

Serbian Students Are Reimagining What Society Could Be

Thursday 27 February 2025, by [MILOSAVLJEVIĆ Dušanka](#) (Date first published: 20 February 2025).

The ongoing mobilizations against government corruption contain the seeds of a much broader transformation

Serbia is currently in the grips of the largest student rebellion and subsequent civilian mobilization in the country's history. The movement began with protests in Belgrade and Novi Sad demanding political and criminal accountability for the deaths of 15 people in the canopy collapse at Novi Sad train station last November, under the slogan "You Have Blood on Your Hands". Soon after, a collective 15-minute silence was organized on major city roads under the slogan "Stop, Serbia". The students of the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Dramatic Arts were the first to initiate a blockade on 25 November, following an organized physical attack on their fellow students during the 15-minute silence. Shortly thereafter, blockades sprang up on university campuses across the country.

Self-organized students have now occupied more than 50 university departments, demanding that the relevant institutions publish the complete documentation regarding the canopy collapse in Novi Sad. They are also calling for the prosecution of those responsible for physical attacks on students, the release and dismissal of criminal proceedings against students arrested during the protests, as well as a 20-percent increase in the higher education budget with a 50-percent reduction in tuition fees.

Numerous social layers, including agricultural workers, educators, high school students, lawyers, and cultural workers have come out in support of the students. Some have also put forward their own demands, launched protests, or gone on strike. The wave of civil disobedience has intensified with the blockade of major roads and bridges, as well as calls for work stoppages and a boycott of major retailers.

The current mobilizations come after a decade of peaceful protest marches in which any "radical" elements were dismissed as violent, and anyone advocating for a more radical approach was denounced as an "infiltrator". This time, however, things are different. The current mobilization is heightening its effectiveness precisely through such radicalization. Whether blockades of university buildings, major urban roads and bridges, boycotts, or (illegal) work stoppages, concrete and direct actions that disrupt the regular functioning of the system have helped the movement to pressure the government and motivate an otherwise largely apathetic society.

On the other hand, the radicalization of the protests has also been fuelled by the brutal violence faced by demonstrators, carried out by individuals and organized groups, most of which are directly linked to the ruling regime. Incidents such as cars driving into crowds of students during moments of silence and repeated physical assaults on protesters have occurred for weeks, further intensifying public outrage. The future is still uncertain, and that is precisely what makes the political situation in Serbia so unprecedented — no one knows what will happen next. The only certainty is the students' determination to persist in the struggle until their demands are met. As one particularly

powerful piece of graffiti claimed: “It will be as the plenum decides!”

Moderate Demands and Radical Tactics

The student rebellion currently rocking Serbia has no representatives or leaders. Although some previous protest waves also lacked clear leadership, parliamentary opposition parties or activist groups often dominated the front rows or even organized the mobilizations directly, preventing a truly grassroots social movement from developing. In contrast, the current student movement is independent of parliamentary parties and other political organizations, including NGOs.

The blockades are organized through directly democratic plenums, which prevent the emergence of leadership figures. Student plenums constitute the primary decision-making bodies composed of all interested students of a department. All decisions are made by majority vote following extensive deliberation based on the principle of one person, one vote. Additionally, several larger plenums at the university level facilitate coordination among decentralized departments. Coordination is further strengthened through umbrella working groups, whose horizontal mobilization capacity and effectiveness are perhaps best demonstrated by their ability to quickly organize protests, such as what was likely the [biggest non-partisan gathering](#) in Serbian history on 22 December 2024 at Belgrade’s Slavija Square.

This marked absence of leadership enabled by horizontal organization has several positive implications. First, it ensures the democratic nature of the movement, discouraging opportunists who might exploit the protests for personal promotion or political careers. Second, it protects participants from being targeted by the state. Recent events have already demonstrated the risks of individual prominence — those who frequently appear in the media are summoned for questioning by the secret service, and their personal information is exposed by the press.

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The relationship between strategy and tactics, i.e. between protest demands and methods of struggle, is crucial. In terms of method, the movement has (largely unintentionally) adopted anarchist tactics: self-organization, autonomy, direct action, and direct democracy. While this may appear new or radical, it aligns with a long tradition in post-socialist Serbian society, where workers’ assemblies, self-managed workers’ councils, municipal and local community organizations, and previous university occupations have employed similar tactics.

