



spotlight

UPRISINGS IN SERBIA

Struggle(s) against a resilient regime

Following the collapse of the recently renovated Novi Sad train station, which resulted in the death of 15 people, students across Serbia have been leading one of Europe's largest protest movements. After months of anti-corruption demonstrations demanding justice and government accountability, hundreds of thousands gathered in Belgrade on March 15, 2025, in what some call the largest mass protest in Serbia's history. While unprecedented in scale, these protests build on previous uprisings since 2018, driven by diverse causes, but united by a common thread – deep dissatisfaction with the corrupted state apparatus and Vučić's regime. This article explores the similarities and differences among these movements and why, despite their massive scale, achieving political change in Serbia remains so difficult.



In 2024, students paid tribute to the 1996/97 protests with the slogan "Belgrade is **again** the world". Many view the protests of that time as the beginning of the end for Milošević, who was ultimately overthrown in the 5 October Revolution (also known as Bulldozer revolution) of 2000, following another attempt at election fraud. Photo: © EPA-EFE/ Andrej Cukic.

BY MINA TRPKOVIĆ AND CHRISTIN STÜHLEN

"We have never seen anything like this before – and we were there during the massive demonstrations that led to the overthrow of Milošević's regime in the early 2000s." This is how people who were in Belgrade on March 15, 2025, describe the peaceful, 'Gandhian' mass demonstrations – a show of non-violent resistance that some have already called the largest protests Serbia has ever seen¹. And it is not just those who lived through the 1990s who say this – younger protesters, born during or after that era, share the same sentiment.

Since 2018, protests in Serbia have increased in both frequency and intensity, driven by growing concern over political violence, the rise of authoritarianism, widespread state corruption, and the erosion of the rule of law. Many protesters attribute Serbia's current problems to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS) and its leader, President Aleksandar Vučić. In turn, Vučić's government has become increasingly repressive, implementing measures that erode citizens' rights across various spheres.² This Spotlight highlights three movements from the broader Serbian protest landscape: *#1od5miliona* (*One [person] out of five million*) in 2018/19, *Ne damo Jadar* (*We won't give up Jadar*) in 2021/22/24, and *Svi u Blokade* (*Everybody to the blockades!*) in 2024/25. By analyzing these cases we show how, despite their ability to mobilize large-scale resistance, state repression and institutional constraints have so far prevented the political change that these movements demand – and why and how the current protests stand apart.

RECURRING PATTERNS OF MOBILIZATION

The *One out of five million* protest wave, which lasted for nearly two years, was triggered by the beating of Borko Stefanović, the leader of a minor opposition party, on November 28, 2018. These protests, rooted in widespread dissatisfaction with the government's repression and erosion of political rights, gained momentum in December with participation quickly growing to 45,000 at later demonstrations.³ President Vučić dismissed the movement, stating he



Serbia has a long history of protests, with student demonstrations playing a key role. In response to electoral fraud in 1996, students united under the slogan "Belgrade is the world" protesting against Slobodan Milošević's regime. These month-long protests are seen as a turning point leading to his eventual downfall. Photo: © EPA/MLADEN ANTONOV.

wouldn't meet the protestors demands „even if there were five million of you“ – a remark that inspired the protest's name, #1od5miliona ("One [person] out of five million")⁴. The movement remained largely peaceful until March 2019, when demonstrators forcefully entered the building of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), the country's main public broadcaster, due to general dissatisfaction with its reporting and protesters' demands of greater media freedom. This resulted in clashes between police and protesters. Later, opposition leaders announced their decision to boycott the 2020 parliamentary elections. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the protests to a halt, and the elections, initially scheduled for April, were postponed, eventually taking place in June 2020.

