Serbia's youth on the brink: Rising right wing shift and EU dilemma

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SUMMARY

The research was conducted by the European Movement in Serbia and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, with the aim of showing how young people in Serbia form political attitudes, how they understand democracy, the rule of law and the European Union, and how much they are exposed to right-wing and Eurosceptic narratives. The paper combines a desk analysis of relevant studies with focus groups in 5 cities, which contextualises the key points of political behavior of young people. The findings show a steady decline in trust in institutions, political actors and parties and a shift towards social networks as the main source of information, even though the young recognize and try to avoid constant misinformation. Participants highlight corruption, legal uncertainty, unequal opportunities for advancement and weak institutional accountability as the main reasons for political fatigue. Protests and student blockades have increased interest in politics among young people, but they are described by them as being without a clear strategy and sustainable organization. The attitude towards the EU combines a pragmatic appreciation of benefits with doubts about the specific performance of EU actors in Serbia, with the belief that key changes can only be achieved through internal reform of society. Young people value order, justice, education, tradition and transparent institutions, but it is difficult to translate these values into political participation. For policy makers in Serbia and the EU, these findings have direct implications: young people expect clearer communication about the role of the EU, a more consistent attitude towards democratic standards, investment in media literacy, more work with student and local initiatives and greater institutional integrity in the domestic framework.

INTRODUCTION

The project was developed with the aim of determining how young people in Serbia form political attitudes and how they interpret social processes, democracy, the institutional environment and the European Union. The research is focused on what young people recognize as key problems, which sources of information they trust, how they perceive political actors and what kind of attitude they have towards European integration at a time of increased social divisions and the growing visibility of right-wing narratives. The European movement in Serbia worked on the project by relying on its long-term work with young people, university communities, student organizations, local forums and a network of partner organizations in different parts of Serbia, as well as long-term research experience. Therefore, it was possible to include, in addition to desk analysis, direct work with young people in different contexts and to recognize their patterns of thinking throughout the country.

Methodologically, the research combines two approaches. The first includes a desk analysis of available national and international studies on the position of young people, their media habits, value orientations, political participation and perception of the European Union. The second line of work is based on 5 focus groups with a total of 55 participants aged 18 to 26, held in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Novi Pazar, Kragujevac and Niš. The discussions were conducted as semi-structured group discussions, using thematic coding and subsequent grouping of recurring thought patterns. Additionally, some of the findings were gained through individual conversations with students and members of youth initiatives that EMinS reached through its network. This method made it possible to recognize recurring tensions in the attitudes of young people and to distinguish what they consider a personal belief, what comes from direct experience, and what comes from the media and political environment.

CONTEXT

How young people get information, what are their main sources and who do they trust

The data show a stable pattern in which young people increasingly get their information from digital channels, primarily social networks, with a decline in the use of traditional media and with a loss of trust in institutional sources. Since 2018, while being oversaturated with digital content, Serbian youth expressed mistrust towards political actors and the traditional media. In 2025, this trend becomes dominant: 80% of young people are primarily informed via social networks, television content is watched online, and direct TV viewing drops to minimal levels. At the same time, exposure to disinformation is growing, with a contradiction between the declarative recognition of fake news and the real practice of sharing content without systematic verification. The low level of trust in political institutions and the perception of a captive media system further increase the dependence on digital communities in which algorithmic models favor conflicting, fast messages, and suppress content that requires time and argumentation.¹

Dominant narratives that shape political attitudes

The political attitudes of young people are formed at the intersection of 3 processes: a marked distrust in the political order and a sense of moral frustration due to corruption and irresponsibility of institutions, then identity topics that include Kosovo, national affiliation and the religious dimension, and finally personal socio-economic motives that give priority to stability, employability and justice, without a clear ideological classification. In the period 2021–2023. The narrative focus was on corruption and crime, with the continued centrality of the Kosovo issue. During 2024 and 2025, the structure of priorities changes: democracy, security, institutional responsibility and the fight against corruption become key topics, especially in the context of student blockades and protests, while at the same time the perception of weak representation of young people in the political system remains unchanged. These changes go hand in hand with the expansion of digital frameworks in which content without editorial control spreads rapidly, amplifying echo chambers and polarization.²

