Protiv Nenormalnog: 
An analysis of the #protivdiktature 
Protests in the Context of Memory 
Politics of the 1990s in Serbia 
Event Analysis 

Orli Fridman 
Associate Professor, Singidunum University Belgrade 
Director and Lecturer, School of International Training, World Learning, Belgrade 
orli.fridman@fmk.edu.rs

Srdjan Hercigonja 
Junior Researcher, Singidunum University, Belgrade 
srdjan.hercigonja@cfces.org

www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/cse/fridman_hercigonja
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Protests in the Context of Memory Politics of the 1990s in Serbia

Orli Fridman and Srdjan Hercigonja*

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Introduction
April 2017 saw a wave of large demonstrations in cities and towns all across Serbia, following the victory of Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić in the first round of the presidential elections, held on 2 April. With the largest demonstrations taking place in Novi Sad, Niš and Belgrade, with simultaneous protests in smaller towns as well, thousands of students (referred to as “the Facebook generation”) gathered in the streets marching against the “dictatorship” (Protiv diktature). This slogan spread first as the hashtag for the demonstrations on social media networks, and later in general reference to the events.

Early analyses of the demonstrations pointed out, above all, a great deal of uncertainty regarding the identity and motivations of the protesters.1 We noticed many people who chose not to join the demonstrations this time. Some argued they were not sure who was behind the demonstrations; others did not want to march in the same political event as right wing ultra-nationalists. Observing the protests in the streets of Belgrade and following the messages that have emerged from other locations as well, it became clear how broad the plethora of issues and demands was, ranging from anti-Vučić chants to

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* Orli Fridman is an associate professor at the Faculty of Media and Communications (FMK), Singidunum University, where she heads the Center for Comparative Conflict Studies (CFCCS). She is also the academic director of the School for International Training (SIT) Study Abroad programme in the Balkans (Peace and Conflict Studies in Serbia, Bosnia and Kosovo). Her interdisciplinary research interests focus on peace research, Peace and Conflict studies and social memory studies.

Srdjan Hercigonja holds an MA degree in Political Sciences-International Politics from the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade. He works as a junior researcher at the Center for Comparative Conflict Studies, Faculty of Media and Communication, Singidunum University. Working within the field of peace and conflict studies, his current research is focused on conflict transformation in post-Yugoslav countries, collective memory in post-conflict societies, and relations between art and politics in the context of war and genocide.
statements on workers’ rights emphasising socio-economic issues,\(^2\) statements against the shrinkage of the freedom of the media in the country, anti-NATO banners,\(^3\) and demands for free and fair elections with numerous references to Serbia’s recent history, especially the 1990s.

In this text, our aim is to analyse the demonstrations by identifying and discussing the references to and representations of the 1990s that we observed in the “Against the Dictatorship” protests. We aim to shed light on the expression of ideas and rhetoric that have emerged during the demonstrations, the signs protesters carried, and the slogans they chanted that made any reference to the 1990s. We frame our analysis as related to our interest in the politics of memory in Serbia. Particularly, we are interested in tracing reference to the Milošević regime, to the student demonstrations and other demonstrations of the 1990s, but also to the wars of the breakup of Yugoslavia (the wars of the 1990s) and their legacies in Serbia today. The analysis of the social organisation of memory in Serbia after 2000, especially as related to the 1990s, indicates deep processes of silence and denial.\(^4\) With the questions we discuss here, we aim to shed light on what is remembered, what is silenced or forgotten, and what appears to be present in the collective memory of the 1990s in Serbia which is available to the students and young generations who marched in the streets in April in the “Against the Dictatorship” protests.

From the early days of the demonstrations, parallels were drawn and comparisons were made between the “Against the Dictatorship” protests and those against Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s (with the most common references being to 1996-97 and to 2000).\(^5\) In our analysis we traced any references we could find to the protests of the 1990s. As we heard in conversation with one student: “Our parents’ generation had the 1991 demonstrations, the 1996-97 demonstrations - this is now our turn, our generation’s time to protest, our demonstrations.” Some symbols can be traced to the anti-regime demonstrations of the 1990s: for example, the use of

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\(^2\) A few days after the demonstrations began, in the front row of the marches in the Belgrade demonstrations we witnessed a dominant group with messages such as: “Nećemo da budemo jefitina radna snaga” (we do not want to be a cheap labor force); “Sistem te laže” (The System is lying to you); “Radnik nije rob” (Worker is not a slave); “Niko ne sme biti gladan i bez doma” (No one can be hungry and without a home).

