



Student Uprising in Serbia: The Power of Nonviolence

Centre for Nonviolent Action





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This story begins with the people who were killed at the railway station in Novi Sad when a concrete canopy collapsed on them on Friday, 1 November 2024. Fourteen people, including four minors, died at the scene. The youngest victim was six years old. Two more people succumbed to their injuries later, and one woman was seriously injured and left with lifelong consequences. The station building had been officially reopened in July of that year, following reconstruction. After the tragedy, in one of his usual and frequent televised addresses, the president said that the canopy had not been renovated as part of the reconstruction works. We quickly learned this was as untrue as most things he utters.

It might be more accurate to say that the collapse of the canopy was the last drop and that this story starts with the Serbian Progressive Party coming to power way back in 2012.

Raising the temperature, a timeline of events

The day after the tragedy, the people of Novi Sad started spontaneously gathering at Trg Slobode and by the railway station, bringing flowers, lighting candles and calling for resignations of those in charge and the prosecution of those responsible. A smaller gathering (of around 1500 people) was also held in Belgrade, organised by the activist group SviČe. It took the then minister of construction and infrastructure, Goran Vesić, more than three days to submit his resignation. At the time, he stressed that neither he nor his team were responsible for the tragedy. In the first few days, on nationally broadcast media we heard explanations about how it was an accident, force majeure, an old canopy that had deteriorated. Today, those very same media outlets are telling us that it was a terrorist attack, linked in one way or another to the opposition or to power-hungry students. From the very beginning, the citizens of Novi Sad made it clear that they believed this was a case of corruption and crime, and demanded that those responsible be arrested and brought to trial.

Four days after the tragedy, on 5 November, a protest in Novi Sad brought out over 20,000 people, which is a very large number for Novi Sad, unprecedented until then. The organisers, activist groups and the opposition, called for a nonviolent gathering, which it mostly was, except for “infiltrators” in hoods who coordinated to vandalise the Town Hall. This is a well-known tactic. Infiltrators are an effective tool against peaceful protests: people who had come for a peaceful gathering withdraw, the thinking is that they probably won’t come out again, the authorities use the opportunity to portray protesters as violent hooligans, “enemies of the state”, the propaganda machinery picks this up and runs with it on all the national frequency media. In addition, the police arrest a number of protesters, possibly some of the most innocent who may not even have participated in the rally, to make an example out of them so everyone else will be discouraged from even thinking about attending such gatherings, then they drag them through the mud and smear them in the media as violent, again to make an example out of them. We saw the same tactic this time

Victims of the collapsed canopy in Novi Sad:

Sara Firić (2018) from Kovilj

Valentina Firić (2014) from Kovilj

Đorđe Firić (1971) from Kovilj

Milica Adamović (2008) from Kać

Nemanja Komar (2007) from Stepanovićevo

Anđela Ruman (2004) from Stara Pazova

Miloš Milosavljević (2003) from Kničanin

Stefan Hrka (1997) from Belgrade

Sanja Ćirić Arbutina (1989) from Kać

Goranka Raca (1966) from Novi Sad

Vukašin Raković (1955) from Bukovac

Mileva Karanović (1948) from Kać

Đuro Švonja (1947) from Stepanovićevo

Vasko Sazdovski (1979), a national of North Macedonia, from Sveti Nikola

Anja Radonjić (2000) from Paraćin

Vukašin Crnčević (2006) from Zmajevu who went to school in Novi Sad

around as well. Does it even bear stressing that none of the actual vandals ever get arrested, only decent folks, including students. They were arrested by plain-clothes officers who refused to show their police badges. Despite being against the law, this non-identification practice has slowly taken root.

In the days that followed, smaller protests took place in Novi Sad for the release of those arrested and for the arrest and prosecution of those responsible for the collapse of the canopy that caused casualties. Belgrade was slowly waking up. On 11 November, at the invitation of the parliamentary opposition, around 10,000 people turned out in front of the Government Building for a protest under the slogan “Corruption kills”.

