

# Serbia



## Facts & Figures

Population

**6.8m**

Political system

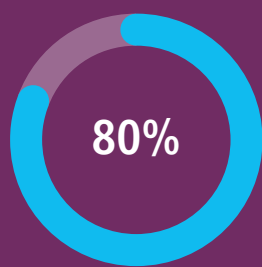
**Unitary  
parliamentary  
republic**

Varieties of Democracy  
regime type

**Electoral  
autocracy**

Varieties of Democracy  
Liberal Democracy Index  
ranking (2021)

**111**



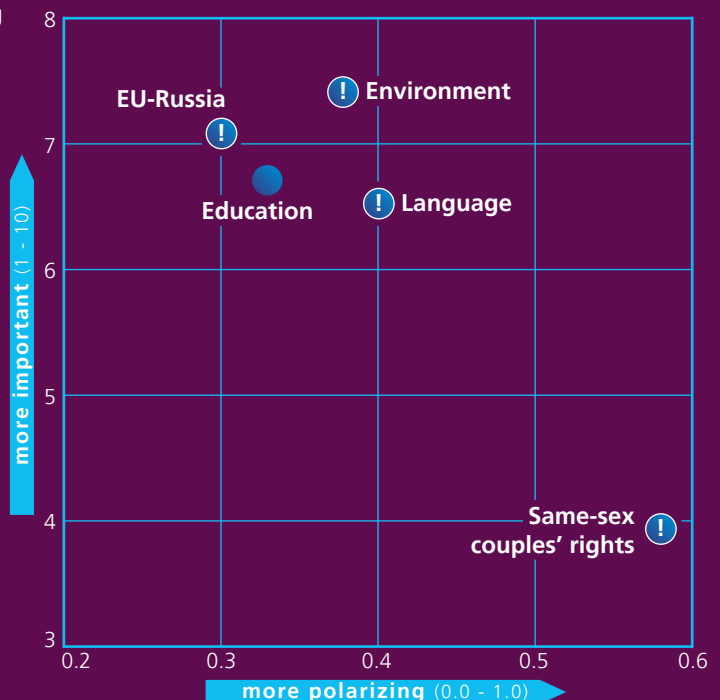
### Democratic competence of Serbian respondents

Percentage of respondents who on average rate the four democratic items as more democratic than the ten undemocratic items in our survey

## Which issues let politicians get away with undemocratic behavior?

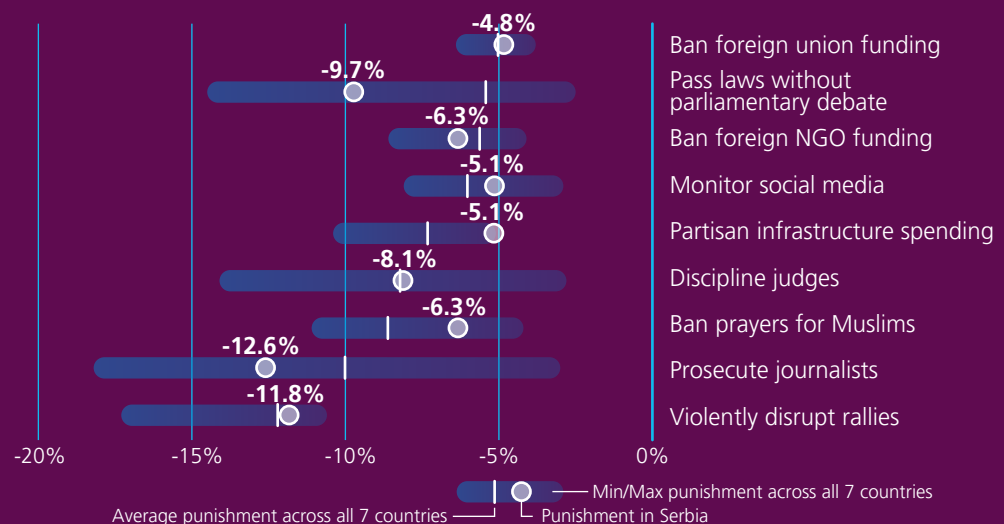
Issues displayed according to their importance to voters and degree of polarization

! Issues for which voters forgive undemocratic behavior



## How much are key elements of liberal democracy valued?

The higher the vote loss for an undemocratic policy proposed by a political candidate, the more a certain democratic element is valued.



