

New Democratic Imaginaries: Serbian Protests and Their Regional Implications

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the scholarship about the ongoing (2024-) student-led protests in Serbia thus far, and introduces a thematic issue in this volume *New Democratic Imaginaries: Serbian Protests and Their Regional Implications* examining their regional reverberations. Sparked by the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy on 1 November 2024, which killed 16 people, the movement evolved from silent vigils into massive civic mobilization. Organized horizontally through faculty plenums and initially distancing itself from party politics, the student movement articulated demands centered on accountability, rule of law and institutional integrity. Confronted with repression, media delegitimization, and stalled judicial processes, the students gradually entered the political arena by calling for early elections and announcing their participation in it with an independent list, supported widely by the citizens and public actors. The issue situates these developments within regional and comparative perspectives. Contributions analyze media framing in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, parallels with North Macedonia's anti-corruption mobilizations as well as previous protests in Montenegro and Serbia herself, the responses of national minorities in Serbia and Serb political representatives in neighbouring states, and the ambivalent role of the European Union.

Keywords: Serbia; Students; Protest; Regional Implications

For once, we can refute the proverbial Hegelian claim that “the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dark,” i.e., that scholars can offer their thoughts only after

the historical events have already finished and aged (Hegel 1945, 13). The articles in this thematic issue have been written in the *mi(d)st* of the student and civil protests in Serbia, and even at the time of writing this editorial, introductory article, the all too familiar pattern from November 2024 unfolds: the students organise a series of protests (albeit somewhat less frequently and with lower turnout), face violence by hooded thugs allegedly linked to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) (N1 2026), with police being typically reluctant to act or, on occasion, exercising the violence themselves. In the few instances when someone got arrested on the pro-government side, they are either swiftly released or, in the unlikely case of prosecution, pardoned by the president. In July 2025, Vučić thus used a presidential pardon to drop the case and free a woman who deliberately hit a female student with her car during the protests, for which she was initially charged with attempted murder (Martać 2025), and in August pardoned four SNS thugs who broke the jaw of a female student (Jovanović 2025). Meanwhile, Vučić for long refused to use his powers to call early elections, which the students and protesters demand, as arguably the only desirable and peaceful resolution to the crisis. At last, he called the parliamentary elections for October 25, and resigned as a president in order to run for the prime minister. By gathering analyses of the still ongoing protests, this thematic issue aims at contributing to its fuller understanding, but is therefore necessarily a fragmented attempt, a snapshot in time, an update or a prolonged footnote to the still ongoing political movement in Serbia whose outcome is uncertain.

The contributions gathered here approach this still-unfolding movement not primarily as a domestic Serbian phenomenon, but through its regional resonances and comparative horizons. Several articles situate the protests within the wider arc of contentious politics in the Western Balkans, most directly through the comparison with North Macedonia's 2015–2017 crisis and the more recent "Who is Next?" mobilisation, while others trace the echoes of the protests among national minorities in Serbia and among political actors representing Serb communities in Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Croatia. A further set of contributions examines how the protests have been framed and mediated — in the Serbian and Croatian press, in the longer continuity of Serbian print media coverage since 1996–1997, and in the symbolic geopolitics of Serbian–Croatian relations. What emerges from this collective effort is a picture of a movement whose significance exceeds its immediate demands: it reopens questions about democratic imagination, minority inclusion, media capture and transnational solidarity that resonate well beyond Serbia's borders.

Since contributions to this issue, rather than analysing the protest in itself, perceive it primarily through the regional lens, discuss its (potent) implications and drive comparisons with the cognate and contemporary events in the region, it seems instructive to provide first some preliminary, basic information about its timeline, fabric and actors thus far.¹

The Anatomy of the 2024-? Student-led Protests in Serbia

The focal point of the protests is a silent vigil that starts at 11:52 am every day since 1 November 2024 – the time when the canopy of the newly refurbished Novi Sad railway station collapsed – lasting 14 (later 16) minutes, one for each victim who died. Citizens and students immediately linked the tragedy to deep-seated government corruption and

¹ For a more comprehensive overview of the protests with detailed chronology of important events, see: Zaharijević and Krstić 2025; Popović 2025. See also Trifunjagić's and Simon's article and bibliographical references in this volume.

negligence, sparking public outrage, and becoming a symbol of alleged corruption, negligence, and state capture under the long rule of President Aleksandar Vučić and the SNS. The first protests demanded accountability, with demonstrators in Belgrade painting their hands red, declaring the authorities had “blood on their hands” – a symbol that would come to define the movement. Initially, vigils were organised by small, isolated groups in hundreds of locations, blocking a prominent intersection for 16 minutes.

