

# How to Explain to Older Generations Why Serbian Students Are Protesting?

Monday 3 March 2025, by [KRSTIĆ Jana](#) (Date first published: 27 February 2025).

**Rather than isolating themselves within the bubble of youth activism, Serbia's student protesters are crafting their message to resonate with all segments of society—from Baby Boomers who built Yugoslavia through collective action, to disillusioned Gen-Xers who fought their own battles in the 1990s, to individualistic Millennials navigating a post-socialist reality.**

**With older citizens, students connect through local examples of corruption that directly impact daily life. With Gen-Xers, they acknowledge past disappointments with democratic mobilizations. With Millennials, they emphasize personal impact while gently expanding the discussion to wider issues.**

**Serbian student protesters understand that progressive movements cannot succeed through youth mobilization alone—they must become truly popular movements that unite diverse constituencies around shared interests and values.**

**It remains to be seen to what extent students can engage with economic frustrations, poverty and low wages, and all the other issues that cannot be blamed on 'corruption' alone. [AN]**

The divisions in our society have led to frequent misunderstandings between different perspectives, and the generational gap that exists globally is stronger in our region due to the lack and concealment of accurate information in many media outlets. Therefore, it's not unusual for new generations to create their own culture and language, and consequently, a new perspective. Some communication research has shown that this gap has deepened further under the influence of modern technologies, because we not only speak different languages, but also occupy different spaces, i.e., use different media formats.

Since the very beginning of student blockades, we have had four student demands, each clearly and directly stated in formal and legal language. To remind you, the four demands are:

1. Publication of complete documentation related to the reconstruction of the Railway Station in Novi Sad.
2. Prosecution of all who attacked students and citizens during protests and blockades.
3. Dismissal of charges against those arrested at protests.
4. Increased budget allocations for education.

However, understanding these demands requires an understanding of context, and more importantly, certain information that is not available to everyone.

It's very important to consider the information someone has before they form an opinion about student protests. For example, if you are now in your twenties, research says you most likely get

your information via the internet and social media, and rarely watch television, if you're subscribed at all. Imagine you don't use social media or the internet, that you get information via television and only have access to national frequencies, i.e., media controlled by the regime narrative. Are you sure you would think the same about students as you do now?

For the boundaries of generational groups, years that mark important changes at the global level are generally used. For example, the University of Southern California groups generations as follows:

- Baby Boomer: born 1946-1964.
- Generation X: born 1965-1979.
- Generation Y (Millennials): born 1980-1994.
- Generation Z (Zoomers): born 1995-2012.

In the following text, we will offer some guidelines for intergenerational conversation about student blockades with each of these groups. That is, with all except the last one - the Zoomers whose generation has put forward these demands and who are now in large numbers at blockades, protests, or marches from place to place in Serbia.

Also, in this text, we will generalise generational values in accordance with the values of the majority and the time in which the generation was formed, although we know that each generation has its exceptions and that what is written will not apply to them.

The Baby Boom generation includes people born after World War II, during the reconstruction of war-devastated infrastructure. When it comes to the local context, this generation grew and developed alongside a completely new state with a new ideology - socialist Yugoslavia.

Their youth was often coloured by work actions through which roads and public buildings were built, and they built institutions through self-management. That's why it's not strange that this generation likes the part of the regime's narrative where everything is being built, growing, and developing. Simply - these are the positive values of their youth.

Another dominant value to keep in mind when it comes to this generation is their inclination towards authorities or a hierarchically ordered system. Whether this value is a product of the spirit of the times or was produced by the generation itself can be debated. But it's important to understand that as a consequence of this value, there is trust in authorities, institutions, and ultimately the media.

In other words, Boomers are inclined to believe someone who appears on television and is presented as an expert in some field, as long as they use "expert language" and are dressed accordingly. They grew up in a period when the working class was far more respected, so there are fewer highly educated people in their generation than today, and their tendency towards authorities in knowledge can deceive them into believing that someone who performs as an expert is actually an expert. That's why you can occasionally hear sentences like "what do I know, they know better than me", but also "what do you know, they know better than you".

Considering all this, we can conclude that a negative reaction to "this government is good, see how much they've built" or directly opposing performative experts can be counterproductive because it will cause distrust, and any further argument becomes less important when there is no trust in the good intentions of the interlocutor.

The approach I suggest instead is one I've tried in my home municipality of Gadžin Han, which according to the latest census is one of the municipalities with the fewest highly educated people, and is the first in terms of the number of computer illiterate people. Despite many beliefs, this

literacy is not directly related to political literacy, and understanding for student protests can be evoked by referencing personal and local experience.

