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Serbia's Path to Climate Resilience: A Critical Assessment of the Climate Change Law and Its Implications

Vladanka Presburger Ulniković[1*], Anđelka Radosavljević[2], Bojana Božilović[1], Ana Ćirišan[1]

[1]Faculty of Ecology and Environmental Protection, University Union-Nikola Tesla, Cara Dušana 62-64, Belgrade11000, Serbia
[2] Serbian Environmental Protection Agency, Ruže Jovanovića 27a, Belgrade11000, Serbia

[*]**Corresponding author:** vladanka.gsc@unionnikolatesla.edu.rs

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Abstract: Serbia's Climate Change Act (2021) represents a key element in developing a modern national climate governance system, aligned with the Paris Agreement and European Union policies. This paper provides an analytical overview of its potential to contribute to Serbia's climate resilience through examination of the institutional architecture, monitoring mechanisms, and compliance with contemporary climate governance approaches. By introducing comprehensive frameworks for mitigation, adaptation, and reporting, the Act establishes a solid foundation for further development of climate policies and marks an important step toward long-term transformation of the environmental protection system. At the same time, the analysis identifies certain areas where further strengthening of the integration of scientifically grounded methodologies and enhancement of participatory processes is possible, which can be viewed as opportunities for further development and alignment with international practices. Drawing on contemporary literature on climate governance (Braithwaite et al., 2007; Bulkeley, 2021; Triyanti et al., 2023), the paper indicates that the Act provides a stable foundation upon which, with consistent institution al support and continued intersectoral collaboration, an effective and sustainable climate policy system can be built. In this sense, the continued implementation of the Act is expected to contribute to the gradual strengthening of Serbia's climate resilience and progress toward long-term development goals.

Keywords: Climate Change Law, greenhouse-gas emissions, MRV, CBAM, EU ETS, energy transition, climate policy

1. Introduction

The escalating impacts of climate change underscore the imperative for robust national governance frameworks. Serbia's adoption of the Climate Change Law in 2021 marked a pivotal transition from ad-hoc measures to a structured policy approach, intended to align with the Paris Agreement and the EU acquis. The law establishes a comprehensive system for mitigation, adaptation, monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV), targeting a sectoral transformation in line with Serbia's pledge to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, as detailed in its Third Nationally Determined Contribution (Republika Srbija, 2025). This goal is further underscored in the national Low-Carbon Development Strategy (Republika Srbija, 2023) and recent assessments (UNDP Serbia, 2025).

Serbia's updated NDC (submitted December 2022, accepted by UNFCCC) commits the country to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 33.3 % by 2030 compared to 1990 levels — a significantly more ambitious baseline than the previous 9.8 % reduction against 2010 (Republika Srbija, 2025).

However, as seminal scholarship on regulation and governance asserts, the mere existence of a legal instrument is insufficient to guarantee its effectiveness (Braithwaite et al., 2007). Achieving transformative climate action requires institutional capacity, cross-sectoral coordination, science-driven planning, and inclusive participatory processes

(Bulkeley, 2021; Bosselmann, 2016). This aligns with broader European assessments of climate progress (European Environment Agency, 2024) and global scenario analyses (UNEP, 2024; IEA, 2023).

This paper critically examines Serbia's Climate Change Law through this conceptual lens, assessing its institutional design, operational mechanisms, and practical implementation through illustrative case studies. The analysis aims to identify key governance gaps and offer evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the law's contribution to Serbia's climate resilience, a goal further underscored in the national Low-Carbon Development Strategy (Republika Srbija, 2023). The analysis aims to identify key governance gaps and offer evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the law's contribution to Serbia's climate resilience, a goal further underscored in the national Low-Carbon Development Strategy (Republika Srbija, 2023) and recent assessments (UNDP Serbia, 2025).

2. Methodological Approach

The methodology includes a review of Serbia's Climate Change Law (2021), its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), and relevant EU legislation, including the EU Climate Law and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) (European Commission, 2022). This assessment employs a qualitative analytical framework that synthesizes legal, institutional, and policy dimensions to evaluate the nascent climate governance system in Serbia. The methodology is structured around four interconnected pillars:

(1) **Legal and Policy Analysis:** A review of the Climate Change Law (2021), Serbia's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), and relevant EU legislation, including the EU Climate Law and the CBAM (European Commission, 2022).