Values and norms, and the direction of their orientation

Young people most consistently single out freedom, honesty, rule of law and personal responsibility as central value points, while they often rank political participation low despite the belief that young people should be more visible in politics. In the findings for 2024 and 2025, the assessment that democracy is the best form of government is growing and the similarity between the personal values of young people and European standards of institutional discipline is growing, while at the same time part of the population still highly values traditionalism, especially in matters of identity. Religiosity remains a relevant identity marker, trust in political actors remains low, and selective modernism emerges as the prevailing pattern: young people want functional institutions, stable rules and a just order, but at the same time retain emphasized elements of national identity and family norms. Young people see domestic politics as an area marked by corruption, weak accountability and dysfunctional institutions, with permanently low trust in parties and classic political structures. Elections are often perceived as irregular, and the change of government as insufficient to change the system.³

The perception of the European Union, the process of integration, and its rivals

The perception of the European Union among young people is changing slowly, but clearly. In recent years, the share of positive first impressions and recognition of the benefits of membership has been growing. Personal experiences with travel, work or study in member states significantly influence a more positive attitude. At the same time, young people increasingly recognize the slow rate of institutional reforms in Serbia as the main obstacle and increasingly conclude that progress is primarily a matter of internal arrangements. Dissatisfaction with the EU's inconsistent signals regarding democracy and the rule of law is observed in the public space, which among young people increases doubt about the intention, but not about compatibility of values.

Young people most often associate the EU with institutional orderliness, professional administration and predictable order, while cultural and identity topics are often interpreted through media-filtered narratives. The attitude that the EU contributes to peace, stability and a better quality of life for young people in the member states is growing, while the fear of losing identity is decreasing. The set of values of young people, which emphasizes freedom, honesty, solidarity and ecology, is largely compatible with European standards, and the obstacles most often concern insufficient understanding of EU mechanisms and the perception that the

¹ Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije (KOMS). Alternativni izveštaj o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji 2023; 2024; 2025; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). Mladi u Srbiji 2018/2019; Youth Study Southeast Europe 2024; Youth Study Serbia 2024; Adam D. Participacija mladih i internet: društvene mreže kao neistraženi oblik i strategija mladih za političku participaciju i angažovanje. Diskrepancija 2024;18(26).

² KOMS 2023, 2024, 2025; CeSID. Nasilni ekstremizam i mladi: od dezinformacije do radikalizacije.; Stojanović BŽ. Representation of Youth in Local Assemblies in Serbia. Serbian Political Thought. 2025.;Međedović JM, Petrović B. Intergroup Conflict Runs in the Family. Psihologija. 2021; Surlić S, Lazarević A. Embracing change? Političke perspektive 2024.

³ KOMS 2022;2023;2024;2025; FES studies 2018-19;2024; Stanojević D, Vukelić J, Tomašević A. Political Participation of Young People in Serbia. 2023.; Delegacija EU: Indeks participacije mladih. 2025.; Ninamedia 2024

Union does not react consistently enough to the collapse of democratic norms in Serbia. Additionally, many participants pointed out key singular issues, such as the Lithium mining projects and normalization efforts between Kosovo and Serbia as hinge points on which their opinion of the EU has been affected. The foreign policy orientation of young people has long been balanced between the EU, Russia and China, but in recent years, a decline in strictly pro-Russian orientation and a shift towards a more pragmatic understanding of international relations has been observed. The EU is consistently seen as the actor with the largest presence, while Russia remains symbolically important in identity issues, but with declining support for extreme solutions. 4

FOCUS GROUPS

Youth and socio-political problems in Serbia

The data indicates a strong and widespread dissatisfaction with the socio-political situation and deep mistrust towards the authorities and institutions. Corruption is perceived as a widespread and normalized practice that undermines trust and creates a feeling of powerlessness, and they consider that joining the European Union cannot solve the problems without a change of the systemic culture. Economic pressure, low wages and unequal opportunities for advancement are recognized as the main reason for young people leaving. Brain drain is associated with an order in which knowledge and work are not valued, and politically connected individuals have priority, which deepens cynicism and the feeling that effort is not worth it.