That same year, the *We won't give up Jadar* protests emerged as a response from local communities and environmental groups opposing the Australian-British mining company Rio Tinto's plans to open a lithium mine in western Serbia. Their resistance was driven by concerns over ecological contamination, as well as the potential loss of property and agricultural livelihoods. However, by 2021 and 2022, this local opposition turned into nationwide protests, rallying a significant portion of the Serbian population into a unified movement. The protesters criticized a lack of transparency with regards to the project's implementation, corruption, and the perception that political elites were prioritizing foreign corporate interests over the well-being of citizens. Eventually, they led to the annulment of contracts between Serbia and Rio Tinto on lithium mining in 2022. During the Raw Materials Summit in Belgrade in July 2024 with EU representatives and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz present, a new Memorandum of Understanding was signed, covering the extraction and production of raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles, all of high significance for the German car industry. While the Summit prompted the protests to erupt again the following week, the struggle is still ongoing. Finally, Serbia's

most recent protests, *Everybody to the blockades!* relate to the collapse of the recently renovated Novi Sad train station in November 2024, which marked a turning point in the county's protest landscape. The collapse occurred only months after the building was officially renovated, leading to general outrage over corruption and a lack of accountability in Serbian institutions. During a 15-minute silent vigil paying tribute to the victims, several students and faculty staff members in front of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts were attacked by an unknown group of men.⁵ This led to a blockade of the faculty, which escalated weeks later into a full-scale shutdown of the University of Belgrade. These protests are student-led and have evolved into university blockades and mass protests spreading across major academic centers – Belgrade, Niš, Novi Sad, and Kragujevac. Students articulated four central demands: (1) transparency regarding the train stations' renovation, (2) accountability for attacks on student protesters, (3) the dismissal of charges against those arrested at the demonstrations, and (4) a 20% increase in funding for state higher education institutions.⁶ None of these demands have been met, prompting two nationwide general strikes – on January 28 and March 7. Since the beginning of the protests, over 400 cities and municipalities in Serbia have held demonstrations, supporting the students.⁷ The means of the protests varied from blocking critical road junctures, bridges, and university facilities to demonstrating in front of the prosecutor's office and the main public broadcaster, but also included days-long marches through towns across Serbia, as protesters walked on foot to reach all four university centers. Along the way, they were welcomed by local communities, who opened football stadiums, school gyms, and municipal halls to provide them with shelter and food – demonstrating an extraordinary level of national unity and solidarity. The largest protest yet took place in Belgrade on March 15, where hundreds of thousands marched peacefully in what some have called an unprecedented display of nonviolent resistance in the country. Despite their growing scale and determination, as well as rising tensions and provocations from the ruling party, the protesters remain committed to peaceful means.

While the reasons behind the different protest movements may differ, they share several core grievances – chief among them, a profound sense of betrayal due to rampant corruption and the subsequent ‚selling out‘ of the country and its citizens. However, a significant shift is observed in the role of opposition political parties: while they were key drivers of the 2018/19 protests, recently their presence has notably diminished.

THE EVOLUTION OF REPRESSIVE POLITICS

In responding to protest movements, President Vučić – once 'Minister of Information' under Milošević – consistently employed direct and blunt forms of violence, fueled a threatening and intimidating discourse characterized by

'strong man' rhetoric and levied legal attacks on civil liberties. While direct police violence characterized the protest cycles of 2018/19 and 2021/22, recent actions suggest a shift in strategy. Violence is now increasingly being channeled through intermediaries and "middlemen" associated with but formally independent from the government. In the most recent protests related to the accident in Novi Sad, the protests originated in the first place as a response to a violent attack on students and faculty members, and they have since been met with further violence. In January 2025, two students were run over by cars during two separate peaceful demonstrations, resulting in serious injuries.⁸ Another group of students was attacked in front of the SNS headquarters in Novi Sad by four individuals affiliated with the party.⁹

In the past, activists involved in the Rio Tinto resistance have received anonymous death threats as well as checks and prolonged detentions at border crossings.¹⁰ In justifying these actions, the government persistently draws on narratives that portray resistance against the mining project or the government as a foreign-backed plot to destabilize Serbia.¹¹ In the current protests, conspiracy theories spread by government officials about 'colour revolutions' and foreign influence are a common tactic.¹² In addition, the government has also sought counter protests by organizing counter-rallies. This was the case during the *One of five million* protests, but also during the latest demonstrations in 2024/25. These counter-protests organized by the ruling SNS, and the government are part of a broader strategy to maintain the government's narrative, presenting itself as the legitimate and popular force in Serbian politics while attempting to undermine and delegitimize opposition movements.