## Serbian parties presented in the survey



English name	Serbian Progressive Party	Socialist Party of Serbia	Democratic Party	Dveri	Party of Freedom and Justice	It is enough
Serbian name	<i>Srpska Napredna Stranka (SNS)</i>	<i>Socijalistička Partija Srbije (SPS)</i>	<i>Demokratska Stranka (DS)</i>	<i>Dveri</i>	<i>Stranka Slobode i Pravde (SSP)</i>	<i>Dosta je Bilo</i>
European affiliation	EPP (associated)		S&D (associated)			ECR
Currently governing						

## KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AND SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY

Respondents of Serbia have a good understanding of what democracy is and what it is not. Indeed, democratic competence of Serbian citizens is at 80%. They are pro-democracy oriented as well, but at the same time unsatisfied with how Serbian democracy performs.

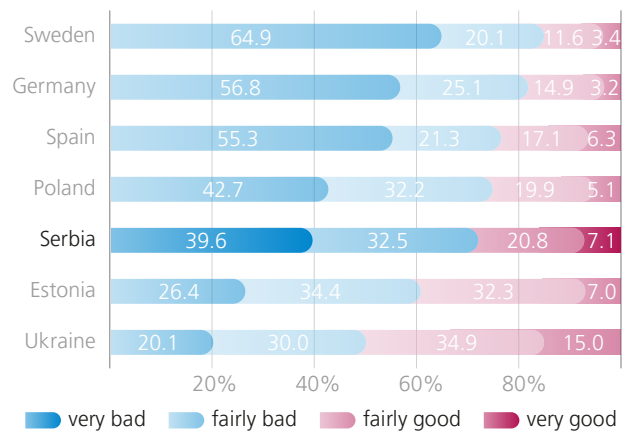
For the Serbs, it is important to live in a country that is governed democratically (mean score 8.2), to have a democratic political system (78% rank this as either “fairly good” or “very good”). Moreover, 85% of all Serb respondents either “strongly agree” or “agree” that democracy is better than any other form of government. Interestingly, Serbs seem to appreciate democracy generally slightly more than the respondents in the EU-member state Estonia.

The Serbian respondents also generally reject features of an authoritarian system: They are opposed to “having the army rule” (80% ranked this as either “bad” or “fairly bad”). And the statement “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections” is rated negatively by 72% – that is 11% more than in Estonia. One of the more concerning findings is that 29.2% of Serbs regard it as rather or completely democratic<sup>27</sup> if the military removed a corrupt president.

We moreover found that Serbian respondents appreciate especially the “electoral fairness” aspect of democracy: One undemocratic practice that is very much disliked by Serbs is “passing laws without a debate in parliament.” This item received the highest “completely undemocratic” rating in contrast to the other seven countries under investigation. Serbs also agree that losing an election can be an inherent part of a democracy: the statement “The prime minister conceded a nar-

### “How good or bad do you find having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections?”

All figures in %



Due to rounding, totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

row election” got the second highest mean score of all European countries (6.8). And Serbs also rate it as very democratic if opposition parties organize protests against the governing party, by giving it the same mean score as the Swedes: 6.4.

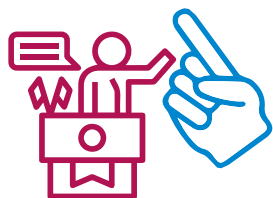
Serbs also view it as rather democratic if the country’s high court ruled that a government policy was unconstitutional, ranking this statement with the second highest mean score (6.0) just behind Germany.

However, it appears that the Serbian democracy is currently not fulfilling the expectations of the Serbian citizens. Across the entire sample, the Serbs see their country as being governed

<sup>27</sup> Rating it with an 8, 9 or 10 on a scale from 1 to 10.