Legal uncertainty stands out as the foundation of many problems. Institutions do not inspire trust, the police inspire fear, and justice is seen as selective. This is why, in their view, there is a need for a complete reset of the system and a thorough reorganization of state and social relations, not just a change of individual office holders. There is a fear of social instability and a sense of regional neglect, especially outside Belgrade and Novi Sad, accompanied by permanent economic uncertainty.

Young people believe that the removal of one leader would not fundamentally change the situation without a new political culture and the emergence of competent and non-corrupt actors. It also strengthens the feeling of personal vulnerability, as well as mistrust in basic security. The need for a clear and quick institutional reaction in cases of violence and rights violations is emphasized. Young people are looking for a new beginning through people without a political past, with the awareness that changing faces does not automatically mean changing the system.

Text box 1: Young people describe Serbia as a system in which corruption, legal uncertainty and unequal opportunities prevent personal development and belief that political and social change are possible.

Political orientation of young people and whom they trust

Young people showed strong skepticism towards all political actors, and trust in the media is minimal. They collect information from multiple sources in order to avoid manipulation, relying mostly on social networks, followed by using independent media portals. The prevailing view is that completely independent media practically do not exist. Social networks are the main channel of information, but at the same time they are a place of suspicion due to fake profiles, bots and coordinated campaigns. TikTok and Instagram are used to monitor mood and basic information, while more complex content is checked on portals that young people consider more professional. There is a fear of the influence of artificial intelligence in the creation of news, as well as fatigue from an overabundance of content, which leads to the fact that the news is often followed casually, and subsequently checked by talking to friends and following opposition or alternative sources.

Trust is more often attached to individuals who report from the scene, to direct recordings and testimonies, than to central media houses. In conversations with peers, political topics often cause tension, so some young people avoid discussions, especially in environments with pronounced ideological differences. Political apathy is recognized as a bigger problem than division. Many rely on the views of parents or close people, without forming their own political opinion, which reproduces passivity. The first information is usually shared in closed circles on social networks, especially on faculty pages and student accounts. The practice of directly verifying information by going to the reported events themselves and consulting with reliable contacts has developed, which further increases skepticism towards official versions of events.

Text box 2: Informing young people is based on digital networks and personal sources, while the absence of trust in institutions shapes their political distance and skepticism.

The future of Serbia and the consequences of their attitudes

Reflections on the future of Serbia among young people oscillate between pessimism and conditional optimism. Most believe that changes are possible, but only if they are based on an internal reform of society and institutions with outside help but without outside instruction. External actors, including the European Union, are seen as a framework that can provide support through standards and a legal framework, but not to solve deep problems instead of domestic actors. Young people recognize that there is no developed culture of responsibility in Serbia and that public administration is inefficient, slow and often uninterested in citi-

4 Evropski pokret u Srbiji. Srbija i EU: Predrasude i stavovi. 2024.; KOMS 2022;2023;2024;2025; FES studies 2018-19;2024; Bruegel. Understanding Serbian youth discontent. 2025.; The Hague Research Institute. Why Serbia's youth are turning away from the EU. 2025.

zens. They believe that the public sector should have clearly defined work results and control mechanisms, having the impression that there is a lack of responsibility and empathy, which creates a permanent distance between citizens and institutions. This schism is carried over to the political level, so the opposition parties fail to build trust, because they are perceived as actors without a coherent vision and readiness for systemic change.

Protests, which were once a symbol of resistance and hope, are now often seen as a repetitive form without a clear goal or strategy. Young people state that the protests lost their energy and original purpose over time, and that the politicians who joined later were perceived as opportunists. The consequence of this is less readiness for political participation, including going to the polls, because many do not see an offer that deserves support. The blockades also left personal consequences, such as interrupted classes and difficult studies, which further weakened enthusiasm. At the same time, there is an expectation that responsibility will be established for serious failures, with a realistic attitude that quick changes are unlikely and that it is a long process. Concerns about jobs and staying in the country remain a central theme, and social ties have suffered strains, although there is rarely a complete breakdown in relations. Despite the fatigue, part of the youth retains a sense of community and the belief that changes are possible, but not through quick solutions, but through long-term work and the gradual building of a different attitude towards institutions and public life.