The March 15 protest in Belgrade, has further highlighted the government's evolving suppression tactics. In the weeks leading up to the protest, the ruling SNS organized a counter-protest camp in front of the parliament, with its participants shielded by police corridors – ensuring their protection while attempting to delegitimize the opposition movement. At the same time, Vučić himself intensified threats of potentially escalating political violence. However, the most alarming development took place during the 15-minute silent vigil. Numerous protesters reported symptoms consistent with exposure to a Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), a military-grade crowd control weapon that produces high-decibel noises and is illegal under Serbian law.¹³ The resulting confusion and distress triggered a massive stampede, which luckily did not result in any serious injuries. While the police have already officially denied using such a device¹⁴, the incident remains under investigation by various human rights organizations, as it remains unclear what happened. At the same time, the Public Prosecutor's Office issued a statement warning that individuals spreading claims about the alleged use of LRAD will face prosecution¹⁵, even though hundreds of people who were present have already contacted human rights organizations to report symptoms commonly associated with LRAD expo-

sure and a petition for the UN investigation of the incident is ongoing¹⁶.

This is not the first attempt to criminalize protest and protesters over the years. The administration's intention to legally suppress dissent was recently further underlined through proposed amendments to the Serbian Criminal Code by the Ministry of Justice in October 2024. If passed, the laws would a) expand state control over online expression by introducing prison sentences for sharing or accessing content that could be interpreted as advising on criminal acts, b) broaden restrictions on information disclosure by redefining espionage laws to criminalize the disclosure of even low-level classified information, and c) weaken protection against police brutality by removing legal safeguards.¹⁷

THE LONG STRUGGLE AGAINST STATE CAPTURE

The movements analyzed here have achieved significant successes across three key arenas. Firstly, all of them have continuously mobilized large numbers of people to the streets while bridging urban/rural and generational divisions present in many other European movements. Secondly, they have achieved temporal successes in legal and political spheres, including for instance the temporal revocation of Rio Tinto's mining licenses. Finally, they gained widespread attention from international news outlets – albeit to a lesser extent in German media – amplifying their demands beyond the national frame. However, despite immense and recurring mobilization seen across multiple protest cycles, Vučić has remained in power. Why? We argue that his political longevity rests less on broad public support and more on backing from a "powerful few." Regulatory institutions, media networks and patronage systems all stand in service of the ruling SNS, effectively 'capturing' the state.

Similarly, just as his domestic stability rests on the support of a "powerful few", Vučić's regime is further legitimized by a few powerful external actors, as Chinese, Russian and EU actors continue to strengthen their economic and political ties with Vučić's government. Many EU and member state representatives – including Olaf Scholz and Ursula von der

STATE CAPTURE

State capture refers to the infiltration of state institutions, political parties, and parliaments by clientelist networks that manipulate decision-making for private gain. In turn, individuals associated with these networks leverage the legitimacy of democratic institutions while subverting their function, leading to weakened rule of law, selective enforcement, and eroded public trust.

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Leyen – have willingly overlooked authoritarian practices in favor of strategic economic partnerships, particularly in securing raw material supply chains. This dynamic may serve as one potential explanation for the relatively muted response from EU and German officials to the current situation in Serbia. This however undermines the democratic aspirations of Serbian protesters and contradicts the EU's self-image as an agent of democratic change in Serbia. At the same time, this uprising is unfolding in a broader European context where many countries are witnessing a rise in right-wing parties and movements. In some ways, Serbia's fight against a de facto authoritarian regime, though crucial, may be seen as less urgent in the eyes of Europe, which is not only preoccupied with its own internal political shifts, but also with its future role in a changing world order.

Due to the effective state capture and the lack of international support so far, a lasting regime change in Serbia remains highly complex and uncertain,

especially as the current movement has so far rejected political party involvement due to past disappointments. However, the current protests differ from past mobilizations in several crucial ways that may increase their transformative potential. Unlike previous movements, they have remained entirely nonviolent (from the protestors side) despite growing repression – an approach that has historically increased the likelihood of success in mass uprisings.¹⁸ Moreover, these protests are centered around corruption, a grievance that research suggests is particularly powerful for sustainable resistance.¹⁹ As March 15 demonstrated, protesters are not only rejecting Vučić's authoritarian rule but also the system of corruption that upholds it, signaling a fundamental challenge to the regime's legitimacy; and the students and those who support them in the streets are making one thing clear: they will keep fighting.

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