



Friends of the Western Balkans' Joint Statement

We, the Friends of the Western Balkans (FoWB) – representatives of the European social democratic community, including members of national and European parliaments, political foundations, political parties and civil society organisations in the region – have convened for our seventh meeting in Ljubljana, with the aim to bring together progressive and social democratic actors, and reaffirm our unwavering commitment to the integration of the Western Balkans countries into the European Union. This meeting in Ljubljana has been dedicated to the situation in Serbia.

On 1 November 2024, the concrete canopy of Novi Sad railway station collapsed, killing 16 people and injuring one. The tragic event exposed yet another case of corruption and triggered mass protests all over Serbia, calling for truth, justice and accountability. On 5 May, the protesting students also demanded the immediate dissolution of parliament and early elections.

The demonstrations follow a decade-long period of protests over different, but related, issues and show the dynamism of Serbian civic opposition. Against this evolving background, the FoWB decided to dedicate their meeting to the political developments in Serbia and their implications for the region as a whole and the process of enlargement.

Therefore, united as a single voice, the Friends of the Western Balkans show their support to the Serbian students and other citizens, and:

- Express deep concern about the systemic issues highlighted by the student protests, relating to democratic backsliding, civil liberties, separation of powers, endemic corruption and state capture, environmental protection, institutional and financial transparency, especially in relation to infrastructure projects, and accountability.
- Condemn any act of violence and the use of illegal weapons against peaceful protestors.
- Closely monitor developments regarding the arrests of protesters and legal proceedings that have been opened against them.
- Deplore the fact that the government missed the opportunity to meet the demands of the students and of the citizens who support them in good faith.
- Affirm that the students' demands are legitimate and align with democratic and rule of law reforms that Serbia is expected to implement on its EU integration path.

The Friends of the Western Balkans call on the Serbian authorities to:

- Ensure the protection of those participating in the legitimate, peaceful protests.
- Immediately release political prisoners, among them Marija Vasic, who is on hunger strike, and ensure their fair legal treatment and end their arbitrary detention.
- Carry out a timely, independent and efficient investigation of the use of illegal weapons against the protesters, causing injuries to a number of them.
- Stop the misuse of personal data from public registries to retaliate against peaceful protesters.
- Guarantee the autonomy of universities by restoring legally mandated funding and salaries of university staff, and protecting academic freedom and the university's role as a pillar of democracy and critical thinking.

- Urgently implement the OSCE/ODIHR 2023 election observation mission's recommendations, as well as those set out in the European Parliament resolution of 8 February 2024, in an inclusive dialogue with the opposition and civil society, acknowledging that free and fair early parliamentary elections are a way out of the crisis.
- Stop using the judiciary and law enforcement as a tool of repression against civil society; charges against all persons who physically attacked and incited violence against the participants of the demonstrations need to be filed.

The Friends of the Western Balkans reiterate their unwavering commitment to Serbia's future within the European Union but assess that Serbia's current trajectory cannot lead to a successful membership bid or constructive membership of a Union of Values. Therefore, the Friends of the Western Balkans also urge the European Commission and the member states to:

- Communicate unequivocally to the Serbian students' movement that European institutions stand for democracy, human rights and free elections.
- Stop the appeasement towards President Aleksandar Vučić against the backdrop of the government's rollback of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights. Pursue a coherent, principled and strategic EU response to autocratic trends, using all available political and diplomatic tools.
- Assess long-term trends in Serbia's EU integration on the basis of implemented reforms instead of empty promises.
- Stop regarding President Aleksandar Vučić as a stabilising influence on the whole region.
- Do not prioritise economic and migration deals over long-term democratic transformation, which is necessary for successful EU integration.
- Attach political consequences upon breaches of declared red lines and broken promises, including immediate and unequivocal actions in line with the High Representative's statements.
- Investigate the possibility of individually targeted sanctions as a measure to punish Serbian political actors who violate fundamental human rights.

The Friends of the Western Balkans conclude that:

- We should facilitate structured dialogue between sister parties, civil society and the students' movement.
- We should reinvest in political parties as an inclusive infrastructure.
- We will animate a European public debate which will focus on this statement and send it to high officials, including the President of the European Commission, the High Representative and Commissioner Marta Kos.

The Friends of the Western Balkans meeting was preceded by a meeting of the S&D Group Willy Brandt Program.

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