(2) **Scientific and Governance Literature Review:** Engagement with contemporary scholarship on climate governance effectiveness (Bulkeley, 2021), the role of law in sustainability transitions (Bosselmann, 2016), the critical function of scenario frameworks (Triyanti et al., 2023), and the behavioral dimensions of institutional change (Alavosius & Houmanfar, 2020). Participatory governance practices are also considered, drawing on ongoing efforts to improve policy planning (EU za tebe, 2025).

(3) **Institutional Mapping:** Analysis of the roles and responsibilities assigned to various state and sub-national bodies to identify potential coordination challenges and fragmentation.

(4) **Illustrative Case Study Examination:** Exploration of high-profile projects, such as the Vinča Waste-to-Energy facility and the modernization of the TENT power plant, to ground the analysis in practical implementation contexts, using publicly available official documents and reports.

This multi-faceted approach facilitates a holistic evaluation of both the law's structural provisions and its initial real-world impacts.

3. National Context and Institutional Architecture

Serbia's climate policy is shaped by its international commitments and economic structure, which is characterized by a significant reliance on fossil fuels. The energy sector remains the dominant source of GHG emissions, with official inventories reporting emissions of approximately 63.7 $MtCO_2e$ in 2022 (SEPA, 2025), as also reflected in the First Biennial Transparency Report (Republika Srbija, 2024).

The Climate Change Law creates a multi-level institutional framework to address these challenges. However, this distribution of responsibilities, detailed in Table 1, inherently presents risks of coordination failures and policy incoherence, a well-documented challenge in multi-level governance systems (Scown et al., 2023; Bulkeley, 2021) that continues to be a significant hurdle, as noted in the most recent report.

Table 1. Institutional Responsibilities under the Climate Change Law

Institution	Key Responsibilities
Ministry of Environmental Protection	Overall coordination, national planning, UNFCCC reporting
Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA)	National GHG inventory, e-GHG platform, MRV system management
Hydrometeorological Service of Serbia (RHMZ)	Climate data collection, modelling, early warning systems
Sectoral ministries (energy, agriculture, transport, etc.)	Sector-specific mitigation and adaptation plans
Local self-governments	Local climate action plans, vulnerability assessments, public engagement
Inter-ministerial Council for Climate Change (established March 2021)	Cross-sectoral coordination (currently with limited executive power)
Institution	Key Responsibilities

4. Core Implementation Mechanisms

The cornerstone of the law is the establishment of a Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) system for industrial emissions, mirroring the structure of the EU Emissions Trading System. This system obliges operators of large installations to monitor their GHG emissions, submit annual reports, and have these reports verified by accredited entities. The operationalization of this system has been supported by the development of a digital platform, e-GHG, which streamlines data submission and enhances transparency (UNDP Serbia, 2023). A critical implementation milestone was the deadline of 30 June 2024 for existing operators to apply for GHG emission permits, signaling a tangible shift towards a regulated carbon management regime and supported by the launch of the e-GHG digital platform (e-GHG, 2025).

As noted above, the following are the core implementation milestones (2021–2025):

• March 2021 – Law adopted and Inter-ministerial Council formally established

• 1 March 2024 – e-GHG digital platform officially launched (SEPA, 2025)

• 30 June 2024 – Legal deadline for existing installations to apply for GHG emission permits

• 2023–2025 – First Continuous Emission Monitoring Systems (CEMS) installed at TENT A/B, Kostolac, and Vinča WtE facility. The introduction of a CEMS is a direct response to the requirements of the Climate Change Act regarding MRV (EPS, 2023).

• Ongoing – Preparation of integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) and Long-Term Strategy (LTS) — both significantly delayed (expected adoption 2026 at earliest)

5. Case Studies: Bridging Law and Practice

5.1. The Vinča Waste-to-Energy Project

The Vinča WtE plant represents a significant shift in urban metabolism and waste management for Belgrade. By processing municipal waste to generate energy, the project directly contributes to mitigating methane emissions from landfills, a potent greenhouse gas. Project documentation highlights its role in reducing overall GHG emissions from the waste sector and advancing the circular economy (Beo Čista Energija, 2022). This case illustrates the law's objective to drive decarbonization in key sectors through large-scale infrastructure modernization.