\(^3\) Anti-NATO banners often appear in actions organised by far right nationalist groups.


whistles, chants against the national television broadcaster, humorous placards, banners and stickers. One journalist reporting from Belgrade drew a similar comparison: “The youngsters have been joined by protesters of all ages - including parents who, in the 1990s, were among the hundreds of thousands of students who marched against Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević.” She quoted one 39-year-old female protester who said she wanted to “finish what we started at the time, which has not been completed.”6 Another comparison was made by Vesna Pešić, one of the opposition leaders in the 1990s. She argued in favour of inter-generational connections and legacies of the demonstrations of the 1990s that are apparent today in Serbia. According to her, these pro-democracy demonstrations show continuity from a tradition the foundations of which can be traced to the 1990s. Vučić, she argued, was then on the “other side” and therefore did not know the capability of Serbian pro-democrats to rise against electoral injustices: “There are generational discussions, about walks, beatings, victories, and these stories reached the ‘Facebook generation’ that is protesting now.”7

Against the Abnormal - Protiv Nenormalnog

As the protests began, we noticed pink stickers reading Protiv Nenormalnog (“Against the Abnormal”) [Figure 1] waved by the demonstrators. The wish to live in normalcy, in a normal country, was expressed in various ways. As one student was quoted saying: “We want a state that is part of a normal, European society.”8 Concepts of normality and abnormality were both used by the participants in the protests. As one protester told us: “Ovo je prešlo sve granice normalnosti - This has gone far beyond normal.” Another protester argued: “Ovo je potpuno nadrealno - This is completely surreal.” “This” in these statements refers to the omnipresence of PM Vučić in the media during the election campaign, but also to the worsening economic and political situation in Serbia today and to corruption in all state institutions.

7 Pešić, Vesna. 2017. Dometi i paradoksi protesta protiv diktature. Peščanik, 21. April 2017 (accessed: 12. May 2017); other reference to the 1996-97 were also made disagreeing with this comparative line of thought. For example, Aleksej Kišjuhas from the University of Novi Sad has argued that there is a big difference between the 1996-97 protests. According to him, in the 1996-97 demonstrations political parties were involved in the organisation of the protests unlike in the “against the dictatorship” protests. According to him, the 2017 protesters reject the party system and are finding alternative methods of political articulation. Additional analysis has framed the 2017 protests in line with the broader global trend of mistrust towards the political establishment, and against dominant economic and political systems in general, which can be seen in protests across the globe [Kišjuhas, Aleksej. 2017. Studentski protesti 2.0. Danas, 23. April 2017 (accessed: 12. May 2017)].
8 Subašić, Protesters Take to Serbian Streets Against ‘Dictatorship’.
Interestingly, the idea of normality/abnormality can be traced back to the anti-regime protests of the 1990s. Research and analysis about the 1990s in Serbia has dealt extensively with the notion of the normal. In her text, “On the Road to Normal: Negotiating Agency and State Sovereignty in Postsocialist Serbia,” Jessica Greenberg wrote about what she often encountered in her conversations with students active in the anti-regime demonstrations in the 1990s. “Young men and women told me time and again that they just wanted a ‘normalan život’ (normal life).”

When further asking about the meaning of normal she wrote:

“They would go on to list a series of material goods and economic and social status markers: a car, a good job, and, most frequently, the ability to travel. Young men and women were especially likely to link the lack of opportunities – educational, career, consumer – to Serbia’s international political and economic isolation during the wars of the 1990s.”

While the anti-regime demonstrations of the 1990s were often referred to in 2017, by young and older people alike (regardless of their participation), the anti-war demonstrations of the 1990s were hardly ever referenced. According to Stef Jansen, the 1996-97 demonstrations were strictly anti-regime in nature: the opponent was the Milošević regime, and not necessarily his nationalist policies, and certainly not his line on Kosovo. This could also be argued about the 2000 demonstrations; the Otpor anti-regime activists had a strong urge to

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10 Greenberg, On the Road to Normal: Negotiating Agency 92.

remove Milošević because they wanted to live in a normal country, but their message had no reference then to the wars. As one Otpor leader explained:

“We decided to fight against Milošević by persuading the public, not that the Muslims are the poor victims of Serbian slaughtering, you cannot do that. It is false advertising and we did not believe in it. Our focus was not there. We deeply believed that the most patriotic thing in Serbia was to release the Serbian people from Milošević’s irresponsible and catastrophic career as the head of state.”