On 15 November, two weeks after the tragedy, an action was organised in Novi Sad called “Zastani, Novi Sade” (“Stand Still, Novi Sad”). Activist groups called on fellow citizens to stand still for 14 minutes, to mark 14 days since the tragedy, in remembrance of the 14 people killed. The idea was that at 11:52, which was the precise time when the canopy collapsed, citizens would stop wherever they happen to be and stand still for 14 minutes of silence. Citizens who had gathered near the railway station unfurled a black banner. The moments of silence were dignified and heartbreaking, people were crying. In Belgrade, activists had been calling for actions in solidarity with Novi Sad, so citizens gathered at several locations in the city or independently observed 14 minutes of silence in the streets. Students and professors at the Faculty of Philosophy left their lectures and held a memorial service in front of the building. These actions weren’t massive, but they were held at multiple locations in both cities. It was particularly touching to see random passers-by joining in, so that in some places an action by three people would grow to a dozen or more. There were people who stood still on their own, wherever they happened to be at the time. The message was: conduct an investigation, arrest those responsible, release the arrested protesters.

At that time, opposition MPs and councillors blockaded the Courthouse in Novi Sad with the same demands: the release of arrested activists and the prosecution of those responsible for the canopy collapsing. Citizens joined the blockade and it lasted several days for hours at a time. It was at that time that an MP spray-painted a red handprint on the institutional plaque of the Court, symbolising the message “you have blood on your hands”. The police set up a cordon and then there was pushing, yelling, shields used to strike, several people knocked down. Opposition members accused the police of using excessive force.¹ Non-governmental organisations began to highlight and react to the increase in repressive measures in the form of unwarranted detention of citizens, intimidation of activists, abduction of young female activists by the Security Service, and police violence against MPs, councillors and citizens.

Three weeks after the tragedy, on 22 November, the ProGlas group and opposition parties organised protest rallies in almost 60 cities in Serbia² under the slogan “Zastani Srbijo” (“Stand Still, Serbia”). Citizens gathered at the agreed locations and observed 15 minutes of silence. In Belgrade, people gathered in several locations around the city. A group of hooligans (wearing hoods, bandanas, masks and caps) attacked the people gathered in front of the Radio Television of Serbia building, swearing at them and pushing people who were standing in silence.

A cardinal error

That same day, 22 November, students and staff from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) came out onto the boulevard in front of their building to pay tribute to the victims of the canopy collapse and show support for their fellow student Relja from Novi Sad who had been unjustly detained since 5 November. They were also joined by members of the public. As the assembled people stood in the rain in silence, they were attacked by several individuals, who insulted them, shouted at them, and then began to beat them. At first, it looked like these were drivers enraged over having the boulevard blocked. However, since numerous videos were made of the attack, with the help of the public and the media, the students managed to identify most of attackers within 24 hours and realised they were an organised group.^{22. novembar}³ Those who follow social and political developments in Serbia were not surprised when it turned out that SNS officials

¹ A few months later, the Novi Sad prosecutor’s office initiated proceedings against three female MPs for “assaulting an officer”. During the blockade of the Courthouse, they had tried to remove a police officer’s visor in order to see his face.

² The action was announced in the following towns and cities: Aleksandrovac, Apatin, Arandelovac, Arilje, Bač, Bačka Palanka, Bački Petrovac, Bečež, Beograd, Bogatić, Boljevac, Bor, Čačak, Dimitrovgrad, Đurđevo, Gornji Milanovac, Ivanjica, Jagodina, Kikinda, Kisač, Kragujevac, Kraljevo, Kruševac, Kučevo, Kula, Lazarevac, Leskovac, Loznica, Lučani, Majdanpek, Mali Zvornik, Mladenovac, Niš, Novi Sad, Osečina, Pančevo, Požarevac, Požega, Priboj, Prokuplje, Raška, Ruma, Šabac, Smederevo, Sombor, Srbobran, Sremska Mitrovica, Sremski Karlovci, Stara Pazova, Subotica, Trstenik, Užice, Valjevo, Velika Plana, Vladimirci, Vranje, Vrbas, Vršac, Zaječar.

³ FDU students made a twenty-minute documentary film “[22. novembar](#)” about that day and the subsequent trial.



were among the attackers. We had seen it before, thugs would be used to start riots or to intimidate. Now we began to realise that the thugs had become officials, or that the officials had become thugs, either way, but the link between the authorities and criminals was undeniable.

Following the attack, FDU students began a blockade of the faculty on 25 November and announced three demands: 1) that the police file criminal charges against those who attacked the students (identified as: Aleksandar Jokić, Milija Koldžić, Dušan Kostić, Milena Aleksić, Ivan Stanišić); 2) that all members of the organised group that attacked the students be identified, and those who hold public office be dismissed; and 3) that Milija Koldžić, one of the attackers, be removed from his position as a member of the Novi Beograd municipal council.

