

Resignation of Serbia's prime minister: a failed attempt to quell protests

Marta Szpala

On 28 January, the Serbian Prime Minister and leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Miloš Vučević, submitted his resignation, officially in response to an incident in Novi Sad in which students were assaulted by individuals closely linked to the SNS and the prime minister's son. He announced his departure a day after more than 100,000 protesters took part in a 24-hour blockade of Belgrade's main thoroughfare. The demonstrations, which have been ongoing for nearly three months, were triggered by a building collapse at Novi Sad's railway station on 1 November last year, resulting in 15 fatalities (see: ['Protests in Serbia: a crack in Vučić's system of political dominance'](#)). The largely student-led protests have attracted an unprecedented number of participants by Serbian standards. Protesters have been demanding a full disclosure of the documentation related to the disaster and the prosecution of those responsible. They have also called for accountability for those who failed to prevent violence against demonstrators. Large-scale protests have occurred in over 100 towns and cities. More than 60 university faculties remain occupied, while schools continue to be disrupted by blockades and strikes. Academic and teaching staff, as well as associations of farmers and lawyers, have supported the protests. A general strike on 24 January was supported mainly by small and medium-sized business owners.

Previous attempts to disperse the protests have only led to further escalation. The resignation of the prime minister, who is widely regarded as fully subordinate to President Aleksandar Vučić, has also failed to quell public unrest. The demonstrations are continuing, and further actions have already been announced. If a new government is not formed within 30 days, early parliamentary elections will be required. Protesters and the opposition oppose this, insisting that systemic changes must precede any vote to ensure its democratic integrity.

Commentary

- **The protests have exposed the extent of public discontent with President Vučić's increasingly autocratic rule.** His power relies on a network of corrupt actors and control over the media and state institutions, including the judiciary—a situation symbolised by the Novi Sad disaster. The government attempted to suppress the protests by intimidating participants and their families with threats of job dismissals, revoked scholarships, and other forms of pressure. It also published protesters' personal data in the media, conducted arbitrary detentions, and permitted police and individuals linked to the ruling party to assault demonstrators. However, these measures only fuelled

discontent, which has escalated into a broader challenge to the current system of government.

- **The prime minister's resignation aligns with President Vučić's efforts to restore the government's legitimacy through changes in personnel.** At a government rally on 24 January, officials announced plans to restructure the SNS into a new social movement. The mayor of Novi Sad, where the disaster occurred, also resigned. By taking steps to revamp the ruling party's image and reorganising the cabinet, Vučić aims to create the impression of a fresh start and a willingness to enact systemic reforms. He has declared his readiness for dialogue with protesters while simultaneously accusing them of being influenced by foreign actors, such as Croatia and the 'West'. He has also alleged that they are seeking to destabilise the country and overthrow the legally elected government. However, changes in the government and the selective release of documents appear to be tactical moves designed to buy time, sow divisions within the protest movement, and ultimately cause it to dissipate. If these efforts fail to produce the desired results, Vučić may call early elections, anticipating that his control over the administrative apparatus and security forces will secure his party another victory. Factors that work in Vučić's favour include his close ties to figures in Donald Trump's new administration, some EU member states, and China; for Beijing, he remains a key guarantor of Chinese economic interests in Serbia.
- **The government's response has been too slow, and the protests show no signs of abating.** Belgrade's actions appear to have reinforced protesters' conviction that sustained mass pressure is the only way to achieve their demands and, ultimately, bring about democratic reforms in Serbia. A thorough investigation into the causes of the disaster and an inquiry into cases of violence against protesters could reveal the extent of corruption and abuses committed by the current government, including its use of state institutions to control and intimidate the population. Both demonstrators and the opposition parties that support them have rejected the prospect of early elections, arguing that such a vote cannot be genuinely democratic without systemic reforms, including changes to electoral law, verification of voter rolls and guarantees of equal access to the media.