In those years the search for normality was mainly framed in the following manner:

“A normal country is a country from which you can fly; it is a country in which airports are not closed so that when you need to travel you must go to Budapest. A normal country is a country in which you can receive mail, in which you are connected to the internet, all kinds of small things.”

In that sense, one can argue that a lot has changed in Serbia, particularly after October 2000 and even more so after the visa liberalisation in 2009. Yet, the lack of change in political culture, in reforms, in a society where corruption has become normal, where low economic standards of living, where facing neoliberalism and aggressive privatisation is normal, frustration with the “new democratic state” has often resulted in great disappointment. What we see now in the 2017 protests can and should be traced to the 1990s.

The wish for normalcy among the anti-regime activists in the 1990s was rarely about the politics of the wars, ethnic cleansing or genocide; hence today’s collective memories and references to the 1990s among young students in Serbia have very little reference to the legacies of the past, as it relates to the wars of the breakup of Yugoslavia. If anything is collectively remembered, it is the anti-Milošević demonstrations, in terms of fighting the abnormal existence in Serbia in the 1990s.

“Puko Si!” (You are done!); “I Sloba je ovako radio...” (“Sloba did the same...”)

References to the Milošević regime have emerged in various ways during the ‘against the dictatorship’ protests. A popular banner and sticker used by the

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13 Fridman, It Was Like Fighting a War, 514.
14 Fridman, It Was Like Fighting a War, 514.
protesters was *Puko si!* ("You are done!"). This message is undoubtedly similar to the famous slogan *Gotov je!* ("He is finished!"), the popular slogan used by the anti-Milošević demonstrators and Otpor activists in 1999 and in October 2000.

![Figure 2: Puko si! ("You are done!")](source: www.vice.com/rs)

As in many other cases in recent mass demonstrations worldwide, the main platforms for organisation and communication were social networks. In Serbia as well, the “against the dictatorship” demonstrators checked Facebook for updates and news. As argued numerous times, the protests had no official organiser and no political parties behind them. A Facebook page @protidiktature (@against dictatorship) was created and the events page moderated by this group bore the image of PM and president-elect Aleksandar Vučić. The caption on the image was: "I Sloba je ovako radio. Ako smo mogli njega, možemo i malog Aleka" ("Sloba [Slobodan Milošević] did the same. If we could beat him, we can [also beat] little Alek [Aleksandar Vučić] as well") [see figure 3]. Separate Facebook event pages were created for each day of the protests in Belgrade, and they always bore the same message; a message which directly criticised both regimes and both leaders: Milošević and Vučić, for lack of democracy.

Even though Serbia’s new calendar does not commemorate the ousting of the Milošević regime on 5 October 2000 (as yet another disputed event in Serbia’s recent history), seventeen years after the fall of Milošević, it may be argued that both the famous 5 October protests and the *Gotov je!* slogan have become part of Serbia’s collective memory. The memory of the anti-Milošević protests,

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16 Bjeloš, *Who are the protesters in Serbia.*
17 In each city the demonstrators organised themselves via separate Facebook pages. Here, we follow and analyse the Belgrade ones.
as represented in the 2017 demonstrations, indicates they remain a mobilising force for social and political mass collective action in Serbian society today.

Figure 3: *I Sloba je ovako radio. Ako smo mogli njega, možemo i malog Aleka* (*Sloba [Slobodan Milošević] did the same. If we could beat him, we can also beat little Alek [Aleksandar Vučić] as well*)

![Image of Slobodan Milošević](source: www.facebook.com)

**Remembering Slavko Ćuruvija, the RTS workers killed in the NATO Bombing, and “Vučiću Šrederu”**

The month of April in Serbia’s mnemonic calendar has a number of events commemorating the 1999 NATO Bombing. The 2017 “against the dictatorships” protests themselves began just a few days after the 18th anniversary of the NATO bombing of Serbia. During the protests, the Belgrade demonstrators joined two commemorative events that take place annually in the city: one on 11 April in memory of the journalist Slavko Ćuruvija, who was assassinated in Belgrade, and one on 23 April in memory of the RTS (Radio Televizija Srbije – Serbian National Radio and Television) workers killed during the bombing of the RTS building on that day. Neither of the commemorations are state-sponsored events – they are privately initiated by families, co-workers and friends of the victims.

