

## The Rise of the Serbian Student Movement 2024: From Tragedy to Political Change

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Belgrade (Voždovac), March 15, 2025. Photo: Goran PL.

On November 1, 2024, part of the newly reconstructed concrete canopy at the main entrance of Novi Sad's railway station in Northern Serbia, which had reopened earlier that year, tragically collapsed, killing 15 people and injuring two others. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić expressed his condolences to the victims' families and promised to ensure accountability for the tragedy. He also remarked that the canopy had not been included in the station's recent renovation, a claim echoed by other officials of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). However, shortly after the address, social media revealed photographs and videos from May 2024, showing workers and scaffolding around the collapsed section, indicating that work had indeed been carried out, a fact later confirmed. This false claim, coupled with the revelation that the station's renovation costs had risen from 3 million to 16 million euros, sparked anger and raised suspicions of corruption in the government leadership. In response, citizens staged peaceful protests across the country, beginning with 15-minute silent street blockades to honour the victims and demand accountability.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The number of victims has meanwhile risen to 16, so the commemorative silence was extended to 16 minutes.

The government's response was swift, with reports indicating that members of the ruling SNS party and their supporters had attacked protesters to intimidate citizens and prevent the spread of discontent. These actions were facilitated by top government officials, including the President, using media channels largely controlled by the ruling party. On November 22, 2024, a violent incident occurred in front of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts of the University of Belgrade when a driver, stopped by protesters blocking the street, physically attacked students. Similar verbal and physical assaults across the country triggered an intensified response from students. On December 6, 2024, students began to block access and boycott classes at all state universities, including those in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, and Kragujevac, demanding: 1) the disclosure of the complete documentation about the railway reconstruction and responsibility for the collapse of the canopy, 2) the identification and punishment of those who attacked students and citizens, 3) the dismissal of charges against the arrested and detained students and youth at the protests, and 4) an increase in budget allocations for state higher education institutions by 20 percent.

The student protests intensified, accompanied by escalating incidents of violence, often provoked by ruling party members and their supporters. These incidents included cars driving into crowds, physical assaults, and the use of knives and sticks on students and citizens. On January 28, 2025, in Novi Sad, 22-year-old student Ana V., who was at the time placing protest stickers in the city, was severely beaten by ruling party members with a baseball bat, resulting in a broken jaw. In response to this attack, Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned, leading to the collapse of the government. On February 1, 2025, tens of thousands of students and citizens gathered in Novi Sad for one of the so far largest protests in the country, with support from public figures and global stars such as tennis player Novak Djokovic and pop singer Madonna.

Many other protests have been taking place across Serbia daily, continuing in a sustained manner. However, there was one day that stood out as particularly special. After days of student marches from various parts of Serbia—passing through numerous villages and towns where they were welcomed each time as liberators in a carnivalesque atmosphere—the largest protest in history of the country took place in Belgrade on March 15. Some estimates indicate that over 320,000 people gathered for this event, filling the streets of central Belgrade. One of the most striking moments of the day was the 15-minute silence. At 19h precisely, street chants ‘pump it!’, whistles, and vuvuzelas, abruptly ceased in honour of the 15 victims of the canopy collapse in Novi Sad. Students, bikers and tractor drivers who had accompanied the students’ marches, as well as citizens from across Serbia, suddenly came to a halt and stood in solemn stillness, with their phone flashlights raised to the sky. This powerful moment would have been like any other previous commemoration had it not been abruptly interrupted by, at the time, an unidentified sound device, causing panic and triggering a stampede that split the crowd of thousands of people along a central Belgrade street. While the government initially denied the use of any sound-based crowd control devices, videos, testimonies, and images that prove the government’s possession and use of such equipment began circulating in the media. This attack on peaceful citizens appears to have been coordinated alongside orchestrated actions by a group assembled by the ruling party in Pionirski Park, near the Presidential office, in the so-called “Ćaciilend”, a Disneyland-style spectacle where paid supporters posed as students in a desperate attempt to undermine the protests.<sup>2</sup> In reality, this group consisted of a few bribed students who

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<sup>2</sup> The term originated when, most likely, a supporter of the ruling party publicly misspelled the Serbian word for “pupils” (đaci) as “ćaci” on a sign demanding “ćaci to schools.” The error quickly became a viral symbol of the regime’s performative and clumsy propaganda, especially since the individuals camped in front of the park were widely reported to be paid to simulate support for the government and to discredit the authentic student protests

call themselves ‘students who want to study’, local officials affiliated with the ruling party, criminals, and members of the disbanded Red Berets (JSO), a unit with a notorious history of involvement in war crimes and assassinations during the 1990s, including the tragic assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003. Their goal was to provoke conflict in order to, most likely, create a pretext for declaring a state of emergency, which would have allowed the government to halt the uprising. However, the students thwarted this plan through their precise organization, which led to the peaceful dispersal of the citizens.