A key turning point occurred on 22 November 2024, when the students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade were attacked by individuals identified by protesters and media reports as ruling party officials during a silent vigil. Outraged, the students gathered on their faculties, holding daily *plenums* – direct democratic assemblies where each student has equal rights and voice. Decisions were taken collectively by majority votes, with the first being to block their faculties. This act of defiance spread rapidly, and by late December, the entire University of Belgrade and the majority of other faculties, elementary and secondary schools were at times blockaded or occupied (Pavlović 2025a). Organized horizontally without formal leaders, the students formulated four core demands: the publication of all documents related to the station’s reconstruction, the identification and prosecution of those who attacked protesters, the dropping of charges against arrested students, and a 20% increase in the higher education budget (Bieber et al. 2025, 2). According to a policy analysis of the protest (Bieber et al. 2025), the four demands raised by Serbian students can be summarized into one fundamental call: accountability from their government and the reinstatement of the rule of law. Going further, the students rejected talking to any politician, especially to the undisputed leader of Serbian politics – President Vučić, as he has limited constitutional powers – using the slogan “nisi nadležan (“you’re not in charge”)” (see: Beširević 2025, 30–38), demanding that the institutions do their job.

Throughout early 2025, the protests grew into the largest and most persistent civil uprisings and daily marches in Serbia’s modern history. Daily traffic blockades – branded “Serbia, stand still” – gave way to longer road occupations, marches between cities, and even a student cycling relay to Strasbourg and running to Brussels to draw the attention of the leading EU institutions. A protest in Belgrade on 22 December 2024 drew an estimated 100,000 people.² By March 2025, the movement had spread to over 400 towns, attracting support from a broad cross-section of society. What began as mourning for 16 victims evolved into a nationwide reckoning over corruption, institutional decay and democratic accountability. Led by students but joined by farmers, teachers, lawyers, and pensioners, the protests have become the biggest challenge to Serbia’s SNS rule since their rise to power in 2012.

Beyond their immediate demands, the protests may be read as a double intervention. On the one hand, they reopen the political space in an Arendtian sense – restoring plurality, appearance, and judgment in a context marked by institutional hollowing. On the other hand, they function as a stress test of a captured institutional order. The students do not call for the abolition of representative democracy, nor for a permanent substitution of institutions with direct assemblies. Rather, they expose the gap between the formal existence of institutions and their substantive functioning, insisting on what could be described as their reactivation. In this regard, the plenums operate as provisional spaces of deliberation: not alternatives to institutions, but reminders of the democratic standards those institutions are meant to uphold (Mansbridge 2012).

² According to the figures provided by the Serbian non-government organisation Arhiv javnih skupova (Public Assemblies Archive, <https://x.com/javniskupovi>).

A pivotal moment came on 15 March 2025, the largest rally in modern Serbian history, which gathered in Belgrade some 300,000 people (in a country of 6,5 million altogether). During the commemoration, a deployment of what was widely claimed to be a long-range acoustic device (LRAD) caused panic.³ The protest was widely portrayed as a “historic day of anger”, reflecting deep frustration over the rule of law and judicial independence. Such numbers were not repeated afterward, but another rally in Belgrade called by the students on the historical St. Vitus days on 28 June, gathered an estimated 140,000 people, and on the anniversary of the tragedy over 100,000 gathered in Novi Sad, a city of 250,000 people (350,000 including a wider metropolitan area, see: Arhiv javnih skupova).

The sustained pressure prompted some political moves by the establishment. In late January, following an attack on students by men emerging from ruling party offices, Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned and was replaced by Đuro Macut, a Belgrade university professor from the medical faculty who was not a member of the SNS (De Launey and Gozzi 2025). Besides such internal political reshufflings, the establishment’s response was multifaceted and increasingly repressive, including: police arrests and documented instances of violence against protesters, punitive measures against the teachers and professors (withholding salaries for the teachers partaking in the protest and slashing university professors’ salaries by up to 87.5 %), labelling the movement a foreign-funded “colour revolution”⁴ and filing charges against university rectors and deans, organising counter-protests and their encampment in Belgrade, dubbed “Ćacilend” by protesters, by using the vast ruling party and state resources. By late 2025, state repression had intensified. In late October, the students counted that more than 3,000 people had been arrested, beaten, detained, or otherwise targeted during the protests (See: Popović 2025). Gendarmerie units entered university premises, teachers faced dismissals, and deans were summoned or removed, all with little regard for the constitutionally granted university autonomy. After a long hesitation by the EU officials to endorse the protest and condemn Vučić – which Žižek stigmatized as the EU reaching “the new low” (Žižek 2025) and many in Serbia saw as support for Vučić – in late October 2025 the European Parliament adopted a Resolution that “loudly and unequivocally expressed unreserved support for student demands and condemned the authoritarianism of the Serbian regime.” (Milićević and Pavlović 2025)

