

Serbia's Student Protests in Mature Phase: What to Consider Going Forward?

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Through symbolically stripping power from the head of state and mass organisation, student protests have already accomplished much for society as a whole. Nemanja Drobnjak examines the further outcomes and possibilities of this movement.

Despite concerns that student protests across Serbia would wane after the holidays and that students would return to their regular duties under political pressure, the protests show no signs of abating. New road blockade actions and protests are already being announced, while regular 15-minute daily blockades across Serbia continued even during the holidays.

Negotiations between education workers and the Government have also continued, and according to official statements, both sides appear satisfied with the outcomes, although Premier Vučić had threatened dismissals just days ago if teaching in the second term was not regular. Many teachers remain dissatisfied, but regardless of the future fate of education workers and student protests in general, certain goals have already been achieved, new directions for political struggle against the authorities have been established, and potential problems have been highlighted that we as a society and political subjects may not have clearly seen before, but must now become aware of. Therefore, it is important to problematise these issues and explain why awareness of them is crucial. But first, let us examine the benefits of the student protest.

The Greatest Benefit of Student Protests - Shifting the Socio-Political Focus

For years in Serbia, there has been a media-crafted socio-political narrative that Aleksandar Vučić is the one who decides absolutely everything in the country. Even if this were entirely accurate, many analysts and interpreters of social reality, even when directing their critical edge at him, haven't fully understood that such a narrative suits his maintenance of power. It's clear that media outlets serving the authorities do this for obvious reasons of media propaganda in favour of the government. However, when the supposedly critical media fixate solely on "one man" as the source of all evil in the country, they unwittingly play into his hands, giving him something against which he must defend himself. And he defends himself by calling press conferences where he tells us a million times what we could have already heard - that he is a victim, that evil media are attacking him, but that he fights for Serbia and Serbian interests and will not back down. Through this, he created a desirable image of himself as a martyr and victim, "boosted" his political position and status as Leader, and in return gained support from media-blinded voters.

Then the students emerged. And regarding the collapse of the canopy in Novi Sad and Vučić's daily efforts to control the damage, they directed one very clear, seemingly simple sentence at him: "Nobody asked you anything."

Why did this sentence present such a problem and why does it fundamentally open a path to a different relationship with Vučić's authoritarian rule? Because for the first time as a leader, he was

confronted with such a situation - that a certain social force engaged in demonstrations actually demands nothing from him. Rather, they demand action from the responsible institutions, which must do their job.

With this act, the students killed two birds with one stone - on one hand, they exposed the collapse of institutions that should be responsible, and on the other hand, forced Vučić to independently return focus to himself as a leader, as that's the only situation in which he knows how to swim. However, by doing so, he was forced to admit what we have all suspected for years - that he would indeed like to be the one who decides everything in the state, thereby confirming accusations that he is an authoritarian leader, despite claiming that Serbia is a democratic country. Additionally, they successfully knocked all his "aces from his sleeve" regarding claims of weak support for gatherings, ideas about foreign mercenaries, and similar previously seen planted stories. So much so that he had to concede and offer some completely nonsensical proposals to students and young people, such as supposed housing loans with state subsidies, which the protesting students rejected as this wasn't in accordance with their demands.

All this produced a clear political destabilisation of Vučić as a leader, where he became, as the folk saying goes, "tangled like a chick in hemp". One day he offers subsidies, the next he threatens with 17,000 loyalists, the third he says he's ready to talk and that all demands have been met, the fourth that he would send special forces to disperse the students. By doing this, he permanently damaged himself as a politician, as he confirmed himself before a wide audience as a falsely stable and falsely infallible Leader.

Consequently, students have shown a clear path for how to oppose him and all similar authoritarian leaders in the future - by diverting the socio-political focus away from the Leader as a personality. And by shining the protest spotlight where responsibility truly lies - in this case, in non-functional institutions.

