

Students vs the system – protest strategies in Serbia

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The mass protests, ongoing for six months and led primarily by student movements, have highlighted the scale of public frustration with President Aleksandar Vučić's style of governance. They also point to a shift in the aspirations of Serbian society, particularly among the younger generation, who are demanding greater transparency from those in power and accountability for politicians and their associates who break the law. The demonstrations have spurred mobilisation and self-organisation among numerous social groups that had previously remained largely passive – not only in the capital, Belgrade, but also in many smaller towns across the country.

These protests represent the greatest challenge faced by the president since his party – the Serbian Progressive Party – came to power in 2012. More than a third of citizens have participated in various demonstrations, and on 15 March, Serbia witnessed the largest protest in its history, attended by over 350,000 people. The authorities remain unwilling to make any concessions. However, in an effort to retain the support of Western partners, they have avoided resorting to violence against demonstrators on a massive scale. Instead, they are focused on delegitimising the protest movement, seeking to create divisions within it, selectively detaining and intimidating activists, and targeting smaller gatherings in the hope of demobilising society and bringing the protests to an end. In response to this strategy, students abandoned their previous stance of refraining from political demands at the beginning of May and initiated calls for early elections – a demand which the authorities, in the current climate of mass mobilisation, have rejected.

Public frustration

The Novi Sad railway station disaster on 1 November 2024, which claimed the lives of 16 people, provoked a strong public reaction. The Serbian public have treated the collapse of the canopy of the recently renovated railway station as a symbol of the system of governance under the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which is rooted in nepotism and corruption. As a result, projects are often undertaken by companies (both domestic and foreign) without proper oversight, posing a threat to public safety. State institutions have not only been subordinated to the ruling party to serve its interests but are also used to exert full control over society and suppress any activity that might pose a threat to its power. The relatively strong economic situation, support from foreign partners



(including the EU, USA, Russia, and China), access to substantial financial resources, and an efficient, well-organised party apparatus have so far enabled the authorities to win successive elections and marginalise opponents, critics or ordinary citizens who question government decisions.

A key strength of the regime, led by President Vučić, lies in its extensive party structures, which include 800,000 members – approximately 12% of the population. Party membership offers not only access to

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lucrative jobs and contracts but also impunity and protection from the justice system – whether in cases of corruption, mismanagement, the appropriation of state assets, or errors and negligence that, as in the case of the Novi Sad disaster, have led to fatal accidents. During the SNS’s time in power, no official has been held criminally accountable for their actions, and investigations into such matters have either never been launched or have stalled at an early stage.

For nearly a decade, Serbian society has shown growing frustration, manifesting in regularly recurring protests. At the root of this discontent lie the arrogance of the ruling elite and President Vučić’s autocratic style of governance. He treats any demands or calls for policy changes voiced during demonstrations as personal attacks and consistently refuses to respond to the expectations raised by various social groups. Activists and opposition figures are subjected to surveillance and targeted by smear campaigns in the media. They are dismissed from their jobs, including in the public sector, subjected to audits, and denied access to public services such as education or healthcare. The authorities have also made consistent efforts to undermine the credibility of all alternative social actors – opposition parties and associations – or to bring them under control, as seen in the case of trade unions and professional organisations. Citizens have been discouraged from political participation and any form of civic activism, resulting in widespread apathy and a lack of belief that any change in the political system is possible.

In response to the growing public unrest triggered by the Novi Sad disaster, the government opted for the tactical dismissal of several ministers, while simultaneously attempting to deter further protests by arresting random participants and activists – some of whom were beaten in police stations – and provoking incidents during demonstrations through individuals connected to the authorities. The expectation was that these isolated resignations would satisfy the public demand for accountability over the disaster and lead to an end to the protests. Instead of discouraging participation, as had happened after previous demonstrations, these actions only intensified the public mobilisation.

Escalation of protests and youth awakening

Initially, the demonstrations occurred mainly in Novi Sad and Belgrade. These included decentralised, grassroots, and spontaneous actions commemorating the victims of the disaster with 15 minutes of silence through road and transport hub blockades, as well as protests in front of public institutions (such as the prosecutor’s office and city hall). These were organised by opposition parties and non-governmental organisations calling for investigations into the causes of the disaster. In mid-November 2024, students and secondary school pupils joined the protests. On 22 November 2024, during a blockade outside the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) in Belgrade, a brutal attack was carried out by an organised group of ruling party members.¹ In response, students from the faculty began an occupation of university buildings. In the following days, other departments of public universities – in a show of solidarity – announced their own blockades, and student-led occupations have continued to this day.²

¹ M. Ž. Lazić, ‘Službenici javnih preduzeća, lokalni političari i jurišnici SNS: Ovi su ljudi koji su napali studente FDU’, Nova.rs, 27 November 2024.