5.2. Emission Monitoring in the Energy Sector

The introduction of Continuous Emission Monitoring Systems (CEMS) at facilities like the TENT thermal power plant is a direct response to the MRV requirements of the Climate Change Law. The implementation of CEMS is a foundational step for accurate data collection, which is a prerequisite for identifying emission reduction opportunities and informing decarbonization strategies (EPS, 2023). This underscores the law's role in catalyzing the adoption of essential monitoring technologies in high-emission industries.

6. Synthesis: Visualizing the Governance Pathway

The interplay between the Law's foundational framework and its practical implementation challenges reveal a dynamic transition period in Serbia's climate policy. To crystallize this analysis, the pathway from legislative adoption to envisioned resilience is mapped below (Fig. 1), synthesizing key milestones, current crossroads, and future imperatives. This schematic synthesizes the transition from legislative foundation through operational implementation to the current critical juncture, where addressing governance gaps will determine the achievement of long-term climate resilience targets.

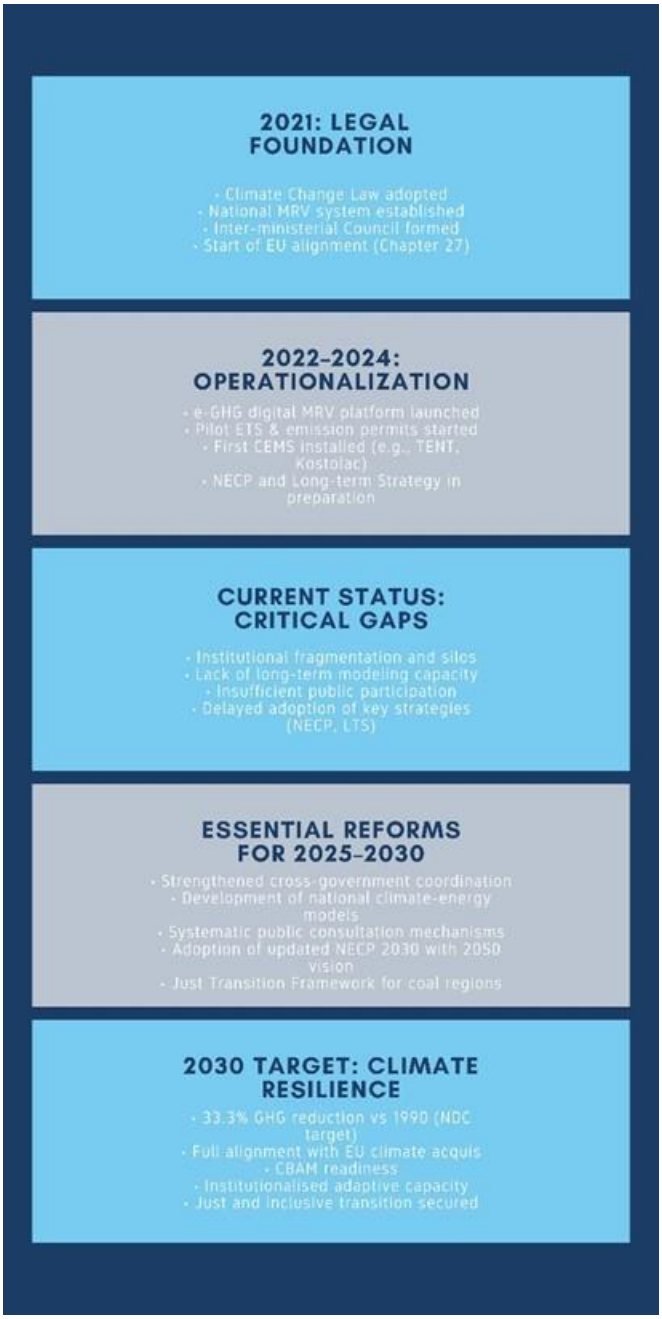

Figure 1. Serbia's Climate Governance Pathway. *

**Abbreviations: MRV = Monitoring, Reporting & Verification; e-GHG = national digital MRV platform; CEMS = Continuous Emissions Monitoring Systems; WtE= Waste-to-Energy, a process that converts waste materials into usable forms of energy, such as electricity or heat; NECP National Energy and Climate Plan; ETS = Emission Trading System; LTS = Long-Term Strategy; NECP&LTS = National Energy and Climate Plan and the Long-Term Strategy for climate action.*