## Foreign policy

The dispute over the preference of a pro-EU or pro-Russian foreign policy orientation is the least polarizing issue in Serbia.

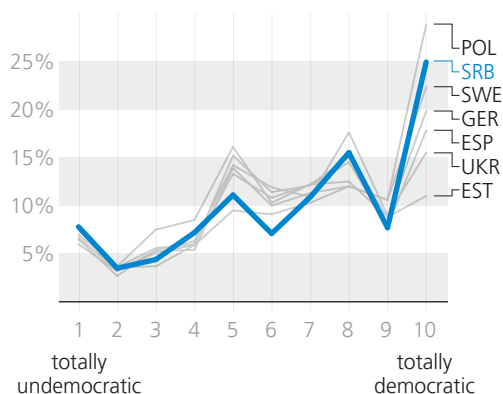


# -7.9%

This is the average punishment corresponding to the share of Serbian voters willing to defect from an otherwise favored candidate once they adopt an undemocratic position.

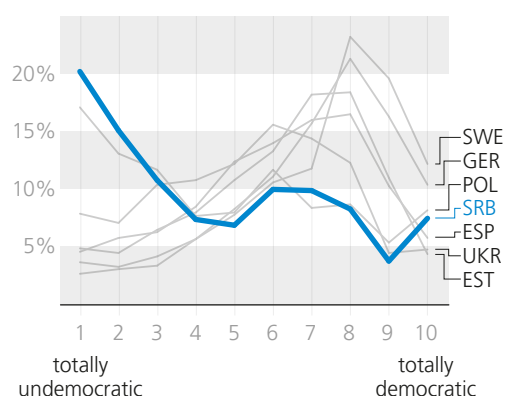
the least democratic (mean score 3.9) and they are also the least satisfied with how democracy works (mean score 3.5). It thus does not come as a surprise that among the seven countries under

### "How democratic do you find the practice of opposition parties organizing protests against the government?"



investigation Serbian citizens most strongly endorse if experts, not the government, make decisions for their country: 74% of them find this either "very good" or "fairly good."

### "How democratically is your country being governed today?"



## WHAT KIND OF UNDEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR DO SERBS PUNISH?

Overall, Serbian voters showed willingness to punish undemocratic behavior. The average punishment is a loss of -7.9% of the overall vote share for the candidate who adopts an undemocratic position, which is slightly above the average punishing rate across the entire sample. The undemocratic positions punished most strongly are "prosecuting journalists" with a

-12.5% vote share loss and "violently disrupt opponent's rallies" with a -11.7% vote share loss. On the other hand, the Serbs punish the items "ban of foreign union funding" and "partisan infrastructure spending" the least, as the candidates advocating for these positions lose only -4.8% and -5% of the vote share respectively.

## PARTY LOYALTY AND POLICY INTERESTS: WHICH ISSUES ARE

## MORE IMPORTANT THAN UPHOLDING DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS?

Serbian voters forgive undemocratic behavior of a candidate when they come from their favorite party. They do the same when it comes to identity-based interests, but rather not for socio-economic interests. This is particularly the case with partisan interests: A candidate who comes from the respondent's favorite party and holds an undemocratic position is nevertheless compensated. Accordingly, they are not be punished, but rewarded, and end up with a +15.6% vote share increase. This percentage is followed

by identity-based interests: An undemocratic candidate who at the same time represents a voter's favorite policy on same-sex couples' rights or foreign policy orientation (pro-European or pro-Russian) is still rewarded +5.3% and +4.8% (final vote share) respectively. The same applies to representing a voter's favorite language policy, with albeit a significantly lower final rewarding rate, namely +1.3%. This is also the lowest rate among those four countries in our sample in which the language issue plays a

salient role in political processes.