² Since November 2024, no classes have been held, examinations have not been scheduled, and university buildings have been occupied mainly by students participating in the protests.

For the first time in over two decades, young people – previously seen as apathetic and passive – became politically engaged on a large scale. The first signs of increased activism in this social group were already visible during the demonstrations following numerous irregularities in the early parliamentary and local elections held on 17 December 2023,³ in which the SNS once again achieved the best result. In the first half of 2024, students from several departments in Novi Sad protested against growing attempts to assert control over universities and against government attacks on professors critical of its policies. Although these events pointed to the gradual mobilisation of young people and their rising aspirations for the democratisation of public life, they did not yet lead to mass protests at the time, and the authorities were able to neutralise the demonstrations relatively swiftly.

The students' actions were supported by secondary school pupils and members of the academic community, including teachers

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who had long been in conflict with the authorities over deteriorating working conditions in the education sector and increasing political control. The government has consistently rejected demands for reform or increased funding for the education system. In an attempt to quell the protests, it brought forward the winter holidays, starting the Christmas break a week earlier than planned, in the expectation that this would defuse the situation. Contrary to these intentions, the move led to the spread of demonstrations across the country. On 22 December, students organised one of the largest protests in Serbian history at Slavija Square, with over 100,000 participants. Their movement began to play a key role in mobilising society, planning and organising further major demonstrations (with local activists or communities initiating those in smaller towns), and formulating new demands directed at the authorities.

The sharp public backlash and mobilisation were further intensified by a government-led media campaign in December 2024 and January 2025 targeting students, accusing them of alleged aggressive behaviour and of posing a threat to public order. Government representatives went as far as encouraging drivers to push through pedestrian-crossing blockades, arguing that the demonstrators were infringing on citizens' right to free movement and emphasising that anyone bypassing such obstructions would not face legal consequences. Each new incident involving students being struck by vehicles – some of which were driven by ruling party officials – only increased public support for the protestors and deepened resentment towards the authorities. Concerned families began expressing solidarity with their children involved in the demonstrations. This also contributed to growing distrust of the state-controlled media, which actively participated in the campaign against the student movement, portraying it as a threat to national stability and disclosing the contact details and sensitive personal data of its members.

New forms of political activism

The organisational structure of the student movement, developed during the initial months of the protests (December–January), is based on collective decision-making through deliberative processes held during weekly meetings open to all interested students of a given faculty, known as *p/lena*.⁴ These debates, conducted with respect for differing opinions and an emphasis on compromise, stand in stark contrast to the authoritarian practices of the ruling authorities. By promoting democratic mechanisms

³ M. Szpala, 'Serbia: protesty po przedterminowych wyborach parlamentarnych', OSW, 29 December 2023, osw.waw.pl.

⁴ Decisions at each faculty are made during meetings that are open to all students. At the university level, a special decision-making mechanism is used in order to reflect the positions of students from all faculties. In March, an attempt was also made to establish a platform to coordinate the activities of representatives from all public universities, with the aim of representing the student movement as a whole.

of civic participation, the students are openly challenging the system of governance rooted in the arbitrary decisions of the president, whose actions go beyond his constitutionally limited powers.⁵

On 17 January, the students formulated four joint demands and declared that the protests would end on condition that these demands were met. These include: (1) the publication of the full documentation related to the renovation of the Novi Sad railway station, (2) the withdrawal of charges against students, activists, and citizens detained during earlier demonstrations following the Novi Sad tragedy, (3) the prosecution of all individuals involved in attacks on students, professors, and citizens, and (4) a 20% increase in funding for universities. Individual universities also presented additional demands, though these were not backed by the broader student movement. The *plena* have also become a forum for broader debate on Serbia's current situation and the possible direction for political and societal change.