The e-GHG digital platform represents the central technical infrastructure of the Serbian climate system: the national MRV architecture and its digital platform, e-GHG. This platform represents the main data channel for monitoring, reporting and verification, supporting transparency and evidence-based policy in line with international best practices (Alavosius & Houmanfar, 2020; European Climate Advisory

Board, 2025). Through this structure, Serbia is institutionalizing a climate monitoring regime that reflects the methodologies of the EU ETS and the IPCC Emissions Guidelines (IPCC, 2022). Accredited verifiers (who are accredited exclusively by the Accreditation Body of Serbia - ATS) have an independent oversight role in the system, ensuring data integrity through compliance assessments, audits and methodological checks . This aligns with global experience showing that verification bodies significantly improve the credibility and accountability of environmental governance systems (Bulkeley, 2021).

7. Strengths and Limitations of the Climate Change Law

This structured visualization offers a comparative lens to the law's advantages and vulnerabilities. Strengths shine in foundational elements: a comprehensive framework aligned with EU acquis like the EU-ETS Directive and Paris Agreement obligations, successful MRV system deployment for GHG inventory and projections, and emerging pilots such as the Just Energy Transition Plan. These enable cost-effective emission limits, adaptation programs, and public data transparency on vehicle emissions, positioning Serbia toward European Green Deal compatibility.

Limitations, however, crystallize at the crossroads, demanding urgent reforms. Without binding science-driven modeling (e.g., for 1.5°C pathways), projections lack rigor (Triyanti et al., 2023; UNEP, 2024; IEA, 2023; siloed ministries exacerbate bottlenecks in by-law enforcement and sectoral roadmaps (Scown et al., 2023; European Commission, 2025); and limited stakeholder engagement hampers ownership, as seen in ongoing gaps highlighted by civil society (Koalicija 27, 2025). Limitations, however, crystallize at the crossroads, demanding urgent reforms. Without binding science-driven modeling (e.g., for 1.5°C pathways), projections lack rigor (Triyanti et al., 2023); siloed ministries exacerbate bottlenecks in by-law enforcement and sectoral roadmaps (Scown et al., 2023; European Commission, 2025); and limited stakeholder engagement hampers ownership, as seen in ongoing gaps highlighted by civil society (Koalicija 27, 2025). The law's promising advisory roles and penalty regimes remain unrealized without deliberate governance upgrades in coordination, science integration, and participation to unlock the upper pathway toward resilient, decarbonized outcomes by 2030. These strengths position Serbia toward European Green Deal compatibility, though progress must be benchmarked against EU-wide trends (European Environment Agency, 2024). Project will contribute to a better environmental and climate change status and quality of life for citizens in the Republic of Serbia and support the implementation of the EU Green Agenda. As a candidate country, Serbia is already making efforts to align with EU policies and actions and achieve climate neutrality by 2050. (EU za tebe, 2025).

7.1. Policy Recommendations

To translate the legislative framework into tangible climate outcomes, targeted enhancements are required across several governance domains. The following recommendations are proposed:

(1) **Institutional Strengthening:** Develop formal inter-ministerial coordination bodies with clear mandates and resources to overcome sectoral silos.

(2) **Embedding Scientific Robustness:** Legally mandate the development and use of national climate scenarios in line with IPCC methodologies to inform policy planning and track progress against long-term goals.

(3) **Enhancing Accountability:** Introduce clear performance indicators and reporting requirements for sectoral ministries and local governments to ensure the implementation of planned measures.

(4) **Fostering Inclusive Governance**: Establish legally defined channels for stakeholders and public participation in the development and revision of climate plans, drawing on best practices for participatory governance and ongoing efforts to improve policy planning. (EU za tebe, 2025).

(5) **Implementing a Just Transition**: Accelerate the adoption and funding of the Plan for Just Energy Transition to ensure a fair and structured phase-out of coal-dependent economies (Ministarstvo rudarstva i energetike, 2025).

8. Conclusion

Serbia's Climate Change Law undeniably provides the indispensable legal foundation for a coordinated national response to climate change, marking a decisive break from previous ad-hoc approaches. This analysis unequivocally demonstrates that the law represents a starting point rather than a complete solution, a point emphasized in the latest national strategic documents (Republika Srbija, 2023; Republika Srbija, 2025). It has successfully initiated crucial processes for monitoring emissions and planning for a low-carbon future, with the MRV system and illustrative projects like Vinča and TENT serving as tangible proof-of-concept. However, this analysis unequivocally demonstrates that the law in its current form represents a starting point rather than a complete solution. Its architectural scope, while commendable, is undermined by foundational weaknesses that risk rendering it a symbolic rather than a transformative instrument. The European Commission's 2025 Country Report for Serbia explicitly highlights the continued delay in adopting the integrated NECP and the insufficient empowerment of the Inter-ministerial Council as the two most critical obstacles to Chapter 27 progress.

