

The Student Revolt in Serbia: Vučić's Nemesis?

Wednesday 5 February 2025, by [DINEV Ivaylo](#) (Date first published: 29 January 2025).

Serbia has been shaken in recent months by student-led protests. What began as an isolated demonstration to honour the dead and demand accountability after a railway station canopy collapsed in Novi Sad has quickly evolved into a mass movement that is presenting Aleksandar Vučić with his most severe test yet.

In late 2024, students in Serbia initiated a wave of protests, leading to the occupation of university buildings, the blockade of schools, and demonstrations in cities across the country. The catalyst for this mass mobilisation was the tragic collapse of a concrete railway station canopy in Novi Sad on 1 November, which claimed 15 lives. The disaster shocked the country and fuelled demands for accountability; the station had recently been renovated as part of a Chinese-led upgrade of Serbia's railway infrastructure.

Chronology of the protests

On 22 November, students and professors from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts at the University of Belgrade gathered to honour the Novi Sad victims. The event took a violent turn when an organised group, allegedly including high-ranking members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), attacked the attendees. In response, the students initiated a blockade of the Faculty on 25 November, a protest that quickly spread to other faculties and universities across Serbia. So far, the [students' demands](#) include the publication of all documentation related to the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station, the release of detained protesters and the dropping of charges against them, and a 20 per cent increase in funding for state universities. While the Novi Sad tragedy has been the central focus, the protests have also become a vehicle for expressing resentment over issues like alleged electoral fraud and the revival of a major lithium-mining project. They are thus the latest in a series of protest waves in Serbia since 2016.

Yet the scale and intensity of this movement are unprecedented in Serbia's recent history - and in the entire history of student movements in Europe. The students garnered broad support in academia and beyond. Around 5,000 university professors signed an online [letter of solidarity](#), and by the end of December 2024, [85 faculties](#) - 74 per cent of all faculties in the country - had joined the protests. [Farmers blocked Serbia's main motorway in December](#), and artists, secondary school students, teachers, education unions, lawyers, and media associations also expressed their support, with 73 schools suspending classes in solidarity with the students. As part of the campaign 'Zastani, Srbijo' ('Stop, Serbia'), people took to the streets in [58 cities and towns across the country](#) and stood for 15 minutes in silence in memory of the 15 victims of the Novi Sad tragedy. Then on 22 December 2024 [an estimated 100,000 people](#) gathered at Slavija Square in Belgrade in what was the largest protest in Serbia in twenty years. Students, joined by farmers, unions, and opposition groups, [carried banners](#) with messages like 'Your hands are bloody', 'Students are not silent' and 'Corruption kills'.

There are no signs of the protests abating in the New Year. [At last count](#), the number of towns and cities where demonstrations have been held was 151. On 24 January, students called for a general strike, which led to country-wide demonstrations and the [suspension of classes](#) at 68 and 48 per cent of the country's secondary and primary schools. And there has been an outpouring of support from the Serbian diaspora and celebrities, including tennis player Novak Djokovic, who expressed his solidarity with the protesters from the Australian Open.

Broad appeal due to grassroots approach

The student movement has adopted a participatory approach, avoiding centralised leadership and party-political influence. In the occupied universities, students hold general assemblies where all participants can vote. This grassroots strategy has lent the movement credibility and authenticity, helping it to spread across Serbia. A [survey](#) conducted by the Centre for Research, Responsibility, and Transparency (CRRT) at the end of December 2024 showed the extent of the movement's public backing: 61 per cent of citizens support the protests, and 58 per cent believe that the students' desire for accountability over the Novi Sad tragedy is genuine. Only 33 per cent view the protests as part of a conspiracy by 'internal and external enemies' to destabilise Serbia. The survey also revealed widespread disillusionment with the Serbian leader: 52 per cent of respondents said they would vote against President Aleksandar Vučić in a referendum, while only 34 per cent expressed confidence in him.

State reaction with carrot and stick

Initially, the government was dismissive of the protests. However, as they evolved into a mass mobilisation, officials, including President Vučić, began to address the students' demands. On 13 December, the government announced the release of documents related to the Novi Sad disaster. Meanwhile, Vučić attempted to appease the students by promising a 20 per cent increase in funding for higher education in 2025. This week Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned and Vučić announced he would replace half of his cabinet and grant pardons to students and teachers charged by the prosecutor's office. With that, he claimed to have met all the students' demands and called for an end to the protests.

At the same time, the striking students have come under increased [pressure](#) from the authorities. Vučić [alleged](#) that the movement was financed by Western interests and supported by [Croatian](#) students working on behalf of the Croatian intelligence services. The president of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić, also [threatened](#) that if they continued to protest, more than 100,000 students would lose the state subsidies that allow them to study. Pro-government media published personal information on some protesters and organisers, and a number of them received [telephone calls](#) from Serbia's Security Intelligence Agency. The protests have also been subject to [violent attacks](#) by provocateurs believed to be close to the [ruling party](#).

Strong regional history of student protests

Student activism has often been a catalyst for political change in the Balkans. In the 1990s and 2000s, students played vital role in anti-government protests waves. In more recent times, student activism against the commercialisation of education has led to faculty occupations and street protests in [Serbia](#), [Croatia](#), and [North Macedonia](#). The current Serbian protests recall a period of student activism in [Bulgaria](#) in the autumn of 2013, when students gave new impetus to an anti-mafia movement and drew international attention to the problem of corruption in Bulgarian politics. All of these movements have relied on a similar mix of strategies, including university occupations, open general assemblies, and street demonstrations.

Next weeks decisive

As the largest ever student movement in contemporary Europe, the student protests are invested with significant symbolic, discursive, and strategic power. Sparked by public outrage over a tragic construction failure, they have grown to the point that they now pose a major challenge to Aleksandar Vučić's reign.

The students are delivering a strong message to Serbian society that the younger generation is committed to pursuing systemic change and reclaiming its future. As the movement progresses, the students and their allies will have to make crucial decisions about maintaining momentum and achieving concrete institutional outcomes. Balancing their autonomy with the need to form broad coalitions against corruption and state capture will be vital to their success. Serbia's students are emerging as a driving force for societal transformation, offering hope not only for the present but also for the future of a country grappling with demographic decline and political stagnation.

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