The establishment of internal decision-making principles (through *plena*), a model of collective representation (without clear leaders), and a general long-term goal of

” The student movement has become an expression of society’s broader desire for political change, reflecting a push to create a more democratic system of governance responsive to citizens’ needs.

systemic change through increased political engagement by citizens was accompanied by the search for new forms of protest that could engage wider social groups. A key priority was reaching smaller towns, where people had not heard about the demonstrations due to their reliance on government-controlled information channels. The first such initiative was a march from Belgrade to Novi Sad at the end of January. This was followed by demonstrations in cities such as Kragujevac (15 February) and Niš (15 March), each preceded by student marches from various parts of Serbia to those locations.

The choice of protest locations was driven by historical symbolism as well as the intention to ensure representation across different regions of the country. Crucially, this approach provided important support for various protest groups in smaller towns, where residents face far stronger pressure from the ruling party and have limited means of publicising their grievances. Coordinating the organisation of marches and demonstrations led to the formation of local cooperation and support networks. These also helped foster a positive image of the demonstrators through direct contact with local residents, breaking the government's information monopoly that sought to portray them negatively. The visible presence of protestors in public spaces—even in small towns—encouraged broader social groups not only to support the students actively, but also to articulate their own demands to local authorities and raise issues of concern to local communities and specific professional groups.

A key distinguishing feature of the student movement is its commitment to building civic solidarity across religious, ethnic, and regional divides. This includes, for instance, the active inclusion of Muslim and Bosniak students, with respect for their religious identity. Such an approach directly challenges the longstanding practices of the ruling authorities, who have historically exploited social divisions and ethnic tensions to demobilise protest movements – through fearmongering about Vojvodina separatism (with Novi Sad as its capital), Islamic radicalism, or alleged Croatian threats. Expressions of solidarity from Slovenian and Croatian students, along with public support for protests in Montenegro and North Macedonia, have helped situate the movement's demands within broader regional aspirations for the democratisation of political systems. They have also served to undermine the government's narrative of supposed threats emanating from neighbouring countries. At the same time, the movement has drawn on significant historical events – such as organising a protest in Kragujevac

⁵ A report by the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), a body of the Council of Europe, indicates that despite having very limited executive powers, the President of Serbia effectively exercises authority over the state. See *Evaluation Report. Serbia*, GRECO, 5 July 2022, rm.coe.int.

on Serbia's Statehood Day, commemorating the First Serbian Uprising of 1804, and the adoption of the country's first constitution – to challenge the government's monopoly over national symbols. This strategy has helped discredit the ruling camp's portrayal of itself as the sole defender of national interests and its depiction of demonstrators as traitors inspired by Serbia's enemies.

Pacification strategies

For decision-makers in Belgrade, meeting the protestors' demands – particularly those concerning the investigation into the Novi Sad disaster – is deemed unacceptable, as it would risk revealing the systemic use of state resources to serve the regime's political and economic allies. To date, the full documentation relating to the station renovation project has not been disclosed (despite government claims to the contrary), and no one has been charged in connection with the disaster.⁶ At the same time, the authorities have refrained from using violence against protestors, aiming to preserve the support and goodwill of Western leaders while avoiding further societal mobilisation. Consequently, they have adopted a two-track strategy. On the one hand, they seek to delegitimise the protest movement by portraying it as an aggressive minority intent on toppling a democratically elected government and terrorising the Serbian public who simply want to return to normal life. On the other hand, they employ a wide range of behind-the-scenes repressive tactics to discourage further dissent.

The former approach includes the establishment of an encampment in Belgrade by a group of students who purportedly wish to study rather than protest. This initiative

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was organised by the ruling party to support the media narrative of internal divisions within the student movement and to convey the impression that part of it still supports the authorities. At the same time, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has attempted to organise so-called counter-rallies to demonstrate its continued popular support. One such three-day gathering took place in Belgrade from 12 to 15 April and was attended by party officials, public sector employees, social welfare recipients coerced into travelling to the capital (including from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina), and paid demonstrators. However, turnout was significantly lower than expected. A similar attempt to stage a three-day pro-government rally in Niš on 16–17 May also ended in failure. These outcomes point to growing challenges in mobilising the SNS's supporters, as the sheer scale of the student protests has discouraged many former supporters from expressing their allegiance publicly, for fear of social ostracism.