Boomers know very well that almost everything requires some kind of connection. A doctor's appointment, especially if it's with a specialist, then employment, but also any paper or certificate issued by the municipality or some other institution - have become almost impossible if you don't know someone who works there. Although this exists in larger cities as well, smaller places are far more affected by this problem. None of the Boomers I interviewed denied the problem of "getting everything done through connections", quite the opposite.

Connecting student protests with this problem opened a Pandora's box of local misappropriations that I couldn't close. For example, I learned that the municipality of Gadžin Han recently bought asphalt for certain streets, but they weren't asphalted according to plan; instead, those who are close to people from the directorate got access roads to their barns, while some planned streets remained unasphalted.

Asphalt theft, which is not a rare occurrence locally, is not much different from the corruption that led to the collapse of the canopy, and the demands of student protests certainly address this problem. Meeting student demands can prevent any further theft of asphalt, employment through connections, doctor's appointments only when you know someone, and the like, because "the law is equal for everyone" is a fundamental value of all student demands. This is exactly how you should communicate student demands to Boomers.

When it comes to Generation X, a great advantage is the fact that their youth was also marked by major student protests during the nineties that resulted in the year 2000 protests that brought down Slobodan Milošević, the historic "Fifth of October". However, despite the change of government, the better times they fought for did not come. Therefore, we can say that this generation is marked by great disappointment in protests and blockades, as well as a lack of faith that change is possible.

During conversations with people from this generation, I noticed that they often attribute my belief in change to my youth, saying that I'll understand how things work when I grow up a bit more. I also tried the approach I had with Boomers, as described above, and it was partially successful. In other words, they understood the problems we're talking about and why it's important for student demands to be met, but they characterised the fulfilment of demands as "impossible", often alluding that susceptibility to corruption is part of human nature.

We can see that this dominant value of the generation is a consequence of political and social circumstances. After the change of government they achieved, privatisation came, when many of them lost their jobs, and due to the global economic crisis and closed borders in the post-war period, and the differences in knowledge and skills they had compared to market needs, it wasn't easy for them to find a new job. On top of all that, shortly afterwards, the same people they drove away on the fifth of October returned to power. Many shared with me the impression that everything that could went wrong and assessed their efforts for change as "wasted youth" or "fighting windmills".

Despite all this, even by the banners at these protests, a leitmotif of regaining hope and some kind of awakening of faith in change can be noticed. Here's the reason: the four student demands are not "utopian" like the demands of some previous protests. Students have shown that they are very aware that it's impossible to shut down all corruption channels overnight, nor can a change of government magically bring justice. That's why student demands are not overambitious; they ask for accountability for corruption that caused 15 deaths. Something like this seems possible even to the disappointed Generation X, and that's exactly how you should communicate with them.

This generation spent their childhood in the wars of the nineties, and their youth and maturation, similar to Boomers, during the building of a new state with a new ideology. In this case, it was the establishment of a capitalist state, which makes this generation more inclined towards values of individualism than any previously described. This value could be felt during conversations with Millennials.

Unlike Boomers, who were difficult to get to start talking about personal experiences and connect them with student demands, there were no such problems with Millennials, because they almost immediately started talking about situations where corruption directly harmed them.

Unfortunately, there is so much corruption in our society that almost everyone has had some experiences with it, and it's clear that this bothers Millennials. The problem is the so-called apoliticalness of Millennials because they often cited as culprits only the people who personally harmed them, without a systemic analysis of the problem.

It's important not to hold this perspective against them, but to understand where it comes from as a dominant value of the generation. Zoomers have, possibly under the influence of social media, realised the importance of networking, so while everyone was saying that new generations are uninterested and just looking at their phones, on the phones was, for example, Greta Thunberg, a peer who started several local, and then global environmental initiatives.

Millennials are in many ways close to Zoomers, starting from popular culture, the use of social media, and the most similar language. Student protests have already mobilised a mass of Millennials who have so far avoided politics, especially because students themselves avoid politicking. With them, it's most important to communicate that corruption is not just their problem, that anyone could have been under that canopy at that moment, and that we must act together to achieve change.

Therefore, it's important to keep in mind how each generation fought for itself in its youth, and how the social and political system influenced that struggle. In this regard, although all generations before Zoomers think they fully understand the perspective from which we come today, that is not the case. We need to offer them our context, values, and struggles that are important to us, and in all of that find a common language and goal.

From everything we see in traditional and modern media over the last few months, it's clear that every generation is connected by love for the community – local, generational, consequently societal. And Zoomers have very clearly shown that they love the society in which they live and that they will use that love as a driving force for their struggle. It's hard for anyone not to understand that.

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**P.S.**

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