Contrary to our findings on identity-based interests, Serbs appear much less willing to forgive undemocratic behavior for their favorite policies on the environment and education. The undemocratic candidate ends up being rewarded with only +0.1% vote share increase in the case of the former, while they are punished

with a final loss of -1.5% in the case of the latter. A greater salience of environmental issues could perhaps be explained by the fact that Serbia recently witnessed country-wide demonstrations against the exploitation of lithium that were organized by environmental organizations.

### ARE SUPPORTERS OF A CERTAIN POLICY INTEREST<sup>28</sup> MORE FORGIVING OF UNDEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR THAN OTHERS?

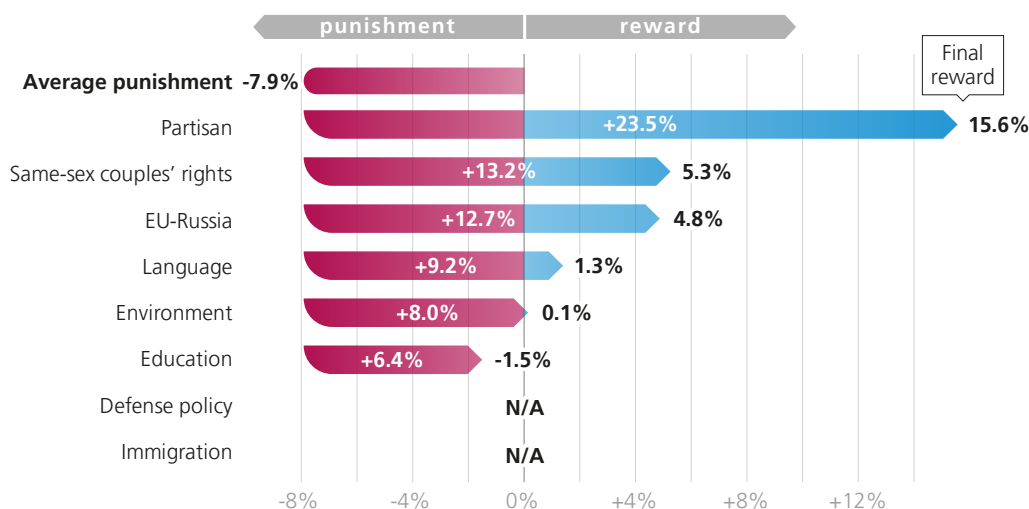
If we divide respondents along a left-leaning/right-leaning axis, we can identify more nuanced findings about the willingness to punish undemocratic behavior. Concretely, when it comes to same-sex couples' rights, right-leaning voters show less attachment to democratic principles. Contrary to left-leaning voters, who in the end still punish with a -3.2% vote share loss, right-leaning voters forgive undemocratic behavior for their favorite policy on this issue with a final +5.6% vote share increase. We can observe a similar correlation when it comes to the language issue as well: voters who prefer the use of only the Serbian language when communicating with state offices in the end punish an undemocratic candidate, albeit with a minimal -0.2% vote share loss; voters who support the

right to use the Albanian language do forgive undemocratic behavior, with the candidate ending up with a +4.2% vote share increase. When it comes to foreign policy, all respondents show a willingness to forgive undemocratic behavior. This is particularly the case with voters who want a closer relationship with Russia, as this scenario results in a +12% final vote share increase – that is +10,8% more when compared with voters who demand a stronger attachment to the EU. Moreover, with respect to environment the electorate is divided, as only those who prefer lowering taxes on coal and gas even if it results in lesser use of solar and wind energy forgive undemocratic behavior for it (+0.1% final vote share increase).

# 6.8

Serbs see losing an election as an inherent part of democracy: The statement 'The prime minister conceded a narrow election' got the second highest mean score of all countries under investigation.