Despite ongoing threats, assaults, and increasing repression—including the detention and imprisonment of activists and government critics that continued after March 15—the student protests in Serbia show no signs of slowing down. But as the blockade of state universities stretches on for months, the urgency for change is growing. The government continues to ignore student demands, deepening frustration among students, the broader academic community, and the general public. At the same time, professors and university staff are under mounting pressure, with many reportedly facing significant salary cuts and not having received their full wages since February. The prolonged protest, combined with the government’s indifference and the worsening conditions in higher education, and the society in general, signals that systemic change can no longer be delayed.

#### ***from a horizontal organization to a vertical structure***

Students have been at the forefront of the mass protests, organizing demonstrations, blocking roads, and engaging in civil disobedience. One of the key and early symbols of the protests was a red-painted palm with the slogan ‘Ruke su vam krvave’ (*Your hands are bloody*), referencing the government’s implied responsibility for the Novi Sad tragedy. Protesters carry signs with slogans like ‘You won’t run us over’, ‘General strike’, ‘Students don’t stay silent’, and ‘Everything must stop’. By chanting ‘pumpaj’, there is a call to ‘pump’ energy, motivation, and solidarity in the fight against the ruling political system.

Disillusionment with the political opposition prompted various segments of society—including professors, high school students, citizens, farmers, doctors, and lawyers—to rally in support of the students. This solidarity ignited widespread public actions across the country, spreading to more than 200 towns and rural villages. In March, the citizens began to organize in civic assemblies, taking decision-making processes outside institutions. This is how the protests, which began as a response to the tragic incident, have evolved into a broader expression of hope, unity, and solidarity, driven by a commitment to peaceful resistance and democratic change.

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taking place. The suffix “-lend” (like in Disneyland) underscores the artificial, staged, and even surreal nature of the scene.



A commemorative moment organised by the Serbian students in front of the European Parliament to honor the 16 victims of the Novi Sad tragedy, May 13, 2025. Photo: Miloje Savić.

The Serbian student-led protest is a decentralized, leaderless movement that makes decisions collectively through panels on campuses, embodying a global shift toward more participatory and horizontal forms of activism. This approach, previously seen in movements like Argentina's *Argentinazo* (2001), the Occupy movement (2011), Spain's *Indignados* or *Movimiento 15-M* (2011), France's *Nuit debout* (2016), and Yellow Vests (2018), is viewed by advocates as a way to invigorate democracy in its most direct form. However, their emphasis on network structures, organizational tactics, and strategic withdrawal from institutions often hinders the articulation of a clear political order. As a matter of fact, despite their progressive goals, many horizontal movements have fizzled out, with dominant politics not only surviving but growing stronger. This raises an important question for Serbia: can this horizontal student movement avoid the same fate?

To avoid such an outcome, the Serbian student-led protest would benefit from a more explicit and deliberate engagement with institutions and representational democracy, rather than maintaining a stance of withdrawal and distancing from all political actors, decisions and actions. This insight was clearly grasped by a few of left-leaning movements. For instance, the Spanish political party *Podemos* emerged in 2014 from a portion of the horizontal grassroots movement *Indignados* or *Movimiento 15-M*; the Croatian political party *Zagreb je naš* (Zagreb is Ours) formed in 2017 by Croatian intellectuals from the *Pravo na grad* (Right to the City) initiative; and, the Serbian movement *Ne davimo Beograd* (Let's Not Drown Belgrade) grew in 2017 from the citizens' fight against the aggressive redevelopment of the Belgrade Waterfront by Vučić's government. Besides, far right parties have most effectively used the strategy of engaging with institutions, leading to their rise to power in many European countries in recent years. In Serbia, could the student movement adapt this strategy to bring about meaningful change?

