

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

November 5, 2021

Dear President Biden:

We are deeply concerned about the current humanitarian and political situation in Serbia and the impact it may have on the Western Balkan region and Europe as a whole. As you said during an August 2016 visit to Belgrade, Serbia, “it is overwhelmingly in the self-interest of the United States of America for the people of Serbia to be able to grow and prosper.”^[i] Therefore, we encourage your administration to engage with President Aleksandar Vucic to combat corruption and attacks on freedom of the press, both of which are critical to a prosperous and democratic Serbia and to its European Union aspirations. We urge you to consider using Executive Order 14033, “Blocking Property and Suspending Entry Into the United States of Certain Persons Contributing to the Destabilizing Situation in the Western Balkans,” where appropriate to push for a more transparent and accountable Serbian government that respects democracies, human rights, and the rule of law.

Freedom of the press is not only a critical American value enshrined in the United States Constitution, but is also important to U.S. foreign policy and to pushing back against authoritarianism around the world. As you declared at the end of your 2016 visit to Belgrade, “Nations are stronger when they hear from many voices”.^[ii] Unfortunately, freedom of the press has reached a new low point in Serbia, as Reporters Without Borders notes: “Serbia is a country where journalists are subjected to almost daily attacks that increasingly come from the ruling elite and pro-government media.”^[iii] It is also clear that pro-government media outlets are prospering and are in a mutually beneficial relationship with the government. In one egregious example, RTV Pink, the largest private broadcaster in Serbia, received at least 7 million euros in government loans between 2014 and 2016.^[iv] The next year, when President Vucic ran for President, RTV Pink provided significantly more airtime to his campaign than all other opponents combined. Even the dealings of majority-state-owned network Telekom are shrouded in secrecy. The appearance of an agreement or arrangement between the government and media harms democratic norms, silences critics, and empowers corrupt individuals. We encourage your administration to work with President Vucic and others to allow all sources of media to prosper and cover news in an equitable, unbiased manner. As you said in 2016, “these voices must be protected and respected”.^[v]

Your administration should also continue to engage the Serbian government about rooting out corruption. The U.S. government has long been the global leader in supporting efforts to combat government corruption by setting high standards for business and procurement practices – and we are pleased that countering corruption will be one of the focuses of the upcoming Summit of Democracies. Our policies and thorough requirements have led to an increase in economic growth and trust in the U.S. economy. Unfortunately for the people of Serbia, reports have shown that President Vucic has deepened the corruption within Serbia, including by using the COVID-19 crisis as an excuse to obscure government spending and procurement of PPE and ventilators. President Vucic went so far as to say on *Radio Television of Serbia* that while the whole world was looking for ventilators, Serbia is procuring them, “semi-legally”.^[vi]

We believe the administration should take swift action to push back against the existing corruption and furthering attacks on press freedoms in Serbia. Serbia plans to organize presidential and parliamentary elections next spring.^[i] We ask your administration to hold Serbia accountable to the highest standards of free and fair elections, including the campaign period ahead of the election and vote count itself. During your 2016 visit to Belgrade, you spoke of a hopeful future for Serbia and the Serbian people.^[vii] Unfortunately, to get to that more optimistic future, we believe further diplomatic action from the United States and from our European allies and partners in particular is crucial to ensuring Serbia can be effective in

implementing democratic reforms. In doing so, they will be able to improve relations with all West Balkan states, including Kosovo.

We thank you for your time reviewing this letter and look forward to working with you to strengthen democracy in the Balkans and around the world.

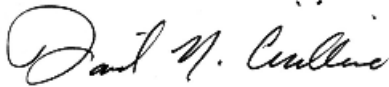
Sincerely,



Raja Krishnamoorthi
Member of Congress



Ritchie Torres
Member of Congress



David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress



Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Mike Quigley
Member of Congress



Jim Costa
Member of Congress

^[i] Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden at the Conclusion of a Bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Vucic of Serbia, August 19, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/08/19/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-conclusion-bilateral-meeting-prime>

^[ii] ibid

^[iii] Reporters Without Borders, Serbia, 2020 Report <https://rsf.org/en/serbia>

^[iv] Pink Received at least 7 million Euros in loans from the state, Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia, September 29, 2016, <https://www.cins.rs/en/pink-received-at-least-e-7-million-in-loans-from-the-state/>

^[v] Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden at the Conclusion of a Bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Vucic of Serbia, August 19, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/08/19/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-conclusion-bilateral-meeting-prime>

^[vi] <https://www.cins.rs/en/medical-equipment-and-health-insurance-fund-governments-secret-conclusion-and-invisible-procurements/>

^[i] <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-new-government-power-2022-early-elections/30903718.html>

^[vii] Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden at the Conclusion of a Bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Vucic of Serbia, August 19, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/08/19/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-conclusion-bilateral-meeting-prime>