Quite incredibly, those who had usurped power, and whose number one priority is to remain in power, failed to understand that they had attacked a group with great potential to win the sympathies of their fellow students, in the first place, who number around 200,000 in Serbia, and then their families, friends, neighbours and fellow citizens. The avalanche was set in motion: students blockaded the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade, the Faculty of Philosophy and the Faculty of Philology. Other faculties at universities in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, and even Novi Pazar joined the blockade. At most of the faculties students had the support of their teachers.

An unexpected force

By mid-December, all faculties of public universities in Belgrade, Niš and Novi Sad were blockaded. In solidarity with the university students, many secondary school pupils in their final year across Serbia joined the blockade and already in January pupils from lower years also joined in, while teachers in primary and secondary schools started suspending classes en masse.

Students at universities and colleges organised themselves into plenums and mega plenums, aiming for the principles of direct democracy, they connected with other plenums and established channels of communication. They started publishing joint, very concrete demands with detailed clarifications:

- 1) Make public the complete documentation related to the reconstruction of the railway station in Novi Sad which is currently not available to the public (specifically, contracts showing who did what works at the railway station and how much they cost, why the price of reconstruction increased five times, and who is responsible for the railway station being officially opened twice without a use permit).

- 2) They demanded that the authorities confirm the identity of all individuals under reasonable suspicion of having physically assaulted students and professors and to initiate criminal proceedings against them. They also demanded that if it turned out these individuals were public officials, they should be dismissed from office.



- 3) Drop criminal charges against students arrested and detained at the protests and suspend criminal proceedings that had already been initiated.
- 4) Increase funding allocated for public faculties by 20%.

The [blood-red handprint](#) became the symbol of the protests, bearing the message “You have blood on your hands”. Faculties throughout the country displayed banners with the handprint and it also appeared on protest signs, graffiti, buttons, some of the protesters raised their hands wearing red gloves. Sometime later the cry of “Pumpaj!” [“Keep pumping!”] – meaning keep the pressure on – also became a staple of the protests.

The action of holding commemoration by blocking intersections also became common in all major cities. At the beginning, people would block certain intersections in cities, standing in silence for 14 minutes in memory of the 14 victims, always at 11:52, which was the exact time when the canopy collapsed. As the protests intensified, this action became a daily occurrence and a feature of almost every protest gathering. When the fifteenth casualty died, the memorial silence was extended by one minute. Since April 2025, when the sixteenth casualty died, the tribute has lasted for 16 minutes.

Protests have marked almost every year since the Serbian Progressive Party came to power, protests over violence, corruption, injustice, the dire environmental situation and/or stolen elections. They would last for varying lengths of time, eventually petering out quietly under variable degrees of repression, but there was also constant stigmatisation of the opposition, non-governmental organisations and independent media, blackmail and bribery, as well as deliberate and heinous turning of people against each other. The government’s media machinery very successfully smeared anyone from these groups who stood out as a possible leader in the rebellion. Their greatest success was that they managed to instil in the public a belief that all politicians were the same, that they all lie and steal and that the opposition is the worst. The great majority of people who do not take part in socio-political events, who never try to change anything and often forego elections, or simply vote for the ruling party by default, have a ready explanation for their disinterest: nothing can be changed, everything has been pre-arranged, there is no real opposition, everyone is working for the regime. The opposition has been thoroughly painted as underhanded, anti-Serbian, an enemy of the state, as rotten to the core. This is one of the reasons why the students did not make the opposition their allies. The students themselves are very heterogeneous and represent a wide range of worldviews, and it was essential for them to come together around points of agreement. They also needed to garner mass support, and associating with the opposition was seen as counterproductive.

Probably because they were aware of the socio-political climate and low levels of political literacy, the students did not focus on criticising the government, but rather on demanding that the institutions do their job. This helped them avoid being easily disqualified by widespread media spin and lumped in with the

maligned “opposition”. They demanded that the laws apply to everyone. They refused to settle for any kind of deal or allow the president to play a leading role, simply telling the ubiquitous meddler: “Not your jurisdiction.”

No one expected an uprising of this scale, nor were there any indications that young people were apt to start anything, so the student movement was called a miracle. The general perception of young people was that they were uninterested, apolitical, just waiting for the right time to emigrate, because the alternative was to bow down and join a political party in order to survive. However, although unseen, something was brewing among the generation of students. It’s worth bearing in mind that the last major student protest in Serbia was in 1996-1997, after Milošević stole the elections. Serbia has a long history of nonviolent protests that have shaped an entire generation. And these students of today are the children of the students from 1996-1997. Our children. So, it’s not a miracle, it’s a quiet but powerful process.