As the one-year anniversary of the tragedy approached in November 2025, the situation remained tense. The judicial process had stalled: while indictments were filed against former minister Goran Vesić and others, no trials had begun, and no one was in custody. The sources document over 3,000 cases of arrests, beatings, or dismissals linked to the protests, with reports of escalating police violence in August. Academic freedom continued to be under assault, with professors facing salary cuts and dismissals. The students’ core demands, including the call for elections, remained unmet at the time, setting the stage for the commemorative protests planned for the anniversary in Novi Sad.

Meanwhile, after months of being consistently apolitical, distancing themselves from any parties or politicians, demanding accountability and maintaining a horizontal organisation with no leadership based on the joint decisions adopted by each plenum, the students at last recognized that the regime will not be accountable and the captured institutions will not

³ Serbian authorities denied and the prosecution office ruled out that such equipment was used, despite circulating footage (See: Više javno tužilaštvo u Beogradu Office 2026). Independent analysis has been performed by EarShot NGO, confirming LRAD usage (See: Hamdan et al. 2025).

⁴ Vučić even publicly proclaimed that he is to publish a book entitled *How I defeated the coloured revolution in Serbia*, see: Beta 2025a.

deliver. Thus, by mid-2025, they called for early parliamentary elections which, according to some polls, nearly two-thirds of citizens view as the solution to the crisis (Crta 2025b, 23). Crucially, the student body began organizing to participate directly, forming a potential non-partisan electoral list that, according to the same polls from September 2025, commanded greater public support than the ruling party list (Crta 2025b, 25). Nearly 22 months after the tragedy and the ensuing protests, Vučić called parliamentary elections for October 25, 2026. The students submitted their list, backed by several—though not all—opposition parties. The two main contenders for the 250 seats in the Serbian Assembly are Vučić's SNS-led *Ujedinjena Srbija* (United Serbia) coalition and the *Studenti pobeđuju* (Students Win) bloc, which together are projected to capture up to 85% of the overall vote. The remaining seats will be distributed among the Slobodan Milošević-founded Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), which remains loyal to Vučić, as well as two opposition coalitions: the pro-EU *Evropska Srbija* (European Serbia) and the *Autentična desnica* (Authentic Right). Additionally, minority parties representing Hungarians, Bosniaks, Albanians, and Roma, among others, are expected to secure a dozen or so seats due to favorable electoral quota regulations (Janković 2026).

The student movement's decision to enter the electoral arena marks a qualitative shift, foregrounding a structural tension between horizontal deliberative practices and the vertical logic of electoral representation. While plenums embody egalitarian participation and rotating responsibility, elections require leadership, visibility, programmatic articulation and organizational infrastructure. This transition is less a departure from the movement's initial ethos than an encounter with the institutional grammar of modern democracy. Whether this translation from moral authority into durable political agency can be achieved without eroding legitimacy remains uncertain, but the dilemma is constitutive rather than accidental.⁵

The movement has fundamentally altered Serbia's political landscape, positioning students as a central force challenging government legitimacy. While protest intensity decreased, polls consistently showed overwhelming public support throughout 2025 (See: Crta 2025a; Crta 2025b; Nova srpska politička misao 2025). Their electoral entrance may erode popularity, but it was a forced move. Small local elections showed the unified student list can match the regime even in small towns, and that, despite media capture, election results will likely show a clear setback for the ruling regime in most urban areas (Pavlović 2025b).

Interpreting the protests: Silent vigils and their s/al/ilent meaning(s)

The body of scholarship so far has provided limited attempts at broader understanding of the protest. Two typical types of writing emerged thus far, the insider or – in anthropological terms – *emic*, often personal account written by scholars deeply involved in the protests themselves (Knežević 2025; Beširević 2025; Damčević 2025; Zaharijević 2025; Zaharijević and Krstić 2025; Zaharijević and Šmelc [unpublished]), and a more policy oriented, *etic* analysis written at least in part by scholars residing abroad (Pollozhani and Bieber 2025; Bieber et al 2025; Burazer, Vulović, and Vasiljević 2025).

⁵ For all the aforementioned reasons, we find it most suitable and accurate to refer to the protests as 2024-, not limiting them to 2025 (as is often the case in scholarship to date), since they are still ongoing in 2026. Furthermore, since the protest in Serbia swiftly spread from the students to large portions of Serbian society, chiefly elementary and secondary-school teachers, university and lawyers, each with somewhat separate guild-specific demands, it is best to refer to it in the plural, as student-led Serbian protests.