On 11 April 2017, the demonstrators paid tribute to Slavko Ćuruvija, who had been assassinated on the same day in 1999. They held a minute’s silence in his memory in front of the RTS building. This act was accompanied by a sharp and clear statement: “We are in front of the RTS so they could report more objectively. On this day, Slavko Ćuruvija was murdered. Aleksandar Vučić was

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the Minister of Information in the Serbian Government that year. Vučić said he would avenge Ćuruvija sooner or later.”19 Some demonstrators were also seen with Ćuruvija’s image on banners that day [see figure 4].

Figure 4: Protester with the Slavko Ćuruvija banner

Source: www.twitter.com

A few weeks later, on 23 April 2017, the demonstrators held another minute’s silence in front of the RTS building, some of them placing flowers around the building, in memory of the sixteen RTS workers who had been killed during the bombing of the building on that day in 1999.

An additional interesting reference to the NATO bombing came from a less expected direction. One banner that became prominent and turned into a popular chant read Vučiću Šrederu (“Vučić, you are Schroeder”) [see figure 5]. On 24 March 2017, during the election campaign, the ruling SNS party organised a large rally in Belgrade. On that day, the former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was invited as a guest speaker to the event. This was highly criticised by other presidential candidates and, later on, by the protestors themselves, since Schroeder, who was the German chancellor in 1999, is often identified with the NATO bombing. In Serbia, together with Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Jaque Chirac, Schroeder is widely perceived as one of the main architects of the NATO intervention in 1999. The students and other participants of the protests chose, therefore, to put Vučić in the same basket with Schroeder, as one of the traitors and enemies of the people. Interestingly, it seems that this slogan originated as a substitute to the popular slogan that had been in use for months before the protests: Vučiću pederu! (“Vučić, you are a faggot!”)21 - which rhymes with “Vučiću Šrederu.”

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21 In the first days of the protests, this was the most popular chant. In our observations we noticed the first rows of demonstrators in the march chanting this slogan passionately and loudly. In later
This shift in the slogan could be analysed in two ways: it may have been a reaction to the critique against the homophobic content of the loud chants of “Vučiću pederu!” Alternatively, it may have been an attempt to use the memory of NATO bombing in order to gain the broader support of various social groups.

Figure 5: Vučiću Šrederu (“Vucic, you are Schroeder”)

Source: www.noizz.rs

Legacies of Serbia’s Past

A number of banners caught our attention and raised some questions related to our interest in the politics of memory in Serbia, and in particular the memories of the Milošević years and the wars of the 1990s. Two banners in particular, with a critical message, could be read as related to the legacies of the politics of the 1990s wars. One such banner (one of the very few that directly mentioned the wars of the 1990s) was held by a man during the protests in Niš. The banner read: Ti si nas slao u rat, gde si sada? (“You sent us to war, where are you now?”) [see figure 6]. The statement can be read in different ways: the holder of the banner might have been a veteran of the wars in Croatia, BiH or Kosovo, or he may simply have been addressing the political history of Vučić as a prominent member of the Serbian Radical Party during the 1990s, thus trying to delegitimise his current political position and power.

days, the front row in the Belgrade demonstrations were also taken by other messages, especially by left wing socio-economic messages. Some LGBT activists came with the message “Narode, pederi su sa vama” (People, the faggots are with you) [N.N. 2017. Parola na protestu u Srbiji: Narode, pederi su sa vama. CDM, 09. April 2017 (accessed: 12. May 2017)]. In the images from the Novi Sad demonstrations, the PACE rainbow flag was also present.
Another banner that can be read as a legacy of the past stated: "Neću Cecu za ministra kulture" ("I don’t want Ceca to be the Minister of Culture") [see figure 7]. Svetlana Ceca Ražnatović, one of Serbia’s most popular turbo-folk singers, is also known for her marriage to Željko Ražnatović Arkan, the leader of one of the most notorious Serbian paramilitary units during the 1990s wars. For some in Serbia and in the region, she symbolises a shift of values, gender representations and cultural codes. At the same time, for many of Serbia’s young generation she is a symbol of power, money and success. This banner, too, can be read in a number of ways: Ceca, in her criminal activities, symbolises the demonstrators’ reference against the abnormal, in the sense of corruption, rampant capitalism, power and money in Serbia’s politics, social inequalities and the system of injustice. Alternatively, the banner can be read as a statement relating to the memories of the 1990s and to her rise to power: to her iconic wedding, turbo-folk music and its role in the rise of nationalism, her music videos known for depicting the Belgrade criminal underground scene of the 1990s and the luxury lifestyle of the newly rich [Nouveau riche]. In that sense, it is possible the banner made reference to Ceca as an iconic symbol of the 1990s, and the legacies of the 1990s that are still present in Serbia today.

