

Serbia: mass protests in the shadow of tragedies

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In recent weeks, Serbia has seen some of the largest public demonstrations, drawing tens of thousands of people, since the country's democratic transition in 2000. Protests under the slogan 'Serbia against violence' broke out on 8 May in response to the government's inaction following mass shootings earlier in the month. On 3 May, a 13-year-old boy killed a security guard and nine students aged between 12 and 14 at a school in Belgrade using his father's (legally owned) gun. The following day, a 20-year-old who possessed a weapon illegally opened fire in a small village near the town of Mladenovac, targeting young people in a school yard as well as others, killing eight in the shooting spree. The total death toll from these incidents was 18 people (mostly teenagers), while another 20 were wounded.

The protest movement is a grassroots effort, but it has been backed by some opposition groups and civil society organisations. It has brought together people from across the political spectrum: from right-wing movements to liberal, left-wing and pro-European groups. The protesters are demanding the resignation of interior minister Bratislav Gašić, the head of the Security and Information Agency (BIA) Aleksandar Vulin and the members of the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media. They are also calling for the revocation of the broadcasting licences of pro-government TV stations that they claim promote violence (including Pink TV and Happy TV), and for the closure of tabloids that disseminate such content. Some demonstrators have also called for the resignation of President Aleksandar Vučić and the dismissal of the board of the public television station RTS.

The minister of education stepped down from his post in the wake of the demonstrations, but the government has rejected the possibility of any further resignations. President Vučić has announced that early elections will be held this September at the latest. The government is also organising a counter-demonstration by the ruling camp's supporters in Belgrade on 26 May. It has also promised more detailed and frequent checks on people who hold weapons permits and a moratorium on the issuance of new ones. The ruling coalition is also planning to launch a programme that will allow for the voluntary surrender of illegal firearms to the relevant authorities without any legal consequences. Once this campaign is completed, penalties for the illegal possession of firearms will be tightened. The government has also announced that the number of police officers will be increased and that they will be posted in schools.

Commentary

- The current protests were triggered by the government's response to the mass shootings. Although a three-day national mourning period was declared in Serbia, government officials did not appear at the sites of the tragedies and tried to avoid any gestures that would imply they bore some political responsibility for these incidents (the perpetrator from Mladenovac was known to the police and had previously been detained, but the prosecutors did not bring any charges against him at that time). The government has focused primarily on shifting responsibility for the incidents to others, including NGOs that promote Western values, and on suggesting that the perpetrators were motivated by religious or ideological motives. From the beginning, it also sought to discredit the grassroots initiative to organise a march of silence, which it interpreted as an anti-government act. The protesters have been accused of posing a threat to public order and the interests of the state, while the pro-government media either did not cover the first demonstration at all or significantly underreported the number of participants (over 50,000 people took part in it, and not 9000 as officially reported).
- The government's actions have been counterproductive, leading to yet greater public mobilisation. The response of those in power has been seen as a manifest display of arrogance and a lack of empathy towards citizens who were disturbed by the two shootings. Although gun crime is relatively common in Serbia, the incident on 3 May was the first one to claim the lives of schoolchildren. The protesters claim that the pro-government media has contributed to the spread and acceptance of gun crime, and created an environment conducive to such acts by portraying those convicted of violent crimes in a positive light and promoting violence. The government's focus on tightening repressive measures and strengthening law enforcement agencies has been seen as an effort to exploit the tragedy so it can step up its control over society. The government has also ignored demands to increase psychological support for the victims, take systemic preventive measures, and boost spending on education and social assistance.
- The demonstrations have led to a consolidation of the ruling camp, which has been underpinned by the fear that any concessions (including resignations) would be interpreted as a sign of weakness and an admission of political responsibility for the tragedies. To that end, the government is focused on discrediting the protest movement in the hope that the upcoming holiday season will help to gradually extinguish it. As in the case of previous anti-government demonstrations, militias linked to the security structures have been trying to draw the protesters into clashes, but so far this has failed to discourage citizens from taking to the streets. At the same time, the anticipated pro-government counter-demonstration is designed to show that public support for the president and his camp remains high. The state apparatus has taken steps to ensure an adequate turnout by arranging the transport of protesters to Belgrade and pressuring those who work in the public sector to join the event. The announcement of early elections is also a tactical ploy designed to defuse social tensions. Given the current extent of 'state capture' and the pressure it can put on the voters, the ruling camp can expect to score another electoral victory and thus strengthen its legitimacy. However, it is not a foregone conclusion whether the snap elections will be held by September as announced, or whether they will be postponed until next spring.

- In the short term the demonstrations are unlikely to pose a threat to those in power. The protest movement is very heterogeneous and does not have distinct leaders, while the government has shown itself to be very effective at discrediting popular politicians and social activists who aspire to leadership roles. On the one hand, the movement's diverse structure gives it mass appeal; but on the other, that makes it difficult to formulate political demands and a concrete strategy for action. Anti-government protests have erupted repeatedly in Serbia since 2016, but every time the government's wait-and-see tactics have succeeded in gradually extinguishing them. However, we can expect that some will become increasingly dissatisfied with the autocratic style of government, which may boost the opposition movement to the Vučić regime in the long term. This is all the more likely as the response to the tragedies has exposed the Serbian state's systemic problems, including the weakness of its public institutions (which are subordinate to the interests of the ruling parties), the ubiquitous aggression in the public space, corruption, and the links between the government and organised crime.
- EU and US officials have not taken a stand on the demonstrations. The Serbian government would probably use any remarks by Western politicians or diplomats to portray the demonstrators as being inspired by forces hostile to Serbia's interests, which the government is already trying to do anyway. Moreover, any deeper political changes in the country are likely to be very violent and destabilise the situation in the region. This is why the Serbian government, despite its undemocratic nature, still enjoys the support of some Western countries.