The students got seriously well-organised.⁴ They held their first protest in front of Radio Television Serbia (RTS) because the public broadcaster persisted in ignoring them and keeping them out of the news, despite their movement being the biggest thing happening in the country. Actions and protests became a daily occurrence. For example, they carried out an action called “1000 Letters to Zagorka Dolovac”, the chief public prosecutor of Serbia who has been playing dead for years and not appearing in public, thereby protecting the arrogant impunity of those in power.

The students invited citizens to join them for a big rally in Belgrade, at Slavija on 22 December. The gathering was colloquially dubbed the biggest parents’ meeting in Serbian history. At least 100,000 people from all parts of Serbia turned up. It was magnificent. For days, people talked about how powerful it sounded when a hundred thousand people made noise with whistles and horns, and how much more powerful it was when the noise suddenly stopped and a hundred thousand people fell silent for 15 minutes. Countless student stewards in yellow vests secured the event, and everything went smoothly.

It became clear that the students had managed to motivate an incredible number of people, despite the national media persistently ignoring the student protests, mentioning them only rarely and briefly and almost exclusively in a negative context.

The power and strength of nonviolent action

In these past few months, students in Serbia have shown us the power of nonviolence, solidarity, community and love.

From the start, they advocated a peaceful and nonviolent approach. For larger rallies, they provided an impressive number of stewards. Across social media, they appealed to citizens to support the idea of peaceful protests and defined rules of conduct. Then at the protests and blockades, the atmosphere was such that a good number of citizens would bring small children or dogs.

In the days that followed, the students carried out a host of smaller and larger actions. Taking inspiration from the 1996-1997 student protests, and believing there was no cause for celebration in the country, they organised an action for New Year’s Eve called “No New Year, you still owe us for the old one”, calling on citizens to join their protest instead of attending celebrations in town squares lavishly paid for with public money. At midnight, the central location fell silent: a fifteen-minute commemoration for the victims. Then they organised protests in front of the Ministry of Education, the Constitutional Court, RTS, for 24 hours they blocked Autokomanda, one of Belgrade’s main traffic arteries. They called for the first general strike and a large number of people responded, but it was short-lived and, as it would turn out, insufficient.

Then they started with the marches. They announced a large rally in Novi Sad for 1 February with the idea of marking three months since the collapse of the canopy. Students from Belgrade and other cities started making their way to Novi Sad on foot several days in advance, walking in a column, though it was a freezing and windy January. They deliberately walked through small towns and villages as a way to overcome the media blockade and ensure people had a chance to see them. There were touching scenes as the procession of students passed through small towns. The locals organised to welcome them the best they could, many would cook and bring out food and refreshments, people would come out to sing and hug them as they passed, and to bandage their blistered feet. Many were in tears. Alongside those coming in on foot, people arrived in Novi Sad in cars, on public transport, even on bicycles. The experience of students marching and meeting people in small towns who cannot see on TV what is happening in the country resonated so much, and was so moving and wonderful that the marches became a new form of protest.

In the months that followed, there were marches to Kragujevac, Niš, Novi Pazar, Belgrade, Kraljevo, Loznica, and many other towns. Secondary school pupils and other citizens started joining the marches or organising them independently. No matter how cold, rainy, windy, and by the end of spring blazing hot the

⁴ A bit later they started regularly using the motto: “The smarter person doesn’t give in, the smarter person organises.”



weather was, young people spent days on the march, which followed a previously announced plan; they slept in fields, under tents or in halls the locals would organise for them or in houses where they would be accommodated. They were greeted as heroes most everywhere they went and a myth started developing about how these children had come to save us. In some places, they were not welcomed; the locals would shut themselves away in their houses and not come out to greet them, or offer a glass of water, due to fear or pressure, or the belief that these were “enemies, Ustashas”, but such places were rarer. The time of liberation from fear had come and the locals would mostly come out into the streets to greet the students. They even started competing who would put on a better welcome. They were equally hospitable to all the other people who were making their way to wherever the students were going. People started being happy to see each other, they started embracing, jumping up and down and dancing in the streets, crying and invariably shouting, “Keep pumping!” It is hard to explain why we all cried so much in those months: maybe those were tears of joy, maybe of sorrow, maybe it was because of the fear that this tremendous hope that had appeared would deflate like a balloon, and maybe it was because of the long years of humiliation and shame that it took these children to shake us awake.