The ultimate success of Serbia's climate policy will not be measured by the law's adoption, but by its capacity to drive tangible emission reductions and build systemic resilience. This hinges entirely on subsequent regulatory and policy efforts to address its core weaknesses, a point emphasized in the latest national strategic documents (RoS, 2025) and international assessments (European Commission, 2025).

Second, building cohesive institutional capacity and mandating coordination is critical to overcome the pervasive fragmentation that currently threatens implementation. Third, establishing clear accountability mechanisms and performance indicators is essential to translate plans into actionable results and ensure that institutions are answerable for their climate commitments. Finally, embracing participatory democracy is not merely about fairness; it is about harnessing societal knowledge and building the public mandate necessary for difficult transitions.

The external pressures, most notably the EU's CBAM and the escalating physical impacts of climate change, make inaction a costly and increasingly unviable option. External pressures are reinforced by global findings on emissions gaps and energy transitions (UNEP, 2024; IEA, 2023).

The European Commission's 2025 Country Report for Serbia explicitly highlights the continued delay in adopting the integrated NECP and the insufficient empowerment of the Inter-ministerial Council as the two most critical obstacles to Chapter 27 progress (European Commission, 2025).

By embarking on these essential reforms, Serbia has the opportunity to solidify its climate governance framework, protect its economic interests, and navigate a more secure, sustainable, and equitable developmental path. The journey from a foundational legal text to a transformative governance system is complex and demands sustained political will, but it is the only path toward genuine climate resilience.

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Put Srbije ka otpornosti na klimatske promene: Kritička procena Zakona o klimatskim promenama i njegovih implikacija

Vladanka Presburger Ulniković[1*], Anđelka Radosavljević[2], Bojana Božilović[1], Ana Ćirišan[1]

[1]Fakultet za ekologiju i zaštitu životne sredine, Univerzitet „Union“ Cara Dušana 62-64, Beograd 11000, Srbija

[3]Agencija za zaštitu životne sredine Srbije, Ruže Jovanovića 27a, Beograd 11000, Srbija*

Autor za dopisivanje: vladanka.gsc@unionnikolatesla.edu.rs

Apstrakt: Zakon o klimatskim promenama Srbije (2021) predstavlja ključni element u razvoju modernog nacionalnog sistema klimatskog upravljanja, usklađenog sa Pariskim sporazumom i politikama Evropske unije. Ovaj rad daje analitički pregled njegovog potencijala da doprinese klimatskoj otpornosti Srbije kroz razmatranje institucionalne arhitekture, mehanizama monitoringa i usklađenosti sa savremenim pristupima klimatskom upravljanju. Uvođenjem sveobuhvatnih okvira za mitigaciju, adaptaciju i izveštavanje, zakon uspostavlja čvrstu osnovu za dalji razvoj klimatskih politika i predstavlja važan korak ka dugoročnoj transformaciji sistema zaštite životne sredine.Istovremeno, analiza prepoznaje određene oblasti u kojima je moguće dodatno ojačati integraciju naučno utemeljenih metodologija i unaprediti participativne procese, što se može posmatrati kao prilika za dalji razvoj i usklađivanje sa međunarodnim praksama. Oslanjajući se na savremenu literaturu o klimatskom upravljanju (Braithwaite et al., 2007; Bulkeley, 2021; Triyanti et al., 2023), rad ukazuje da zakon predstavlja stabilan temelj na kojem se, uz doslednu institucionalnu podršku i nastavak međusektorske saradnje, može graditi efikasan i održiv sistem klimatskih politika. U tom smislu, očekuje se da će dalja primena zakona doprineti postepenom jačanju klimatske otpornosti Srbije i napretku ka dugoročnim razvojnim ciljevima.

Ključne reči: Zakon o klimatskim promenama, emisije gasova staklene bašte, MRV, CBAM, EU ETS, energetska tranzicija, klimatska politika