Beširević and Krstić, both PhD students of the (at the time fully) blocked University of Belgrade, offered valuable insights into the actual deliberative procedures among the students, including first-hand accounts of the organisational, operative, decision-making process.

Each day at every faculty, they hold plenums (plenary sessions as in 1968), with different moderators of the meetings and without consulting the plenum (and it sometimes takes hours before they reach a consensus), they do not make any public statements or decisions [...] There are no designated leaders – even when individuals step out to speak before the crowds or in the media, no single person takes on a permanent role. (Beširević 2025, 33).

In her self-ethnographic account that reads like a diary, Knežević sees an identarian, liberational catharsis force of the protests, transcending political dichotomies and simplistic thinking:

the student movement is teaching us not to think in dichotomies. This lesson is best captured in one of the graffiti's from Novi Sad: “Ни Вучић” (“Neither Vučić”), “Ни жути” (“Nor the Yellows,” a nod to our, at best, incompetent opposition parties), “Студенти су љути” (“Students are furious”). Every government is replaceable, no leader is untouchable, power is decentralized, democracy is the rule of the people. (Knežević 2025, 59)

Writing early into the protest and being immersed by/in it, they offer little more in terms of the overall, underlying sentiment than the commonsensical claims that behind the concrete demands “a fight for democracy, rule of law and freedom, values that the students see as crucial for the country's future” (Beširević 2025, 32).

Adriana Zaharijević and Nataša Šmelc provided arguably the most philosophically potent analysis to date. In “Students' Protests vs Thoughtlessness: Hannah Arendt Meets Serbian Students”, they invoke Arendt's notion of thinking “as related to telling right from wrong. The students' protests brought the reality of facts and events back to the life of people, and those demanded us to think”, as juxtaposed to *thoughtlessness*, “being inattentive, brash and unkind towards [...] the world – there where I am never a single one, but always one in many.”

Invoking Arendt's “banality of evil” – Eichmann's “not stupidity but *thoughtlessness* [...] an inability to *think* [...] from the standpoint of somebody else”, they paint Vučić's establishment as “the regime under which thoughtlessness has been cultivated strategically, as a political program” and as a *kakistocracy* “ultimately based on the authoritarian management of transactions”. They describe a captured state where “there is no separation of powers, the rule of law has long been contested”, institutions are “obliterated, although all of them formally do exist”, and governing becomes “managing transactions”. This produces “a gradual corruption of reality [...] that turn people into depraved creatures who resign from the exercise of thinking”.⁶

Against this, silent vigils are “fundamentally political”, a standstill that demands us to stop and reflect, representing “the retrieved care for the world, for plurality, for the telling right from wrong”. The protests “defied the dissolution of truth, dignity, justice and common sense. It brought the common back.” By 3 May 2025, “2490 minutes of silence had been observed”.⁷

In distinction to such affectionate writing where authors as insiders as participants embrace subjectivity, other authors offered more concrete, policy analysis, aspiring to objectivity.

⁶ Zaharijević, Adriana, and Nataša Šmelc. “Students' Protests vs Thoughtlessness”.

⁷ Zaharijević, Adriana, and Nataša Šmelc. “Students' Protests vs Thoughtlessness”

Early into the protests, Bieber, Kmezić, Laštro and Pollozhani recognized that “They fundamentally differ from previous demonstrations against the Vučić government over the past decade – in terms of scale, countrywide scope and tactics, as well as the students’ central role in them” (Bieber et al. 2025, 3). Noticing the limited international support for the protest at the time (while acknowledging that the EU has so far “failed to deliver”), they advocated for “a new strategy which calls for concerted domestic and EU efforts”, reminding how the union acted during the 2015–2016 crisis in North Macedonia by clearly marking the regime as authoritarian, mediating between the sides and pushing for free elections (Bieber et al. 2025, 4–7). In another article, Pollozhani and Bieber briefly mention the student protest in the context of the protests and their outcomes in North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia in the last two decades, highlighting crucial similarities and differences over the years, while listing the main characteristics of each movement, including demands, time span, outcomes, etc. Attempting to analyze the factors that influence the outcome of social movements, they claim that successful outcomes were characterised by: learning and adopting lessons from the previous protests, attracting the social base, making alliances with political parties, identifying clear demands easy to identify with, and enjoying international support (Pollozhani and Bieber 2025, 193–214). Burazer, Vulović and Vasiljević in their policy brief also insist that “Brussels should deploy all available instruments to incentivise genuine reforms rather than accept superficial compliance that leaves Serbia’s authoritarian trajectory intact.” Thereby, they conclude that a “Clear, consistent, and credible messaging about the EU’s commitment to Serbia’s democratic future is essential”, and that “the EU and the Serbian citizens fighting for democracy are natural allies, and their interests in Serbia align closely” (Burazer, Vulović and Vasiljević 2025, 5, 16).