Students learned quickly from their actions and experiences and used this knowledge to develop new actions. Because of the high impact of the encounters with locals during the marches, they developed a special activity called “A Student in Every Village” where they went from village to village to answer questions and talk with locals as a way to dismantle fear and distrust and overcome the media blockade and spin.

In addition to the already mentioned gathering at Slavija, they organised several mega-protests. These included the blockade of the Novi Sad bridges on 1 and 2 February by tens of thousands of people. Symbolically, on 15 February, Sretenje (Candlemas), Serbia’s Statehood Day, established in memory of the First Serbian Uprising (against the Dahijas, i.e. Ottoman rule), tens of thousands of people gathered in [Kragujevac](#). The students wrote in the invitation for the gathering: “Sretenje is the day when winter and summer meet, slavery and freedom, lawlessness and the constitution. Sretenje is a day for raising our heads and voices, for having faith and taking action, for talking with each other and coming together.” To mark four months since the collapse of the canopy and the government’s failure to undertake any steps towards meeting the students’ demands, a large gathering was organised in [Niš](#) where students presented the “Student Edict” listing and explaining the values they were fighting for.⁵ They also called on citizens to organise into assemblies⁶. As a rule, every larger protest featured a performance by a [blockade choir](#).

⁵ Student Edict full text: <https://ninfo.rs/english/news/the-student-edict-adopted-at-rally-in-nis/>.

⁶ A citizens’ assembly is a form of direct participation of citizens in local self-government as foreseen by law. It is convened for a populated place, part of a populated place, local community or street.

For each large gathering in Belgrade, there was an expectation that it would be the last, the final step before the advent of change, after which the institutions would start functioning, after which we would be liberated from the overbearing and violent regime. This was true of 15 March when several hundred thousand people gathered in Belgrade, peacefully and with dignity. The gathering did not bring about change, but it did elicit a reaction from the regime that could not resist testing out a special weapon on such a mass of people, the “sound cannon”, while at the same time prohibiting any mention of its name.

From the very beginning, the students demonstrated empathy and solidarity. Countless times they said or wrote that an attack on one of them was an attack on all. They organised and participated in a large number of humanitarian actions.

Among their feats are the student cycling tour to Strasbourg, as well as the relay marathon to Brussels, in the hope of engaging European institutions and informing the European public about the events unfolding in Serbia.

They organised or encouraged countless protests. Most frequently in front of institutions, court buildings, prosecutor’s offices, as well as police stations. They called them to account and reminded them what their job was, but also demanded the release of the arrested students and citizens who were unlawfully detained and prosecuted. RTS has traditionally been a frequent target of protests (ever since the 1990s, though almost nothing has changed, it is still entirely in the service of the government as a propaganda machine that manipulates and distorts facts and even goes so far as to lie outright). Students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) have called for a boycott of RTS, and have started producing their own [news programmes](#), which are real little masterpieces. In March, students launched a surprise action and blockaded the RTS building without prior announcement, in the middle of the night, holding it under blockade for 22 hours. They repeated this surprise on 14 April and maintained the blockade for a full 14 days. At that time, both main RTS buildings in Belgrade were blockaded (in Takovska and in Košutnjak), while in Novi Sad, the Radio Television of Vojvodina building was blockaded. They demanded a new call for applications for candidates to fill the Council of the Electronic Media Regulatory Body. This demand was met within two weeks, but it will later turn out that the authorities continued playing by their own “rules”. Because, apparently, the law does not apply to them.

Even though the main aim of the student struggle was to have institutions function no matter who was in power, they too realised this was impossible with the current regime. In reality, the regime had occupied and thoroughly corroded almost all state institutions, transforming them into agencies working for the interests of the ruling party. By the end of May, students were officially demanding snap elections. The idea was for them to come out with their own list that would include people they have a special trust in, and that the new government be provisional in character with the main aim of meeting the students’ demands and creating preconditions for fair elections that could not be stolen.

