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Protests in Serbia: a crack in Vučić's system of political dominance

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A wave of protests has been sweeping across Serbia for over a month. The protests were triggered by a roof collapse at the Novi Sad railway station on 1 November, which resulted in 15 fatalities. Initially, these were local demonstrations, but they have since spread to nearly all major cities. Protesters are participating in decentralised acts of civil disobedience, including blockades of roads and state institutions, such as public television and prosecution authorities' offices. A prominent feature of the protests is a widespread strike by school and university students, who are occupying educational buildings. Protesters are calling for accountability from those responsible for the disaster and the oversight of the railway station's renovation, which was completed in June. They are also demanding that all documents related to the railway station's modernisation to be disclosed to the general public and those involved in the authorities' increasingly aggressive response to the demonstrations to be punished.

Government efforts to suppress the protests, including random arrests, provocation of incidents during demonstrations, and the use of pressure and intimidation tactics, have only exacerbated the unrest. The authorities appear unwilling to fully investigate a case in which senior members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) were involved. Under public pressure, they have taken limited actions, such as dismissing a few officials, including the unpopular Minister of Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure, Goran Vesić, and releasing some project documentation. However, protesters view these steps as mere shadow boxing. The government insists it has met student demands and sees no further reason for protests, aiming to suppress the movement through tactical concessions and police aggression. Officials hope the protests will dissipate naturally, as in previous instances. The government retains the support of most Western countries, which fear instability in Serbia should President Aleksandar Vučić's administration collapse.

Increasing dissatisfaction

Since 2016, Serbia has witnessed regular mass protests, which, until now, have been effectively neutralised by the authorities. The causes of these demonstrations have varied, ranging from purely economic issues such as teacher and farmer strikes, to the harassment of opposition figures by law enforcement agencies in 2018, lithium mining in Serbia from 2022 to 2024, urban planning policies dictated by property developers allied with the government, concerns over air and water pollution, and the lenient enforcement of local regulations for foreign investors. Until now, the government has successfully dealt with public discontent by framing each protest as an isolated issue affecting specific groups or

regions. The government has leveraged tight control over the media to discredit emerging protest leaders. Additionally, provocateurs linked to the authorities have disrupted rallies and thus enabled the government to show demonstrators in a negative light and subsequently, discourage public participation. This strategy has gradually reduced civic engagement, leading to the eventual decline of the protest movement.

Since public demands have been disregarded and have not been addressed, a sense of helplessness has developed among citizens regarding the SNS's entrenched power and influence. However, since 2022, protests have erupted with increasing frequency. The coordination and cooperation between various local protest groups have also improved, particularly following the 2022 demonstrations against lithium mining by the Australian-Canadian company Rio Tinto. These efforts have been further galvanised by increasingly aggressive measures, such as threats, pressure, and arrests, targeting activists and members of organisations challenging government policies.

A symbol of the corrupt system

The intense public reaction to the roof collapse at the Novi Sad railway appears to stem from its perception as a symbol of the government's incompetence, nepotism, and corruption. On top of that, neither the government nor state-controlled enterprises have accepted responsibility for the catastrophe. The station's renovation was part of the SNS's flagship project covering modernisation of the Belgrade–Budapest railway route. The Serbian section is being built by Chinese and Russian companies, including China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) and RZD International, with funding from Chinese and Russian bank loans. The refurbishment of the relatively small Novi Sad railway station cost €65 million, with CCCC as the main contractor, supported by Serbian and Hungarian subcontractors. The inflated renovation costs highlight widespread corruption and the allocation of lucrative public investment contracts to businesses aligned with the government. As is common under SNS practices, most documentation and agreements with foreign partners were classified. The railway station was inaugurated in the presence of ruling party politicians, even though it had not received an occupancy permit. This has reinforced public belief that the authorities implement projects without adequate oversight or compliance with legal regulations, eroding users' fundamental sense of safety. Moreover, immediately after the disaster, the government claimed the affected part of the station had not been renovated, a statement contradicted by photographic evidence. Officials also sought to shift blame onto the building's designers from the communist era. This tragedy has thus exposed the SNS's typical practice of shielding allies and political associates of President Vučić from accountability.

Protesters' demands

Protesters are demanding a thorough investigation into the causes of the roof collapse and the prosecution of those responsible. They regard the announced measures and selective dismissals as insufficient. The Serbian public distrusts the government also due to the extensive capture of state institutions in recent years, including the judiciary and the prosecution authorities, as well as the government's persistent efforts to evade accountability for its failures. Demonstrators are calling for a transparent investigation and the disclosure of the network of individuals, including political figures, responsible for the tragedy. This issue is particularly sensitive for the government, as Miloš Vučević, the

incumbent prime minister and leader of the SNS, served as mayor of Novi Sad from 2012 to 2022, when the agreements for the station's modernisation were signed. Furthermore, the project involved Chinese and Hungarian companies that enjoy numerous privileges due to Serbia's strategic partnerships with these countries. Protesters are also demanding the release of all documents related to the station's renovation and other regional projects, such as the Novi Sad–Ruma route constructed by Chinese firms and the Linglong tyre factory in Zrenjanin, also built by Chinese companies.

The grassroots mobilisation

The current protest movement in Serbia differs from previous waves of discontent against the SNS government, with the measures taken by the authorities thus far only serving to strengthen it. University and secondary school students have joined the protests for the first time in two decades, doing so on a massive scale, by occupying school buildings nationwide. A notable development is the support from some university faculty, who had previously avoided confronting the government. The demonstrations, as mentioned earlier, take the form of decentralised civil disobedience, with a key feature being road blockades at the time of the disaster to honour the victims. The movement has deliberately avoided appointing a clear leader to emphasise its grassroots nature.

Previous anti-government protests often lacked clear objectives beyond the general demand for regime change. In certain instances, individual groups and organisations have protested against specific strategies of action. In contrast, the Novi Sad disaster has led to articulating rather specific demands: justice for the victims and accountability for those responsible. These demands resonate widely with the public, facilitating broad mobilisation. This focus complicates the government's usual strategy of calling snap elections to renew its legitimacy (parliamentary elections were held in 2020, 2022, and 2023). Attempts to demobilise the protests, such as shifting attention to tensions with Kosovo or promising targeted social benefits like housing for young people, have also failed. Therefore, an earlier start to the Christmas holiday break had been announced to deter youth gatherings and justify removing them from occupied buildings. The fact that people are taking to the streets across the country, even in smaller towns, poses a particular challenge for the ruling party. Serbians are thus becoming aware of the extent of public dissatisfaction, and this could lay the groundwork for new political or organisational platforms aiming to challenge the existing regime.

Despite the unprecedented scale of the demonstrations and the novel methods citizens are applying to express dissent, the government retains key advantages. These include control over media and state institutions, along with substantial financial and organisational resources, which it uses to undermine protest unity. Officials argue they have fulfilled students' demands and claim the protesters aim to overthrow the government and undermine a legally elected authority. This narrative is also presented to foreign partners, with the government stressing the risks of destabilisation in Serbia.