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Remembering and Forgetting the 1990s in Serbia: Closing Remarks

In this short event analysis, we traced the presence of symbols, slogans, ideas and messages related to Serbia in the 1990s, which appeared in the “Against the Dictatorship” demonstrations in April 2017. As discussed above, a number of banners, chants and actions made direct reference to the memories of these years. The 1990s, which witnessed major mass demonstrations, have left a significant legacy for joint actions in Serbia, for democracy, popular expression of discontent, and yet also for disappointment, disillusionment and mistrust in the public and political system.

Our interest in the politics of memory in Serbia, in relation to the 1990s, the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, conflict and possibilities for the processes of conflict transformation, allowed us to focus our gaze on the search for these years as represented in the April 2017 demonstrations. These representations, we argue, can help us to reflect on collective memory in Serbia today, and on its current social organisation of memory.

We see collective memory in Serbia as deeply divided and fragmented, obviously not only in relation to the 1990s, but even more so in relation to WW2, the representation of Yugoslavia and of the anti-fascist struggle. In that sense, joint collective mass demonstrations in Serbia, as framed in the “Against the Dictatorship” protests and as was framed in the anti-regime protests of the 1990s, have the capacity to create very broad coalitions with a very broad
message “against” but a very narrow common denominator in terms of what they are “for.”

It can perhaps further be argued that the fragmented Serbian society can march together only around very few issues: this may include the anti-regime demonstrations as in anti-Vučić and anti-Milošević protests and the NATO bombing. Whenever the 1990s are referenced, a clear connection can be made with the anti-Milošević protests. Yet, there can only be very little reference, or none whatsoever, to the anti-war demonstrations that are also an important legacy of street collective action in Serbia in the 1990s. Hence, while the anti-regime demonstrations became part of the dominant collective memory in Serbia, the anti-war demonstrations still stand as counter-memory of alternative mnemonic communities. The NATO bombing can also be understood as a connecting mnemonic theme in Serbia today. As we saw, the demonstrators did join in commemorating Ćuruvija and the victims of the RTS bombing; yet, it did not seem like this was an option for the same demonstrators to join the annual commemorative event in downtown Belgrade on April 6 [while the demonstrations were at their peak], commemorating the beginning of the Siege of Sarajevo.23

In that sense, only a few banners and chants that we found made any direct connection to the recent wars of the 1990s or to their legacies. Referring to the abnormal in the 1990s, as well as in the present, seems to exclude discussions about this recent past relating to the wars of the breakup of Yugoslavia. Civic activism against the wars and against processes of denial or silencing still remains a major dividing memory, and a marginal form of memory activism in Serbia.

Young people in Serbia today, as we could see in the case of the millennials marching in the April 2017 protests, can be mobilised to take action when it comes to broader discussions about democracy, stability, corruption, and economic crisis. Such mobilisation is possible as long as it does not emphasise the overlap between the politics that lead to the wars and the social and economic destruction of the state and society. The demand for normal life can be a mobilising idea, as long as it only calls for the dismissal of leadership [i.e. Vučić or Milošević] but does not seek an exploration of the root causes of such abnormality. Such an exploration, which is considered alternative and even subversive today in Serbia, may raise critical discussions on the policies that lead to the wars fought in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and their legacies today.

The exclusion of any critique of the politics of the 1990s from collective memory as shaped today in Serbia raises questions about the processes of dealing with the past. A question was recently asked at a panel at a Belgrade cultural centre: is the process of Dealing with the Past in Serbia now marked as over? We wonder, will some of the demonstrators from the young generation who marched in the streets of cities and towns in Serbia in April 2017 one day demand to know more about their society’s past, in the context of their demand and search for normality?

Bibliography