The Threat to Power Position - Every Autocrat's Nightmare

The collapse of the canopy at the railway station in Novi Sad symbolically marked the final collapse of our institutions. Or at least those responsible for investigating the causes that led to the deaths of 15 innocent people. But there are those who personify political power when there are no functional institutions that should be symbols of power in a democratic state, so responsibility necessarily turned towards them. Thanks to the policies of these individuals, institutions have indeed become non-functional. In other words, through a developed authoritarian system of rule, the levers of power have been transferred from institutions to individuals, and any form of personal rule leads to autocracy.

Student protests and the aforementioned shift in socio-political focus away from the autocrat to institutions are actually a counterweight and an (in)direct attempt to weaken the autocrat's power. And this is the key significance of these protests - that every autocrat dreads the potential call from demonstrators for accountability from those around whom socio-political power should be most concentrated. Thus, the autocrat loses - he doesn't know how to cope in situations where he doesn't completely control the levers of socio-political power. This is why these protests are a major problem for Vučić. And why he makes various mistakes that are products of his inability to cope with the new socio-political circumstances.

This is indeed a completely new trend, unseen since 2012. And this is the right path that every opposition political structure concerned with democracy should follow. Vučić is aware that his autocratic rule could collapse from within on its own, and the authoritarian political shell that appears stable from the outside but is very fragile inside has been exposed to the public. With the

collapse of his rule and loss of political power will come the end of his political career, given that he doesn't know how to navigate and politically participate in different socio-political circumstances. There is no path that leads from nowhere, and his political path begins in Šešelj's Radical Party. He was socialised in such a way that autocracy is the only way to maintain power and that everything must be subordinated to that political goal - ruling at any cost. And when the levers of power are no longer in his hands, his political career will no longer have meaning. Hence such fear.

The Reformist Character of Student Protests: Does it Carry Something Problematic?

Most, if not all, demands that students have put forward concern criticism of the (non)functioning of responsible state bodies, and in that sense, it is quite certain that their main socio-political goal is to return certain responsibilities under the aegis of institutions. The canopy collapse was, in that sense, merely a trigger. What is also important to emphasise is that the students' idea is not to radically change the social system through institutions. Rather, it is to reform institutions within the existing social system. Therefore, the student movement should not be misinterpreted as revolutionary, as it does not advocate for changing the social system. Instead, it advocates for the functioning of the existing system, or rather, its reform.

This is not necessarily something bad in itself. After all, the reformist character of student protests has encouraged masses from other parts of society to join them in this political struggle. Because the majority in our country view revolutionary tendencies in a negative context, they don't like to risk attempts at radical changes to the social system, and objectively, it's difficult to imagine that something revolutionary could indeed happen on the periphery of Europe, especially in the global context of rising far-right politics. However, this carries within it a question that hasn't been fully problematised - would reform within the social system towards the functioning of social institutions truly produce a better, more just, and more equal society?

The liberal-democratic system carries many imperfections, like any other social system. But it seems that this is not being questioned, or that insufficient attention is being paid to these imperfections. Particularly to those that capitalism, as the dominant socio-economic system within liberal democracies, produces. A good example of such misunderstandings is reflected in the so-called "Day After" measures issued by a group of intellectuals gathered around ProGlas. It clearly emphasises that the proposed measures are non-ideological. And such a thing actually doesn't exist. Ideas of equality, justice, solidarity, human rights that ProGlas members often invoke are ideological, par excellence. They are not interpreted the same way from the perspective of, for example, a liberal and a socialist.

Therefore, we cannot speak about improving institutional functionality in a liberal-democratic spirit necessarily leading to improvement in the social situation, without awareness that certain social values are indeed ideological concepts, which are interpreted differently depending on which ideological matrix is dominant in a society. That's why we must pose the basic question - what kind of society do we actually want and is the liberal-democratic order truly the one that brings the most benefit for the majority of citizens?

