

Serbia: The role of student demonstrations in mobilizing people against authoritarian regimes - The case of Serbia during mid 90s and mid 2020s

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The winter of 1996/1997 on the streets of Belgrade was as bitterly cold as this one. Yet, just like 28 years ago, students in Serbia's capital have once again taken to the streets demanding justice and the rule of law. Using their university buildings as safe spaces, these students step out each day at exactly 11:52AM, occupying streets across Serbia for 15 minutes, mourning the 15 people tragically killed in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, when the train station's canopy collapsed. Weekly mass protests in front of government institutions and on major city squares further intensify their voices, as students, joined by other citizens, press for their demands to be met.

This is not the first time that the students have been at the forefront for social change and justice. This legacy stretches back to 1968, a year when the global youth movement led by the New Left, shook Belgrade to its core for six days in June. The turbulent 1990s saw a resurgence of student-led protests, when frequent anti-war and anti-regime demonstrations arose in Serbia's cities and towns. Among these, the longest and most resolute ones erupted in November 1996, ignited by election fraud. For three months, thousands of students occupied the streets of Belgrade (as well as other Serbian cities and towns), demanding democratization, which had been introduced with the transition in other (South)East European countries. Although elections were held in Serbia since the collapse of the communist regime, and Yugoslavia for that matter, the conditions under which they were implemented, mostly in regard to the captured institutions and the seized media, were not resembling ones in a real democratic society. Since 1991, the political opposition, united in a common goal regardless of their ideological stance, the citizens and the students publicly displayed their frustration against Slobodan Milošević's politics, eager to show the world that the Serbian public was not united in supporting the regime's agenda, which was particularly relevant during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia (1991-1995).

During the protests of 1996/1997, the students marched in front of state institutions, ministries, courts, as well as the main offices of the lead pro-regime media, staging different performances, insisting on a response for the violation of their basic citizens' rights. On the other hand, the state television reported on the alleged disruption of the everyday life in the city that the protests of a "few hundred people" caused, taking statements from individuals who opposed the demonstrations, condemned the alleged violence on the streets and repeated other mantra on the students that coincided with the narrative of the state officials and the regime-controlled media. The evening news of the state television also broadcasted statements of farmers, emphasizing the hard work they do, in comparison to the "lazy" students who, as it was stated, should mind their own business and leave the politics to the politicians. By taking over the streets, the students and the opposition tried to breach the discrepancy in information created by the pro-regime media, a scenario that is being

repeated 28 years later. Although as historians we cannot back the claim that history is repeating itself, the fact that the students in Serbia today are forced to fight the same battles as their parents, is undoubtedly an indication that the Serbian society is not taking its history lessons seriously. During the 1990s Aleksandar Vučić was in the highest ranks of the Serbian Radical Party headed by war criminal Vojislav Šešelj and was the minister of information between 1998 and 2000. The same political forces that isolated Serbian society in the 1990s inside and out, economically, politically, culturally and in every other way, are leading the country yet again. This does not diminish the efforts and actions of the students in the mid-nineties, given that in their own historical circumstances, these protests were a victory. It does leave us with a bitter taste, a feeling that the society ended up in a vicious circle of fighting the same, or at least, similar battles.

The political and social climate of the 1990s in Serbia, severely shaped by wars and international sanctions, was quite different from the circumstances of the present day. Additionally, the opposition parties and the students in 1996/1997 were, at least on a declarative level, supported by the international community (something that certainly differs today). The backing of the international actors undoubtedly had an impact on Milošević, providing pressure on him to meet the demands of the protesters and introduce a *lex specialis* that recognized the opposition's victory in Belgrade and numerous other local election places. Although the protests of 1996/1997 did not bring an end to Milošević's authoritarian rule, they remain an important milestone in Serbia's history of the final decade of the 20th century. These protests are not only serving as proof of the regime's political malpractices but are also a contestant reminder that Serbia had a critical mass which opposed the politics of the ruling regime. The students who were at the forefront of these protests carried a banner that proclaimed: Belgrade is the world (*Beograd je svet*). This slogan reflected their aspirations that went far beyond the immediate issue of the local elections; it symbolized a broader desire for Serbia to rejoin the global community and break free from the isolation imposed by Milošević's politics. In a somewhat different historical scenery, we are witnessing the same urges of the students in Serbia today.