To discourage citizens from participating in protests, the government is primarily applying economic pressure. This includes cutting the wages of teachers who are on strike and altering the pay structure for university staff.⁷ Public sector employees are subjected to various forms of coercion, such as being dismissed for participating in or supporting demonstrations – in some cases, even for having children who participate. Several police and law enforcement officers were forced into early retirement for these reasons. Individual citizens and their families have been harassed with threatening messages and phone calls, while students have been warned of possible expulsion. Pressure has also been applied to non-governmental organisations supporting civic activism. In February, the police raided

⁶ On 11 April this year, the court returned the indictment against 13 individuals overseeing the implementation of the investment project to the prosecutor's office for further clarification. The investigation does not cover the company that carried out the project. That company, in turn, has filed a private lawsuit against the victims' families, as well as against experts and organisations that have questioned the quality of its construction work. See I. Ogarević, 'Šest meseci od tragedije: Pravda za žrtve novosadske stanice zarobljena u korupciji i političkim igrama', Nova.rs, 1 May 2025.

⁷ The regulations governing the academic staff remuneration system were amended, including a change to the division of working time. Previously, half of the workload was allocated to teaching and the other half to research. At present, 90% of working time must be devoted to teaching, with only 10% allocated to research.

the offices of four organisations on the pretext of alleged mismanagement of funds received from USAID. Authorities have resorted to selectively detaining activists and targeting them in public media smear campaigns. On 14 March, six activists were arrested (and remain in custody) in connection with an illegally intercepted and published conversation discussing protest strategies. This was presented as evidence of an alleged attempt to orchestrate a 'colour revolution' aimed at toppling the government. An unsuccessful attempt to provoke unrest during the 15 March demonstration involved plans to deploy a Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD) to intimidate the public.⁸ The authorities are also trying to sow divisions within society, using pro-government academic staff to discipline students. In this context, the idea emerged to introduce online learning as a way for students to complete the academic year. However, students have overwhelmingly rejected the proposal, stressing that remote teaching has no legal basis. Authorities have periodically tested the option of using police to break up student gatherings and occupations of university faculties – such as the raid on the Faculty of Physical Education in Novi Sad on 28 April. So far, these efforts have failed, as they tend to trigger widespread public mobilisation in defence of the repressed students and protesters.

Looking for allies outside Serbia

One of President Vučić's key assets is the backing he receives from foreign partners – not only within the EU and the United States but also China and Russia. Belgrade primarily counts on passivity and a lack of response from Washington and leading European allies such as Germany and France to the increasing repression aimed at quelling social unrest. This strategy is based on the assumption that the current US administration places little emphasis on the rule of law, while Berlin and Paris are perceived as lenient due to their strong economic ties with Serbia. Meanwhile, the Serbian government portrays the ongoing protests to Moscow and Beijing as so-called 'colour revolutions' allegedly funded by the West and intended to overthrow the legitimately elected authorities. President Vučić reinforced this narrative during his meetings with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in Moscow, where he took part in the Victory Day parade – one of only two European state leaders present, alongside Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico.

Given this context, internationalising the protests and gaining the support of Western societies has become a crucial priority for the student movement. The EU institutions' recent approach is perceived with strong disapproval among demonstrators – and Serbian society more broadly. In recent years, the EU has largely avoided criticising the Serbian authorities despite democratic backsliding, restrictions on media freedom, electoral irregularities, and attacks on civil society. Although EU symbols or references are largely absent during the protests and students remain divided over Serbia's potential membership, they nonetheless expect EU and broader European institutions – such as the Council of Europe – to respond to the government's actions, which contradict the proclaimed goal of accession. The protesters emphasise that their demands align with EU values: the development of democratic institutions, an independent judiciary, media freedom, and the protection of civil liberties.

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⁸ Proceedings in this case are ongoing before the European Court of Human Rights, which, on 30 April ordered the Serbian authorities to prohibit the use of such devices against protesters. See *Interim measure issued in sonic-weapon case*, European Court of Human Rights, 30 April 2025, hudoc.echr.coe.int.

and Vienna along the way. Their passage through these countries attracted the attention of German- and French-language media and included meetings at the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, and the European Court of Human Rights.⁹ The students called for international pressure on the Serbian government to ensure the protection of civil rights amid growing repression.

As a result of these efforts, international institutions have shown increasing interest in the situation in Serbia. A notable outcome was the adoption, on 7 May, of an un-

usually strong resolution by the European Parliament,¹⁰ which sharply criticised Serbia's domestic situation and highlighted, among other concerns, systemic corruption. The European Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, has also expressed support for the students' demands. However, leaders of EU member states have largely refrained from commenting on developments in Serbia, indicating that there has been no significant shift in overall EU policy towards Belgrade. It appears that EU capitals still believe that any political transformation in Serbia could destabilise the country and, by extension, the wider region.