Does Vučić's Removal Finally Mean a New Dawn?

The fundamental reason why it's necessary to ask what kind of society we want and whether the liberal-democratic system is the one we aspire to and consider best, is that we must be aware that Vučić's autocracy emerged precisely in the circumstances of the existing system. His authoritarian regime is not some external phenomenon. It was born within the framework of the existing system, which was quite obviously so weak that there were no firm barriers that would prevent its transformation into authoritarianism.

Had the system's institutions been strong, had there been firm control over the work of institutions and inviolability of the separation of powers, as well as mechanisms that guarantee such things and which are impossible to violate, Vučić would not have had the chance to rule for over ten years. But he still rules, because he successfully swept aside all competition and found a way to brazenly violate the highest legal acts without sanctions. And how to dominate all institutions with the aim of destroying them, in order to transfer the focus of rule from institutions to his personality.

It is quite certain that the liberal-democratic system in our country had a series of shortcomings and never fully developed. This is taught to us by the experience of living and political activity in the last almost 35 years.

Since the re-establishment of the multi-party system and implementation of elections, there has often been a tendency for one party or coalition to control all levers of power. This would transform the state into a partocracy, and this trend in Serbia is no novelty; indeed, its roots date back to the very establishment of parties in the 19th century.

The political culture is such that one party, one leader emerges to the forefront, around whom everyone gathers. In these circumstances, when authoritarian tendencies have been breeding for decades, it is difficult to build a democratic society in which at some point one party and one leader would not become the bearers of all political power. Because political culture and its development are the product of long-duration history.

Hence, a very important question arises - does Vučić's departure from power really represent dawn for Serbia? Potentially yes. But it is not enough to just force institutions to do their job. It is even more necessary to establish clear and firm control over the work of institutions to ensure they do not weaken again and enable some new authoritarian figure to take all political power from the system's institutions.

How and Who After These Authorities?

Instead of a conclusion, it would be more relevant to ask the question - what comes after Vučić's fall? Not because we should mourn his fall, but because we should think about how to proceed after more than a decade of society being undermined by an authoritarian leader.

It is certain that not much should be expected from the current opposition. They have shown numerous weaknesses throughout all previous years and failed attempts to overthrow the government. A series of protests without politically tangible results, numerous coalitions that collapse within months, numerous wrong political decisions. Serbian society needs a new political agenda from new people. Student demonstrations will not be able to produce a new political force that could govern the country immediately, or at least not in the near future. Without the joining of other relevant social forces, above all workers and farmers in greater numbers, but also workers in education, judiciary, healthcare, culture and other sectors, the student rebellion will remain just that. This is what the experiences of previous student rebellions in the last twenty years tell us.

By making the movement more massive, a base would be created from which quality, which undoubtedly exists but is invisible, could be selected. Whether due to not wanting to be visible, because of personal discouragement and pragmatism, or due to highly raised barriers to political participation.

The process of creating a broader opposition social movement, which would not include the current opposition - something that would also be to the students' liking - is the only true alternative to the authoritarian system. This movement should primarily define what kind of society we want to live in,

what social system is desirable and why that one, not another. Without this, there can be no well-ordered institutions, because institutions are the mirror of a social system. Then it would have to develop mechanisms that would guarantee the inviolability of institutional functioning within that system. Because without this guarantee, there is again the threat of authoritarian leaders emerging and seizing the levers of power.

Who could be the guarantor and barrier against attempts to usurp institutions? The answer is seemingly simple. All of us. The citizens of this country. Who must not wait more than ten years and be silent observers. Because institutions are part of ourselves, they are what we are. Without clearly defining these two questions and fully understanding that our role as citizens of our country is such that we permanently defend institutions and laws in the country, that we fight for them through civil disobedience as soon as we notice authoritarian tendencies of power, there will be neither democracy nor institutions, and the only thing we can expect is Vučić after Vučić.

Nemanja Drobnjak

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