### Existence of trade-offs/compensation for undermining democracy



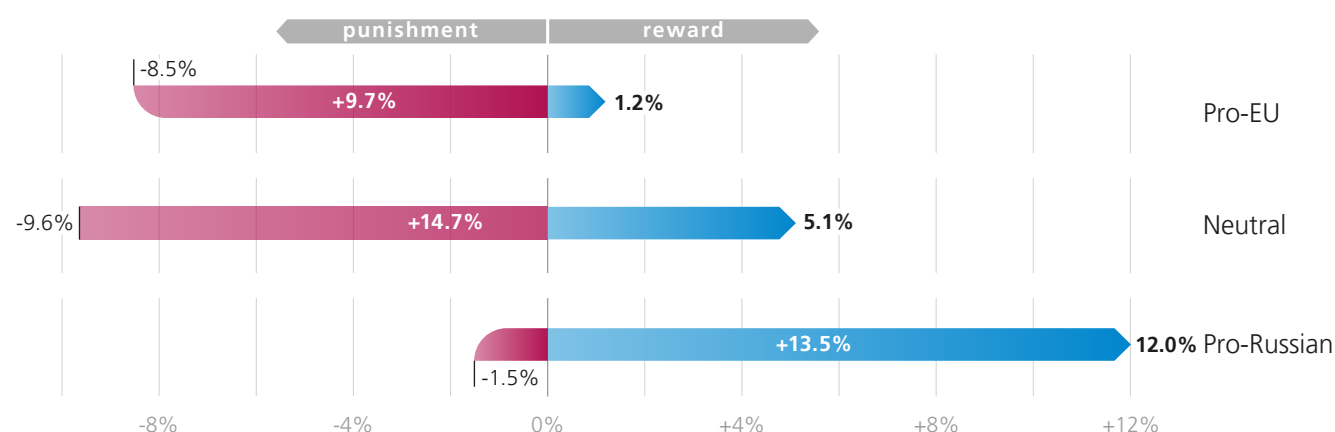
<sup>28</sup> Please find an overview of all tested policy positions on pg. 13.

## WHAT ROLE DOES POLARIZATION PLAY?

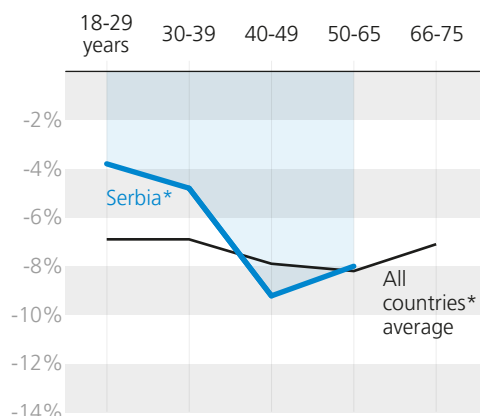
When it comes to same-sex couples' rights, we can observe a correlation between an increased polarization and the readiness to forgive undemocratic behavior for this interest. Indeed, the matter of rights for same-sex couples is the most polarizing issue in Serbia. Moreover, we can observe the same correlation regarding environmental and language issues as well, albeit with a lesser intensity.

With respect to the foreign policy orientation of a candidate, however, the mentioned correlation cannot be observed. As a matter of fact, the EU or Russia foreign policy orientation is the least polarizing policy issue in Serbia, as a great majority of Serbian citizens agree that the country should have close relations with both actors. This fact greatly explains the reluctance of the Serbian leadership to join the Western sanctions on Russia amid its aggression on Ukraine.

### Foreign policy: shift in punishment when presented with favored policy



### Average electoral punishment by respondents' age groups



\*No data was collected for age group 66-75 in Serbia and Ukraine.

## WHO ARE THE MAIN 'DEFENDERS OF DEMOCRACY' IN SERBIA?

As in all other countries under investigation, women punish undemocratic behavior more than men. As in many other countries, other main defenders of democracy are people who show more interest in politics and who are democratically competent, as well as those who lack an authoritarian personality. Also people who work full- and part-time punish undemocratic behavior more than comparative sub-group members.

A more surprising result concerns an interesting inversed generational difference that we find in Serbia, but not in most of the other countries: pensioners and the elderly punish undemocratic behavior more than the

young and students. This holds true for both of the younger cohorts in our sample (18-29 and 30-39); the significant shift starts in the 40-49 cohort.

In line with the average for all cases, the lower the level of education the less Serbs punish undemocratic behavior.