Serbian students do not constitute a formal political entity. Their leaderless and self-managed movement is defined by a conscious rejection of collaboration with both the opposition parties and the government. One of their slogans, 'You're not important', directed at President Vučić, reflects their refusal to engage with him, as they view president's constitutional role irrelevant to their demands, subverting Vučić's persistent attempts to interfere in matters beyond his official mandate. This slogan underscores the students' broader concern with Serbia's

institutions, which they see as ‘captured’ by the ruling party, with particular emphasis on the judicial system, which they criticize for its lack of independence and failure to uphold justice. Through their creative, performative actions—marching, blocking roads, and honouring victims—students seek to compel institutions to investigate the corruption that led to the collapse of the Novi Sad canopy.

Despite their non-partisan stance, the student movement has already achieved profound political consequences, including the resignation of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević and the collapse of the government. In response, the government has outlined two possible scenarios: either appointing a new government or calling fresh elections. Yet, neither of these options is likely to quell the protest movement. The appointment of a new government will not restore trust in institutions that remain under Vučić’s control, while new elections, unless improved to address previous issues such as vote-buying, busing in voters from neighbouring Republika Srpska, and other irregularities like duplicate voter lists, will not gain the support of students, citizens, or the opposition.

Could a transitional government be the best solution? While they are not a conventional political entity, students could play a crucial role in shaping this process. Unlike the fragmented opposition—for years demonised by the state-aligned media and the ruling party—they enjoy broad public support, largely earned through the nationwide student marches, which could pave the way for meaningful systemic change in Serbia. A transitional expert body, elected by students and professors—whose support they clearly enjoy—could establish the foundation for fair elections by ensuring accurate voter lists, independent media, open debate, and institutions that serve the people rather than the government. Through these measures, the student movement could effectively articulate its initial horizontal organisation into a more structured, vertical form of political engagement, transforming its demands—shared with citizens and the opposition—into institutionalised rights. Whether some students will eventually choose to enter formal politics, or whether the movement itself will evolve into a distinct movement-party—one that remains rooted in civic engagement and carries broader democratic significance for Europe—remains to be seen.

This question became especially pressing after May 5, when the students publicly called for early elections in Serbia. In the meantime, President Vučić remains in power, and the protests continue as students together with citizens press for further reforms and justice for the victims of the Novi Sad incident and widespread corruption in the country.

### ***Calling on European institutions***

Finally, after three months of silence, members of the European Parliament have begun to express their support for the Serbian students. In response to the ongoing protests and reports of potential use of sound weapons against peaceful demonstrators, 32 MEPs called on European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to cancel her scheduled meeting with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić on March 25. While the cancellation was unlikely, the gesture itself carried symbolic weight—challenging the widespread perception of Vučić as a stabilizing force in the Western Balkans.

This political momentum was further reinforced by student actions. In April, a group of students cycled 1,300 kilometers over 13 days, from Novi Sad to Strasbourg, to seek support from the broader European community and its institutions. Building on that initiative, another group of twenty-one students undertook a symbolic 16-day relay run from Novi Sad to Brussels in May 2025—covering more than 2,000 kilometers—to draw attention to the erosion of

democratic institutions in Serbia. Along the way, members of the Serbian diaspora organized public, carnivalesque and welcoming events where the students engaged with local communities and officials in cities such as Vienna, Munich, and Luxembourg. Upon their arrival in Brussels, the students were received at the European Parliament by representatives of all five political groups and prominent European figures, including MEPs Gordan Bosanac, Irena Joveva, and Fabien Keller, as well as European Commissioners Martha Kos (Enlargement) and Glenn Micallef (Youth). These meetings provided a crucial platform for the students to articulate their concerns regarding democratic backsliding, systemic corruption, and the suppression of academic freedom in Serbia. In doing so, they called on the European Union to take a more active and principled stance in defending democratic values across the region—values that lie at the very heart of the European project.



*Students who undertook a symbolic 16-day relay run from Novi Sad to Brussels arrived in front of the European Commission on May 12, 2025. Photo: Goran PL.*

However, the question remains: will EU officials support one of the most significant democratic student-led movements in Europe today? And will they do so even if it conflicts with their interest in Serbia's lithium resources? In 2021–2022, massive environmental protests swept the country. Tens of thousands opposed the proposed Rio Tinto project supported by the EU. Citizens raised deep concerns about ecological damage, local livelihoods, and democratic oversight. Those protests showed clearly: any attempt to revive lithium extraction will face fierce resistance.

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