What is particularly interesting is the combination of this plenum-based method with “reformist” demands that largely fit into a liberal-democratic framework, such as anti-corruption measures, the rule of law, security, and the call to “liberate” captured institutions and “restore their proper function”. The exception to this rule is the students’ socio-economic demand, which represents a first step towards free education. The mass mobilization has been made possible by this “ideological baseline” built around core student demands, allowing for a wide ideological spectrum among participants. Combined with radical tactics that apply direct pressure, the framework has bolstered the movement’s strength and effectiveness.

Building Solidarity

The universality of student demands that emerged following the tragedy in Novi Sad continues to reveal new frontiers of solidarity. Previous years saw numerous social groups protest over specific issues across Serbia, yet they remained disconnected from one another. Certain groups, such as

workers or peasants, were persistently ignored by wider society.

Today, students organizing blockades seek to establish alliances with broader society, refusing to be confined to “civic” frameworks or academic structures. Instead of constructing an exclusive identity, the current movement is fostering solidarity across social classes. Its inclusivity extends action proposals to trade unions, as well as workers in hospitality, IT, and other sectors that are difficult to unionize. During the “[general strike](#)” action on 24 January (a call for one-day individual work stoppage and civic disobedience), freelancers, journalists, educators, programmers, service sector workers, and small entrepreneurs all took part.

Despite the movement’s independent, grassroots, and democratic nature, no major political figures from outside Serbia have expressed support for the ongoing protests. On the contrary, they continue to back the widely disliked president, Aleksander Vučić, despite the growing protest wave. Due to the lack of support from the “international community”, which stands in marked contrast to the widespread international support for the mobilization that overthrew Slobodan Milošević 25 years ago, the movement remains independent of external influence. This is positive, as it prevents the mobilizations from splitting into the usual pro- and anti-EU camps that typically divide social movements in Serbia, and instead helps to maintain unity and cohesion.

One of the key debates running through the protests boils down to the question of whether the movement should focus exclusively on the core demands addressed to institutions while ignoring the wider issue of the current regime’s survival, or whether it should shift focus to systemic causes (understood within the framework of the state) and the broader social momentum surrounding the [government’s collapse](#), thus aligning the struggle with the parliamentary opposition. Beyond that debate, however, alternative, albeit as of yet not clearly articulated calls for broader social *self-management* are also emerging.

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This aspect is largely ignored by the public and dismissed by the media as naive or utopian. However, there are clear signs of its presence: the slogan “Student spaces for students” could be heard during the occupation of the Student Cultural Centre, while the protest of public transport workers in Belgrade featured a banner reading “Total Self-Management”, and a plenum of cultural workers gathered in front of the Ministry of Culture under the slogan of “Culture in Blockade”. Their banner, which read “All Power to the Plenums”, now hangs in front of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade.

It remains to be seen whether this tendency will stay restricted to the more radical student plenums or be taken up by the wider movement. What can be expected are attempts to reform certain areas, such as student organization regulations or trade union structures. These changes could lead away from rigidly hierarchical structures, such as student parliaments and trade union councils, which are now seen as reactionary, illegitimate, and overly politicized, towards more democratic, legitimate, and autonomous forms of self-management.

Although any predictions about the immediate future are difficult, for now, most students publicly distance themselves from attempts to overthrow the government, any association with the parliamentary opposition, and crisis-resolution proposals emerging from its ranks, such as the formation of an expert transitional or interim government. At the same time, it is hard to imagine Vučić being forced out of power, given that the EU clearly requires a strong and stable government

to push forward the lithium mining project in the Jadar Valley — at the expense of the people's will.

Such a political change would require broader and more serious organizing with a clearly defined goal, as well as a willingness to make sacrifices from other parts of society. For now, citizens' support often remains merely declarative and symbolic, accompanied by the unspoken expectation that students will single-handedly liberate society as a whole.

However, regardless of short-term political outcomes, the current student uprising holds immense potential for broader social change. An entire generation is becoming politicized through participation in radical forms of protest, gaining awareness of how the broader system operates, and learning effective strategies to resist it through direct action. At the same time, the students' persistence in their seemingly simple demands challenges the entire liberal-democratic order, exposing the ideological myths on which it rests and revealing the system's inability to fulfil its own promises. If the struggle continues and ultimately succeeds, it could give rise to new political subjects capable of earning broader societal trust — whether within the framework of parliamentary politics or in non-institutional forms.

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