Text box 3: Young people believe that the future of Serbia depends on internal reform and the development of a culture of responsibility, and not on short-term protests or a change of people at the top of the government.

Attitude towards the European Union and European integration

The young people's attitude towards the European Union combines a pragmatic understanding of potential benefits, a critical attitude towards the way the EU is presented in Serbia, and doubts about the real scope of external support without internal changes in society. Those who have traveled or lived in member states emphasize experiences of orderliness, consistent application of rules and functioning public systems, which they see as a model of desirable everyday life. At the same time, the majority believes that even in the case of membership, Serbia would retain its internal problems if the attitude towards institutions and responsibilities does not change. Young people point out that citizens often do not understand what the European Union is specifically doing in Serbia, as well as that EU-financed projects are attributed to local authorities. This points to the role of the media, which diminishes or conceals the contribution of the Union and thus affects the image of the EU.

The dimension of critical patriotism is visible: the participants want Serbia to retain the possibility of its own choice and to adopt European standards where they are useful, and to fit them into its own context. Examples of countries that

achieved economic progress through membership, while retaining their identity and tradition, are mentioned. In this sense, they see Europe as a frame of reference and not as a threat, but they note that the domestic public is dominated by superficial topics, while the essential processes of integration remain in the shadow of ideological disputes. Euroscepticism spreads primarily through emotionally strong topics, especially national and cultural, as well as through reactions to environmental and security issues, but at the same time there is pragmatic support for European standards due to mobility, the labor market and better public administration.

Young people state that in European societies the voice of young people is more respected, with greater investment in education, although they also have critical remarks about those societies. The symbolism of EU flags and the origin of political messages in protests are perceived as an indicator of external alignment, so their emphasis is often avoided in order not to additionally open up space for accusations and divisions. The presence of European media and observers is nevertheless positively evaluated, with the dominant view being that Serbia must solve key problems from within and not delegate them to external actors. Geopolitical issues are not close to them, and they mostly focus on internal problems of Serbia and not on foreign policy, which divides them.

Text box 4: The EU is seen as a desirable model of order, but young people believe that European integration makes sense only if Serbia first resolves its internal institutional weaknesses.

Youth values and European values

In the value system of the participants, the need to restore the cultural, educational and moral fabric of society prevails. Young people believe that kindness, consideration, respect and solidarity have been suppressed from everyday life and that nervousness, closed-mindedness and mistrust have prevailed. There is expressed concern about the state of culture and art, lack of access, and the concentration of cultural events in Belgrade. Young people from smaller communities especially emphasize the feeling of isolation and deprivation. Education stands out as a key sphere that determines social development. Young people are aware that functional literacy is low and that citizens often do not know their rights, which facilitates manipulation. European values are primarily associated with knowledge, justice, freedom and orderly public systems, not with renunciation of national identity. The EU member states are seen as examples where it is possible to preserve tradition with efficient institutions.

The participants believe that Serbia could become a better version of itself if it connected family and common values with European discipline and respect for the law. They see democracy as an instrument that should ensure order, fairness and a functional labor market, not as an end in and of itself. They do not expect the EU to manage Serbia, but rather that society only adopt models that have been proven to

be effective. Family values, hospitality, honesty, loyalty and work ethics stand out as pillars of personal dignity. At the same time, there is a demand for social stability and constancy in rules, less frequent changes in the law and consistent application of the law. The majority supports the preservation of tradition while accepting institutional discipline modeled after Europe, while attitudes towards more controversial social issues are more often conservative, especially outside larger urban areas, which creates tension in relation to European values of inclusion and tolerance. The protests reinforced a civic ethos among young people, including volunteerism, concern for the community, and a willingness to invest time and energy in public causes. The ideal is a welfare state based on trust in institutions, as opposed to survival through individual strategies, with the awareness that European societies also have their own problems, but also more developed mechanisms for solving them.