Novi Pazar is the world

“Dunpovci”, students of the State University of Novi Pazar (Državni Univerzitet u Novom Pazaru, abbreviated as DUNP), deserve a special section in this text. It was not easy to declare and maintain a blockade anywhere, but it was particularly difficult in Novi Pazar. The city is located in Sandžak, an ethnically mixed region of mostly Bosniaks and Serbs where strong tensions had prevailed during the 1990s, rippling out from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Shamefully, it has become common in recent years for hooligans to light flares and sing nationalist songs spreading hatred on Orthodox Christmas (e.g. “It’s Christmas, shoot up the mosques”). The police would manage to identify or arrest some of them, but the practice continued. For too long, people had been intimidated and threatened. In such circumstances, most people keep quiet, mind their own business and express little support for any kind of social event. That is why DUNP students are real heroes, because they managed to organise the blockade of the University and maintain it for months in solidarity with students from other cities in Serbia. Like students from other universities in Serbia, they were regulars at large joint events. When you see student stewards wearing DUNP badges at the RTS blockade in Belgrade that lasted several days, you can’t help but be moved.⁷ Social media was enthused with photographs of hijabi students wearing the yellow vests of protest stewards, and especially a photograph of a fez sporting student and one with a šajkača cap carrying a protest banner together.

When they organised a large rally in Niš during the month of Ramadan, students from Niš informed themselves about Muslim customs that were previously unfamiliar to them and provided students from Novi Pazar with iftar and a space for prayer. A few weeks later when the DUNP students organised a large rally in

⁷ And when you hear the speech given by a war veteran in front of the blockaded RTS: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DloCoeLAM4/>



Novi Pazar and invited everyone to come, they provided lent-friendly mantije (a Novi Pazar speciality) for guests observing the Orthodox Easter fast.

The mutual cooperation, respect and appreciation gave an invaluable contribution to building peace and trust, and though this was not the students' main aim, it was a welcome side effect. What they achieved was perhaps best described by an older man by whose shop we passed at the end of February, on our way to support the DUNP students in a day-long protest. The man insisted on treating us to coffee and cakes as guests in Novi Pazar even though we weren't students: "You know, this is the first time that we Bosniaks in Novi Pazar feel like Serbia is our country and we are its equal citizens." (We didn't tell him that we felt the same.) If they had done no more than this, it would have been huge.

Empathy in the region

The support shown to students in Serbia by dozens of students in Banja Luka, Zagreb, Rijeka, Podgorica, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, and Skopje was also touching. In Ljubljana, people gathered in front of the Serbian Embassy at the invitation of the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television to express solidarity with colleagues attacked in front of the FDU. At a support rally in front of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, students held up a banner that read: "One world, one struggle. Academic solidarity". Students from the Faculty of Philosophy in Rijeka recalled that 15 years ago when their faculty was blockaded they received support from colleagues in Serbia and posted: "Back then students from Serbia stood by us, today we stand by them." The "Studentarija" student platform in Macedonia posted that at this time of struggle, they stand shoulder to shoulder with students in Serbia in their quest for justice and safety.

Students who ran the relay marathon to Brussels were very warmly welcomed as they passed through both [Croatia](#) and Slovenia.

Gestures of empathy with citizens in the region were also important. In December 2024, Zagreb was mourning a seven-year-old boy killed in a primary school. The students expressed their condolences on social networks and extended the blockade to hold a minute of silence for the boy. There was a horrific massacre in Cetinje, Montenegro on 1 January this year, when a man killed thirteen people, including two children. The students extended the blockade to hold a minute of silence for each of the victims.

A few hours after the authorities in Serbia tested their "sound cannon" on protesting citizens, at a nightclub in Kočani, North Macedonia, a fire broke out and claimed the lives of 60 mostly young people. Another tragedy that can be traced back to corruption. With that in mind, the students organised one of their blockades in front of the North Macedonian embassy, they brought flowers and lit candles and stood in silence for 75 minutes – commemorating the victims of Novi Sad and Kočani together.



Moves of the regime

The Serbian regime, arrogant as it is, did not have a smart response to the general uprising, so it tried everything it could think of, short of meeting the students' demands. Without a trace of shame, they kept repeating in their media that they had met all of them.

It would be impossible to list all of the regime's misdeeds. They arrested and detained students and activists in an attempt to intimidate people, but also to root out protest leaders. It didn't help that there were **no leaders**, as the students pointed out countless times: they had no leaders, they were organised into plenums where decisions are made by direct democracy. Then they sent thugs to peaceful protests and blockades. The uprising would never have reached this scale if they hadn't been so brazen as to attack the FDU students in November. It was noticeable that the police acted most brutally in Novi Sad.