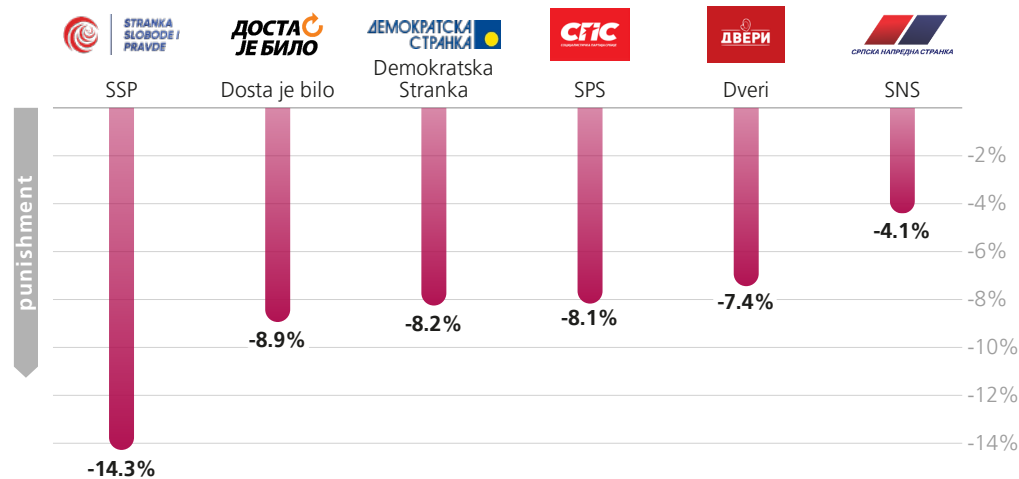
Other groups that are less willing to punish politicians who violate democratic principles are people who are taking care of family members or were temporarily laid off, but also those with a more positive economic assessment of the country and of their family.

## WHICH PARTY'S VOTERS PUNISH UNDEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR THE MOST?

When it comes to party affiliation, voters of all key Serbian parties show a general willingness to punish undemocratic politicians. However, there are strong differences among them: The voters of the party that dominates the Serbian party system – the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) – are least willing to punish undemocratic behavior. The average punishment rate among SNS voters is only -4.1%. However, they do not show a willingness to punish all undemocratic positions, as “disciplining judges who criticize the government” is indeed rewarded by a +14.8% vote share increase. Looking again at punishment rates, the SNS voters are followed by the voters of the far-right

Dveri with a punishment rate of -7.4%. Voters of the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS), the Democratic Party (DS) and Dosta je Bilo (It is enough) showed a very similar willingness to punish violations of democratic principles. The punishing rate of the voters of the SPS and the DS is -8.1% and -8.2% respectively, while for Dosta je Bilo it is -8.9%. Voters of the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP) punish the most, with a punishing rate of -14.3%. In other words, the voters of the opposition parties show more attachment to democracy than the voters of the ruling SNS and SPS.

### Average punishment for undermining democracy



## Summary for Serbia

The majority of Serbs value the various facets of democracy. However, they are also quite critical of the democratic system, and especially of the way democracy functions in their own country. Compared to other countries, they regard electoral fairness as particularly important. When it comes to defending democratic standards in our experiment, Serbs score even slightly higher than the average. They are most likely to defend the right of assembly and electoral fairness as well as the freedom of the press.

As in all other countries under investigation, party loyalty is the most important determinant of voting behavior. Serbs completely forgive a candidate their undemocratic behavior if they are from their favorite party. Group loyalty and identity issues play the second most important role when it comes to voting decisions in Serbia. These include issues such as foreign policy orientation, language, as well as an extension of rights for same-sex couples, which are prioritized at the ballot box over rejecting undemocratic positions.

For the most part, the willingness to forgive undemocratic behavior for particular interests correlates with the degree of polarization for these issues. One important exception is a preferred foreign policy position: foreign policy is not a polarizing issue in Serbia, but Serbs regard it as important. Hence, the salience of the issue could perhaps serve as one of the explanations for the tolerance of undemocratic behavior.