Text box 5: Young people associate European values with respect for young people, justice and functional institutions, but they expect these standards to be harmonized with the tradition and social context of Serbia.

Growth of Euroscepticism and right-wing attitudes

The growth of Euroscepticism and the strengthening of right-wing narratives among young people appear to be the result of a combination of lack of information, disillusionment with domestic politics and cultural tensions. Participants note that many of their peers reduce European integration to issues of identity, gender politics and alleged moral decadence, while issues of standards, justice and everyday life are rarely discussed. Among young people, there is an uncritically positive attitude towards Russia and authoritarian leaders, often formed based on family narratives and selective media content, and not on the basis of an informed comparison of social models. This leads to conflict in conversations and intolerance, especially in environments where the wars of the 1990s are still an important frame of reference. Within the student blockades and protests, internal divisions and conflicts were observed. Deviation from group decisions within the plenum led to labeling and pressure, so critical views were often interpreted as betrayal. Young people who participated in the blockades describe them as psychologically demanding and organizationally unclear, with strong pressure to follow the majority line without room for dialogue.

A large number of participants believe that the protests have lost their meaning because they have become ritualized and devoid of a strategic goal, while the values that should hold them together remain insufficiently defined. Belonging to a group with positive associations was the primary motivator for participating in protests, rather than just a desire for social activism and rule of law reform. Protests are also perceived as a social event and not as a viable instrument of political change. Although there are nationalist and Eurosceptic attitudes among young people, most of the participants emphasize that wit-

hout modernization and functional institutions, Serbia cannot progress.

It is emphasized that the problem lies not only in individual leaders, but in the system that enables the reproduction of the same forms of government, so the goal is to establish an order in which institutions belong to the citizens, and the government is accountable. National sentiment among young people was an important driver of participation in protests and blockades, without which many would not have taken to the streets. The involvement of political parties in the movement is perceived as belated and polarizing, with the assessment that it further increased divisions and contributed to the loss of trust in the sincerity of political support.

Text box 6: Right-wing and Eurosceptic attitudes among young people are growing due to lack of information and narratives of identity issues, but the majority still see modernization as the inevitable direction of Serbia.

Implications and suggestions for policy makers

Young people form political attitudes in an environment dominated by social networks, fragmented sources of information and digital patterns that emphasize emotional and conflict stirring content. As trust in institutions, media and political actors remains low, traditional communication channels do not have the capacity to reach young people. This means that political messages, including those about democratic standards and EU integration, remain marginalized in the everyday digital space where young people spend most of their time. Young people show a high awareness of social problems, a clear identification of institutional weaknesses and a similarity of values to European standards, but this set rarely translates into participation. The lack of visible channels for participation and the absence of positive examples of responsible political behavior create a feeling that engagement does not pay off. Without structures that enable the translation of values into action, the generation remains politically untapped.

Legal uncertainty, selective application of rules and slowness of institutions are recognized as central sources of frustration. This pattern leads to the belief that democracy does not work, because it does not ensure equality and accountability. When institutions do not respond consistently to violence, corruption or abuses, it encourages withdrawal from political life and weakens faith that elections, protests or civil pressure can produce results. They most consistently single out order, stable rules, justice, efficient institutions and personal responsibility as fundamental values. That orientation is closer to the European model than to any radical option, but the lack of political actors offering an orderly institutional framework leaves room for the rise of authoritarian and right-wing narratives that promise a quick introduction of order without democracy.

Intensive engagement in protests and blockades does not translate into long-term participation because there is no clear institutional exit, feedback or visible result. Political energy is spent in cycles that leave a feeling of exhaustion and doubt that participation pays off, which in the long term leads to apathy, and in the short term opens up space for radical interpretations of political reality. Young people largely support European norms of justice, knowledge, welfare state and functional institutions. At the same time, the existence of an invisible or insufficiently clear role of the EU in Serbia, as well as the perception of inconsistency in reactions to the collapse of democratic standards, lead to doubts about the credibility of European action. The gap between abstract support for the EU and actual support for EU actors remains significant.