The regime condoned attempts to run people over at protests and blockades, practically inciting them⁸, which meant the incidents became more frequent. The most notable cases are of two female students who were run over:

- On 16 January in Belgrade, in Ruzeveltova Street, driver Marko Pavlović, who has several prior convictions, drove at full speed onto the pavement and hit Sonja, a student, who fell onto the hood of his car and he drove on for several meters until she fell off and hit the concrete, after which he drove off. Proceedings against the driver are underway, but he has pled not guilty.
- On 24 January, during protests in Novi Beograd, Milica Stojanović tried to run several people over with her car. Kristina Vasiljević, a student steward, was seriously injured. A few months later, the president pardoned the accused perpetrator.

When it comes to violence against students, we must not forget the night between 27 and 28 January when thugs came out of SNS party offices in Novi Sad to beat up students who had been attaching stickers nearby. A student, Ana, had her jaw broken by a baseball bat. This incident brought down the government. Under public pressure, the regime had to show it was doing something, but the change was merely cosmetic. The thugs were pardoned by the president over the summer, he'll need them again. It is interesting that one of them, Marko Tošin, turned out to be a wanted criminal because in September 2023 in Kraljevo, together

⁸ For instance, in regard to one of the first incidents of this kind, the president said at his press conference: "They say someone jumped onto the hood of his car because he wanted to go through. So then, they say, let's arrest the man driving the car. How on earth can you arrest a man who hasn't broken the law? The man was driving, minding his own business. Have you all lost your minds? Splash some water on your face, go on, there's plenty of cold water. You stand in someone's way, you tell them you're the law now and you won't let them pass. And the man passes. And you jump on his car and you say arrest the man driving the car. Are you all insane? What country would do that? Have you all gone mad?"



with a group of cadets from the police academy, he attacked Predrag Voštinić, an activist of Local Front, and the authorities had allegedly been unable to find him since then.

For a while, the regime kept insisting on deporting foreign nationals, especially delighting in deporting citizens of Croatia with no connection to the protests, except for maybe looking at them with approval. The most notable were the deportations of [Yaroslav Bulavin](#), an artist who was filming the student and citizen protests, and of [Davide Martello](#), an Italian pianist who travels on his bicycle with his piano in tow to play for freedom in city squares around the world and who played at the protest in Niš.

Students were commonly targeted with their full names published in the regime's tabloid media. Personal data were disclosed along with lies and threats that can be understood as calls for a lynch mob. RTS equated the students and those supporting them with members of Hamas. And it also became commonplace to call them Ustashas, foreign mercenaries, traitors, enemies of the state, terrorists, thugs. The arrested activists were accused of subverting the constitutional order. Many families of students are in a difficult position because they are routinely fired from their jobs or threatened. Teachers who had dignified their calling and suspended classes in a show of support for the students and to oppose the violence against young people, some of them maintaining the suspension for months, were persecuted and punished. Many were left without pay because the regime decided unlawfully to withhold their salaries⁹, and some were fired. The firing is still underway. Some small businesses that had in some way supported the students were demolished or are facing other types of pressure.

For those unfamiliar with the Serbian context, it is important to note that, in contravention of the constitution and the law, the one person who gets to decide about everything is the current president of Serbia, the same person who was Šešeljić's¹⁰ apprentice and assistant and the very same person who was Milošević's minister of information at a time when the state security services were murdering independent reporters.

In the days leading up to the large rally in Belgrade on 15 March, the regime transformed Pionirski Park, which is located between the National Assembly of Serbia, the Presidency and the City Assembly, into a tent encampment which became known as Čacilend. Allegedly, the tents were for students who wanted to learn and were protesting because their faculties were blockaded. In this age of social media, it did not take long to identify the camp dwellers, and it turned out that there were maybe two and a half students among them,

⁹ In response to this injustice, the Serbian IT community established the Solidarity Network, an initiative for direct financial support for teachers. Anyone could register as a donor and donate as much as they could. Staff at schools under pressure provided payment details for those who had had their earnings withheld, marking priorities.