Taking into account the political, social and economic context of the 1990s and today, one should have in mind that the end of the Cold War created structural foundations for the rising tide of authoritarian regimes in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Rapid deepening of gaps between classes and other inequalities, coupled with diminishing social cohesion and institutional control, created perfect conditions for the gradual establishment of the new "alliances of the elites" between those who came in position of financial and political power. Consequences of neoliberal transition sparked accumulation of deep animosities which, in some cases, temporarily lacked political agenda, while in other cases, pushed people to give into misery and give up active participation in the political dimension of their fracturing social reality. At a certain point in recent history, granted, in almost surprisingly different circumstances, almost all countries of the region witnessed a shaky democratic coalition collapsing under the weight of its own corruption and inefficiency. In Serbia, the authoritarian regime that rose in its place started to slowly encroach towards an even constitutionally unchecked, and in practice, seemingly unlimited power.

While on the road of attaining near absolute control over all state institutions, and subsequently, over all aspects of its citizens' everyday lives, authoritarian regimes did become vulnerable at one critical point in time, which is bound to come sooner or later and bring about an era of reckoning for every wannabe dictator. That critical point is always reached whether an authoritarian regime relies on the nationalist populism and reborn far-right ideas to articulate the increasing animosities created by economic insecurities, or if it, instead, offers a belief in Fukuyamistic utopia, where all will be fine once we give up our Eastern culture of informality and start bringing EU legislation from an empty letter on the paper into practice. Finally, it could be both, as in the case of the Serbian regime today. Drunk on a notion of their own irreplaceableness, representatives of political and

financial oligarchy are bound to forget that, one day, they will have to provide at least some answer to the question - what happens when raging disappointment, accumulated over a long-term process, meets with a cause capable of overcoming differences defined by interests and dominant beliefs of growingly distant social groups?

“There is no God capable of stopping a hungry man” - as the old Latin saying goes, and as authoritarians always find out when their hybrid ideological constructs, as well as their, thus far, nearly perfectly proficient client systems, collapse in the face of the fact that there are many people who have nothing to lose by showing their outrage towards a reality they have been forced upon them. In some cases, it is a terrible tragedy which makes people aware that their backs have been finally pushed against the wall by an authoritarian regime striving to normalize any death toll of its insatiable greed. When the roof of a train station in Novi Sad fell under the weight of the years marked by utter disregard for human safety and machinations of corrupt government officials and companies, numerous contemporaries realized the meaning of a slogan, soon brought forward by the rebelling students of numerous universities in Serbia- “there is a concrete plate above all our heads!”. This catastrophe was the last drop in the glass of justified rage, a last wave in a river of blood that followed the current Serbian administration on its path to seizing a degree of control that would be looked upon with envy by many totalitarian regimes of the century gone by.

From ever increasing number of accidents at work that resulted in the loss of lives, up to the first school shooting in Serbian history, and from the gruesome murders committed by gangs in cooperation with the regime, up to the massacre in Mladenovac, the government's message remained the same - “It is all only natural for a country undergoing an economic development, it happens, get used to it...”. After corruption and carelessness claimed the lives of the latest 15 victims of this repeating transition, Serbian students collectively decided that they will never get used to this. The students decided that they would rather risk everything, than live in a country where a constant threat of death is considered a normal consequence of industrialization, and no one is called on responsibility for the so-called accidents which can happen to every one of us tomorrow. Until now, the regime saw the Serbian youth as a generation distant from politics, and each other, a new “lost generation”, one that will silently accept its assigned role written in the footnotes of the glorious national history written by Aleksandar Vučić and his supporters. Now, the regime is forced to reckon with the fact that it faces an entire generation of people molded into resilience by its own actions.

By the number of participants, the far achieved political effects and its sheer duration, this student movement is the biggest and most successful one in Serbian history. Never before has a student movement managed to block the entire University of Belgrade, as well as the universities of Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and other major towns. The students were soon joined by their high school colleagues and numerous counterparts from the schools of arts, craftsmanship, and other specialized professions. Subsequently, a near complete blockade of the entire upper educational system was established, showing a never-before-seen degree of collective solidarity and empathy among the young generations of Serbians. The collective character of the student movement is a sheer proof of this. The students decided not to single out individuals as leaders of the protest, avoiding being targeted by the regime. Because there aren't any known faces of the resistance to be persecuted, blackmailed, bribed, or intimidated, the students are able to organize themselves without worrying that forces loyal to the government might infiltrate their movement. Another historical precedent was made when the students declared a commitment to making all the necessary decisions by a collective vote on numerous levels of group representation, thus achieving a form of direct democracy with thousands of simultaneous participants, a unique phenomenon in itself. By practicing textbook direct democracy, the students are also directly opposing authoritarianism, paving the path to democracy better than any politician before them.

