

# **Pump it up, Serbia! An unprecedented mass mobilisation, ignored by the European left**

Monday 24 March 2025, by [ZETKIN Karel](#) (Date first published: 19 March 2025).

**In the countries of former Yugoslavia, large-scale and intense social revolts are numerous and frequent, but they quickly fall into disuse without significant results. From the massive student revolts of June 1968 - which the empty promises of Yugoslav dictator Josip Broz Tito were enough to calm - to the demonstrations and citizens' plenums of 2014 in Bosnia and Herzegovina - which the complete disavowal of the European Union managed to kill - few citizens' movements have managed to make a difference, and a certain disillusionment reigns.**

And yet: since November 2024, Serbia has been facing an immense wave of revolt against the authoritarian regime of President Aleksandar Vučić. A revolt that has not only managed to endure but is growing week by week and reached a new peak this Saturday, 15 March, with a massive demonstration in the streets of Belgrade: while official police data defend the figure of 107,000 demonstrators (contradicted without possible doubt by videos of the event), independent organisations speak of figures well beyond 300,000 people.

## **The beginnings of the revolt**

It all began on 1 November 2024, with a tragedy. Shortly before noon, the roof of the Novi Sad railway station, the second largest city in the country located in the northern autonomous province of Vojvodina, collapsed, causing the death of 15 people. The reasons for the collapse were initially unclear, and, despite a small gathering of people, it was the Serbian authorities' refusal to publish documents related to the renovation of the station by a Chinese company that triggered the first large-scale demonstrations in Novi Sad itself. When, much later - but especially far too late in terms of decency - the government revealed the documents in question (and, to put it mildly, compromising ones), it became apparent that the work had been completely botched, particularly on crucial safety issues.

However, the revolt quickly spread. By the end of 2024, high schools and university faculties launched a total blockade and organised citizens' plenums. One principle prevailed: the movement would be collective, without a leader, without a figurehead - in a word, purely horizontal. A symbol and a rallying cry were adopted: the bloodied hand, symbolising that corruption kills, and the imperative "pumpaj" (literally: "pump!"), to "pump" corruption out of the Serbian political system.

## **Against the Vučić drift**

Despite the extended hand of the political opposition (which would go as far as throwing smoke bombs in the National Parliament in early March), the movement refuses any partisan affiliation to maintain its independence and broad appeal. As indicated by the symbols present at the demonstrations, the movement does not have a clear political colour either, and brings together

people from the radical left to the nationalist right under a single principle: to change the Serbian political system to eliminate endemic corruption.

For the regime built by the current President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) is experiencing an increasingly marked authoritarian shift and can be described, to use a popular expression in the region, as a corruption “octopus” (hobotnica). To date, Serbia resembles less a “liberal democracy” than a mafia state. Several examples speak for themselves: the “irregularities” (a mild euphemism) noted by all international observers during elections at all levels; the strong links between Vučić’s close associates and the mafia, like the Belivuk mafia clan; the autocratic control over a major part of the media – which are now merely hagiographic spokespeople for the regime – and the judicial and political pressure on any independent voice.

The demonstrators are not directly demanding Vučić’s “head” – although he resorted to the politics of the fuse by pushing his Prime Minister Miloš Vučević to resign in concert with the Mayor of Novi Sad. What the demonstrators are demanding is full respect for the Constitution and, by extension, the elimination of the authoritarian, mafia-like characteristics and corruption from the political system. Which, implicitly, amounts to demanding the resignation of their main architect: Aleksandar Vučić.

The Serbian President has done everything to discredit the movement. “His” press accused it of not calming down after the government had “addressed all the demands” (for the most moderate press like Politika) or even attributed to the movement a thousand never-committed acts of violence, likening them to potential terrorists (for tabloids like Informer). With the growth of the movement, the President himself staged an appearance with a plainclothes police officer who was a “victim of the demonstrators” – although a video has since revealed that he had been hit by... a uniformed colleague.

## **The European silence**

How has the European Union responded to this situation? “Tepidly” would be an understatement. As several political scientists have explained for many years, Serbia plays the role of a “stabilocracy” for the EU: a regime, admittedly authoritarian, but which – allegedly – ensures the stability of a region perceived as “explosive” – the terms “mir i stabilnost” (“Peace and stability”) are, moreover, omnipresent elements of language with Vučić. And all this without mentioning the lithium mines that the Union is planning under the governance of the Serbian President for its famous “energy autonomy”, which had already, a few years ago, provoked significant environmental demonstrations. Thus, from European political leaders facing gigantic demonstrations, we have only heard calls for “dialogue” and “mutual respect”. And not much more from the main heads of state on the continent.

Beyond the silence of politicians at the institutional level, it is another silence that strikes and hurts even more: that of politically engaged activists, particularly on the left. Quick to vigorously publicise their various commitments, denouncing authoritarian and genocidal regimes, none, unless of Balkan origin, posts or has posted the slightest message of support, none has sought to inform their circles, worse – none seems to have sought to inform themselves on the subject. As a left-wing activist of Bosnian origin, this can only remind me of one thing: the Balkans, once again, are the forgotten of Europe, its unconscious and bad conscience, which one prefers to ignore when it is not simply confining us to the clichés of those “damned Balkans”. And this is true both on the right and on the left – to speak from lived experience.

The silence of the European Union on the events in Serbia is shameful but is explained primarily by a “strategy”, however erroneous or even fallacious it may be. The silence of Swiss and European left-wing activists is simply shameful in view of their moral claims, and nothing explains it except the

usual couldn't-care-less attitude so well anchored in the consciousnesses and unconsciousnesses of these regions towards South-Eastern Europe, tinged with a half-hearted but very present racism towards the Balkans - racism that is addressed primarily in the mode of self-blindness and denial.

With or without Western support, Serbian students and demonstrators are making history at this very moment. Might as well participate in it.

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**P.S.**

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*Translated for ESSF by Adam Novak*