Right-wing, pro-Russian and Eurosceptic narratives gain visibility primarily through the themes of identity, regional disagreements, traditional values and cultural conflicts, while the economic and institutional benefits of European integration remain in the background. This model of communication shifts the focus from reforms and standards to emotional issues, which makes it difficult for young people to see the real importance of international partnerships for their future. Young people are often portrayed in the media as passive or monolithically right-oriented, although findings show that the majority of young people take positions that combine the demand for a fairer, more orderly society with support for democratic standards. When politics starts from the wrong picture, it produces measures that do not correspond to the real needs of young people and deepens mistrust.

Recommendations for decision makers in the EU:

1. The EU should establish a unique, publicly available digital map of the projects and activities it finances in Serbia, with all the information about them, especially in areas relevant to young people, because this would remove the widespread lack of information and wrong attribution of EU projects to domestic actors.
2. The EU should consistently link its public messages to democratic standards, including the state of the judiciary, the media and institutional accountability, thereby countering the perception that the Union favors stability at the expense of principles.
3. The EU should expand exchange and study visit programs to include the areas of justice, public administration, local democracy and social policies, because young people understand European standards best through direct insight into institutional practice.
4. The EU should develop special digital communication channels intended for young people in Serbia, with content that clearly explains how the EU functions and how the decisions and programs of the Union relate to the daily lives of young people.

5. The EU should systematically support the work of university and high school communities through grants for student media, research clubs and local democratic initiatives, in order to encourage the development of critical thinking and reduce the dependence of young people on informal and often unreliable digital sources.

Recommendations for decision makers in Serbia:

1. Media literacy in educational institutions should be improved through mandatory programs for critical reading of media content and understanding of digital sources, which would reduce the vulnerability of young people to misinformation.
2. Short, clear and publicly available information on basic procedures in public services should be introduced in order to at least minimally reduce the uncertainty and confusion that young people often face when contacting institutions.
3. Local youth bodies should be reformed so that they have real powers, a budget and the obligation of public consultation, with the systematic involvement of universities and youth groups in decision-making processes.
4. Stable and transparent channels of communication between institutions and young people should be established, including clear answers and published outcomes in cases of violence, discrimination and rights violations, because young people report that they lack institutional response and feel unprotected.

Recommendations for Civil Society and youth organizations

1. Civil society and donors should strengthen the capacities of youth organizations and informal groups through long-term programs of funding, mentoring and organizational development, so that short-term activism can grow into stable action.
2. Civil society should establish local info points and networks of young communicators in libraries, schools and cultural institutions, in order to provide reliable sources of information in environments that rely predominantly on digital circles and personal contacts.
3. Civil society should develop peer educator programs that would convey information about democracy, the EU, public policies and available opportunities to young people in local communities, because young people trust direct and authentic sources the most.

Conclusion

In an increasingly politically polarized environment and with a steady rise of distrust towards formal institutions, young people are seeking alternative ways to both politically express themselves and find community within Serbia. They do not see the current political landscape as a bedrock of change, rather a catalyst that could, with the right conditions, lead to a positive change towards the kinds of political values they most respect, namely: social stability, respect for the rule of law, tradition and democracy. While these values are in line with the values of the EU, young people do not see the institution as a trusted partner due to the EU's perceived lack of active participation in the student protests as well as its cultural differences with Serbia.

The lack of a robust trusted information source for political events has left the youth to seek alternative sources which are mainly social networks and direct reporting from the scenes of significant events. This has opened the door for misinformation and more extreme positions to permeate on the political scene, though the participants have expressed a healthy skepticism towards the news they were receiving.

Policy makers both in Serbia and the EU, as well as Civil Society actors, must begin building information networks and youth educational programs, particularly in media and political literacy to combat the rise of misinformation and to ensure that youth participation in both local as well as national politics is not simply a formality, but rather an integral part of a healthy democratic society.

**The team of the
European Movement
behind the publication**

Editor: Dragana Đurica.

Researchers: Uroš Popadić and Časlav Jovičić.

Assistants: Neda Racić, Nenad Bušić,
Filip Janković and Jelena Tokmačić