” Students expect Western institutions to respond to the actions of those in power that violate EU principles of the rule of law and respect for civil liberties.

Students: a hope for change?

Given the widespread distrust of the electoral process, politicians (including the opposition)¹¹ and political institutions,¹² the student movement has become an expression of society's broader desire for change. It reflects a push to create a more democratic system of governance responsive to citizens' needs, and to rebuild a sense of community in the face of polarisation and the aggressive, conflict-driven narratives promoted by the government. According to a February survey by the Crta research centre, more than one third of Serbian citizens had participated in various protest actions¹³ – a number that has since grown significantly. Demonstrations have taken place in most towns across Serbia, and the student protests enjoy the support of 58% of the population,¹⁴ including members and supporters of the ruling party.

More than six months of protest have led to wide-scale mobilisation that transcends regional, class, and generational divides. People from diverse backgrounds have become actively involved in supporting students and teachers. Numerous grassroots support networks have emerged: individuals cooking meals for students, IT sector workers raising funds for striking teachers, lawyers offering assistance to detainees, farmers donating food, businesspeople providing logistical help (including taxi drivers and transport company owners), veterans – previously loyal to the government – helping secure protests, and local residents offering accommodation in their homes. This has brought about a transformation in Serbian society, which had long been marked by apathy and acceptance of the political status quo, engaging only occasionally in short-lived protests. Young people in particular, through the complex logistical organisation of large-scale demonstrations, have gained a strong sense of agency and a willingness to cooperate. They have demonstrated significant potential for self-organisation by simultaneously managing various initiatives – from decentralised protests (including

⁹ See *Serbian youth rides for the truth*, Tura do Strazbura, April 2025, turadostrazbura.rs. In May, another group of students organised a marathon, this time to Brussels.

¹⁰ European Parliament resolution of 7 May 2025 on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Serbia, European Parliament Legislative Observatory, oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu.

¹¹ D. Vucicevic, N. Jovic, *Youth emigration and political distrust in Serbia*, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, May 2020, wfd.org.

¹² S. Mihailović, 'Vlast?-Nezadovoljstvo/Institucije?-nepoverenje/Život?-Zadovoljstvo', Demostat, 9 October 2024, demostat.rs.

¹³ *Stavovi građana Srbije. O protestima i blokadama fakulteta*, CRTA, February 2025, crt.rs.

¹⁴ *Stavovi građana Srbije. Istraživanje javnog mnjenja*, CRTA, April 2025, crt.rs.

those ongoing since early May, calling for the release of detained activists in Novi Sad), to large-scale demonstrations and information campaigns promoting their demands in small towns (A Student in Every Village), as well as advocacy efforts abroad.

Despite widespread public support for the youth-led protests, they have not resulted in mass mobilisation among public sector employees, with the notable exception of teachers and the academic community. Attempts by students to initiate a general strike ended in failure. The government continues to depend on the loyalty of a large group of regime beneficiaries who fear the personal and legal consequences of political change, as well as the loss of their privileges. The ruling party maintains access to substantial financial resources that enable it to buy public support, particularly among the poorer segments of society. It also controls state institutions, which it uses to exert pressure and carry out repressive measures against supporters of the student movement, as well as the media, which portray the protesters in a negative light. Furthermore, the failure to meet student demands despite months of mass mobilisation reinforces the perception among the public that any change in power in Serbia is unattainable.

With the recent demand for early parliamentary elections, the protests have entered a new phase. The student movements have yet to clarify how they might engage with the electoral process – whether by nominating their own candidates, endorsing a broad opposition coalition, or proposing specific candidates. At the same time, existing opposition parties are not seen as a compelling alternative to the ruling party. The government retains multiple tools for manipulating election outcomes – from media control and pressure on public sector workers to using financial incentives to buy votes.¹⁵ However, it remains reluctant to call elections in the face of ongoing mass mobilisation. While the protests have weakened its legitimacy and damaged its image both domestically and among Western allies, the regime's current priority is to suppress the protest movement through intimidation, pressure, and financial incentives. It will also test the limits of Western tolerance for repression, gauging what level of authoritarian response remains acceptable to international partners. A continued lack of response from EU institutions risks further undermining the already severely weakened credibility of the European Union as a community founded on the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

¹⁵ A serious problem in Serbia is the electoral register, which has not been updated for years. This creates opportunities for large-scale fraud during elections.