¹⁰ Vojislav Šešeljić, founder of the Serbian Radical Party, convicted at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) of crimes against humanity and war crimes during the wars in BiH and Croatia.

while it was at best uncertain that any of the others had ever set foot inside a faculty. It was also revealed how you could sign up and receive a small daily allowance for becoming one of the settlers in the encampment. We were too quick to conclude that the encampment was just a publicity stunt for the president to show his TV audiences that he still enjoyed considerable support. Crowds gathered in front of Čacilend every day, made up of citizens curious to see this new form of zoo. They chucked popcorn and crisps at those inside or woke them up at all hours with a horn. But then the tent encampment was transformed into a bunker surrounded by tractor barricades and filled with people armed to the teeth who no longer looked like those poor souls pretending to be students for a small daily allowance, but like a paramilitary group freshly escaped from prison. They were guarded by the police. To protect them from citizens. We realised too late that it was the president's last defence against his own citizens who would come to protest there on 15 March. As per the previously announced plan, during the protest, when the phalanges began their provocations, the students evacuated the protesters to safer neighbourhoods.

Among the several hundred thousand people present at the protest, there were certainly those ready to happily clash with these phalanges, but there weren't enough of them who would disregard the students' appeals for a peaceful protest where violence was out of the question. Having failed to incite large-scale violence, while these thousands of citizens stood for 15 minutes of silence in honour of the victims, the regime decided to test out its "sound cannon", a weapon designed to cause panic. Despite numerous videos of the event circulating on social media, despite the testimonies of thousands of citizens, despite countless people going to emergency services with health problems, the regime insisted it was all a lie, that Serbia had no such weapon and that anyone mentioning the sound cannon would be prosecuted for inciting panic.

Students had called on other sections of society to join their struggle from the very beginning, but apart from teachers who stood by them, few were prepared for such sacrifice. Several calls for a general strike achieved a large turnout, but for only one day. The Bar Association was on a prolonged strike, theatres suspended operations for a week, as did other cultural institutions, and workers and pensioners also organised their protests. Even so, students remained the main power source, the engine and the brain behind the protests.

Enraged, the regime started barking and biting, announcing the abolishment of public faculties (after all, they only need higher education institutions that will issue them diplomas in return for a fee or a favour), appointing a minister of education who as a professor had been accused of sexual harassment by several female students. Tremendous pressure was put on faculties and schools, and slowly they started resuming classes.

At the end of June, at yet another huge rally in Belgrade, students gave the "green light", calling on citizens and assemblies to take matters into their own hands. Whether due to the impatience of one part of those assembled for the protest, the impatience of the regime, or the actions of infiltrators, it was the first large gathering where the police displayed a high degree of brutality. The summer was filled with images of police brutality from around the country. Citizens' assemblies organised actions across Serbia and the regime would bus police in full riot gear from place to place in summer temperatures of some 40 odd degrees. In some places the police would beat up the citizens, in some the citizens would push them back or drive them away.

Recently, two stories have shaken the public. One is the story of Nikolina, a student who suffered psychological, physical and sexual violence at the hands of the police and found the extraordinary courage to speak out about it. Together with several students and passers-by, she was detained in a parking garage inside the Serbian Government building where Marko Kričak, commander of the Special Security Unit, slapped her, banged her head against the wall and threatened to rape her in front of everyone. Nikolina has filed a criminal complaint against him. One of Nikolina's fellow students also filed a complaint against a police officer who threatened to shoot him in the head. The other story is about Bogdan, a student who has been detained since mid-August and who was brought to his father's funeral in September in chains.

The police brutality is mostly well-documented. We can only hope that justice will catch up with them all.

While one part of Serbia gathered in Kragujevac for Sretenje, the president tried to organise a counter-rally in Sremska Mitrovica, to show just how very many supporters he had. He had tried this several times before, but had never managed to get enough people together, not even with those attractive daily allowances. On that occasion in Sremska Mitrovica, he stated that he would destroy all those trying to organise a colour revolution anywhere in the world and announced a textbook he would publish about how he defeated the colour revolution, which would then become the most read textbook in the world. This is no colour revolution and there is no trace of a textbook. He didn't defeat anyone, nor will he.



Where are we now?

We are waiting for the elections that we know the regime won't call until it is sure it has the electoral engineering to secure a victory.

We are also waiting for Europe, but we don't expect their help, seeing how quietly they accepted the entirely irregular elections of previous years. It is clear to us that Europe is acting like a neighbour who hears the cries of domestic violence coming from the flat next door and does nothing. For whatever reasons and interests, it has decided to play dead, with few notable exceptions. A good many of us still hold out hope.

We are waiting for internal cracks to appear and the regime to collapse from within. It's on the brink.

September 2025