Another feature of this new movement that appears to be in contrast with the past traditions of student protests in Serbia is the unprecedented success the students had in mobilizing various social groups to support and participate in demonstrations. The closest comparison to the current Serbian student movement in terms of the achieved international notability, was the student movement of 1968, which however, failed to achieve the desired impact on the policy making in socialist Yugoslavia. This was because the students, despite their numerous attempts, never managed, at least to the extent that would make a difference, to integrate industrial workers, peasants and soldiers of Yugoslav People's Army into a wider movement. The records of the Yugoslav secret service bare testimony of numerous students' attempts to march into the factories and army barracks, which ended in physical altercations between the protesters and workers or soldiers, who were, actually, roughly the same age as the rebellious students. On the one hand, it was indeed very ambitious to expect that, back in 1968, the first generation in Yugoslav history to regard even the elementary education as a norm would understand seemingly abstract ideals of young left-wing academics, exceedingly well versed in Marxist theories. The student rebellions of the late 1960s occurred amidst the golden age of the Yugoslav economy and the expansion of social policies; thus, it would have been hard to expect that the people, who saw their purchasing power and living standards actually rise on a yearly basis, would rebel against the system that only relatively recently created a never-before-seen extent of equality, free education, healthcare, etc.

However, social reality is radically different half a century later, during Vučić's self-proclaimed "golden age". The student demonstrations provided an agenda through which all the existing animosities towards a near desperate position, shared by the vast number of Serbian citizens, could finally be expressed. When the streets of Belgrade became filled with tens of thousands of people marching in support of the student movement, it became clear that many Serbian citizens no longer believed in the promise of a "better future for our children" that helped the Serbian Progressive Party to overcome the democratic coalition back in 2012 (which opened up a "bright European future" alongside the doom for the Serbian working class). For the past 13 years the promise of a "better future" has been constantly reinforced by the ever expanding and now, all-encompassing network of state-controlled media. Now it is, finally, clear to everybody observing our Armageddon from the EU countries and from the rest of the world, that the Serbian youth is marching on the streets in order to prevent their future being stolen. Furthermore, their families are supporting them in the struggle to reject the future of cheap manual laborers in land polluting mines owned by shady foreign companies, underpaid and regularly humiliated workers who often die in sudden work-related accidents, which is the only future this regime ever intended for them to have.

The students also managed to breach the gap between generations, ideologies and growingly different social groups in a country, which was, until now, considered to be a home of a society without a sense of itself, broken beyond repair. But the students have proven this assumption wrong and have managed to bring back the idea of collective solidarity among people who all live in Serbia, but come from radically diverse worlds, trapped in different historical times, with different values and cultures. It could be said that Western societies of neoliberal era are becoming particularized in the terms of loosening a connection between an individual and the society, while the poor, previously collectivist societies of integrated poverty are also getting fragmented, only along the lines of one's own immediate social circle, whose boundaries are, to a large extent, predetermined by both one's social class, but also by the family traditions, dominant culture of an area or a school, etc. Accordingly, those who rose up in support of the students on strike all have different notions about what the primary problems of this country are, and what future we should strive to bring into reality, once the tyranny is overthrown. It seems as though, for the first time since the 1990s, all of these people, regardless of their individual beliefs, are convinced, mostly due to the students' bold actions, that any imaginary bridge can be crossed or avoided in the future, as long as we deal with the regime of Aleksandar Vučić before it becomes a straightforward totalitarian dictatorship, in

which case - there will be no future.

The student movement managed to (somewhat) unify Serbian society by changing the presumed frames of political and social activism. Apart from refusing to break up the collectivist movement in favor of a conventionally organized protest, students have abstained from confusing and antagonizing parts of the public by insisting to define the ideology of the movement, which was the biggest strategic weakness of the 1968 rebellion, but an advantage of the ones in 1996/1997. Most importantly, the students have articulated one crucial demand that nearly anyone can stand behind - they are simply demanding that the institutions do their jobs. When Aleksandar Vučić tried to address the rallying students, he failed in a manner similar to Ceausescu, when he tried to calm down the protesters with his "divine" presence. The students declared that they have no interest in the opinion of the president (given that he is not, or more precisely, should not be in charge of the judiciary), demanding the reaction of the public prosecutor, the independent judiciary and other institutions whose job it actually is to investigate the deaths of the 15 people killed in Novi Sad. The students have defined a historical precedent of the utmost importance for Serbia's road towards a country governed by democracy and the rule of law. The future government, succeeding the machinery of Aleksandar Vučić, will have to manage with the fact that the people no longer recognize personal authority of a wannabe dictator, but instead demand from the responsible institutions to act upon their presumed responsibilities and in accordance with the notion of common welfare.

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