Jerkov, Bešlin and Radeljić, apparently writing before the students proclaimed their entrance into the political arena, focus on the paradoxical nature of the Serbian student protests, describing it as “a depoliticized protest with deeply political consequences.” Moreover, in their view, it is precisely by embracing depoliticization, that the protesters complicated conventional understandings of political agency and legitimacy, even though their actions are “unmistakably political in form, content, and consequence”. Consequently, the authors see this protest as “a radical redefinition of civic engagement in a post-socialist, post-ideological society [...] The deliberate avoidance of partisan and ideological labels functioned as a form of strategic ambiguity that shielded collective action from regime co-optation and delegitimization while preserving moral credibility and cross-ideological inclusiveness”. (Jerkov, Bešlin, and Radeljić 2025, 11, 14, 18). Thereby, in authors’ view, by rejecting partisan labels and traditional ideologies, the students built a broad, morally powerful movement grounded in civic ethics.

The “Little Buddha” Effect

“Your fate is mine”

Sophocles, *The Ajax* (1896, 485)

The student protest also somewhat challenges the common notions about young people today being passive and disengaged (Putnam 2000; Bryner 2010; Roberts 2015, 951; for opposing

view, see: Teruelle 2013; Fisher and Lerner 2004, 258; Kassimir 2006, 26). As Raúl Gallego Abellán claims at the opening of his documentary “Wake up, Serbia!”: “Frustrated with political parties and disillusioned by democratic institutions, a growing number of young people in the West are driving the rise of populist and far-right movements. But not everywhere. One country’s youth are unexpectedly pushing back against the tide” (Abellán 2025). Radunović similarly observes that the Serbian students have demonstrated organizational capacities and strategic sophistication that defy stereotypes about their generation. Their decentralized, leaderless structure, disciplined nonviolence and creative use of social media – all testify to what Kassimir calls political practices that scholarship has terribly lagged behind (Radunović 2025).

Others, however, perceive similarities between the Serbian students and their peers elsewhere. As Beširević notes in comparative analysis, the Serbian movement shares important features with student protests in Georgia and Slovakia, where young people have similarly mobilized in defence of democratic norms against authoritarian backsliding – with a notable difference being that young Georgians and Slovaks see the EU as their ally, and the Serbs as Vučić’s ally.

In our view, Serbian students should not be fundamentally differentiated from their peers. For one thing, Jerkov, Bešlin and Radeljić already suggested that Serbian students’ strategy is representative of a general trend of youth mistrust in official political institutions: “This configuration does not reflect ideological incoherence but value hybridization, through which younger cohorts combine civic responsibility and moral universalism with pragmatic skepticism toward institutions of liberal democracy” (Jerkov, Bešlin and Radeljić 2025, 11). They are also consumed by the social media, which they almost exclusively rely upon for information (See: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju 2025, 13–14).

In our understanding, their passage from online activism and engagement with their immediate reality to direct, street political action could be understood via their shocking, traumatic encounter with the reality of the Serbian media and Vučić’s propaganda machine, which could be conveniently – though rather metaphorically – described as the “little Buddha effect”. Namely, the parable of the Buddha describes a prince raised in palatial seclusion, shielded by his father from all suffering. Gautama lived in blissful ignorance, surrounded by beauty and pleasure, until one day he ventured beyond the palace walls and encountered for the first time an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. The shock of this encounter with reality shattered his assumptions and set him on the path to enlightenment. Arguably, something similar – on a collective and secular level – perhaps happened to Serbian students in November 2024. Firstly, the canopy on one of the main railway stations in Serbia fell, killing 16 people in total; some of them were young people, themselves students, and many students used this station frequently and are familiar with it, all of which enabled immediate identification and empathy with the victims (“Your fate is mine,” [Sophocles 1896, 485]). Secondly, the incident during the FDU students’ ‘Stop Serbia’ protest involved assailants that students later identified as officials of the Serbian Progressive Party. For arguably the first time, Serbian students saw how the regime-controlled media actually reported about them. The experience was a shock. They discovered themselves depicted not as concerned citizens mourning a national tragedy, but as foreign agents, traitors, and hooligans. This moment of confrontation with state-sponsored propaganda and physical violence catalysed a movement. Three days later, on 25 November, the blockade of FDU began, demanding the identification and sanctioning of all involved in the attack, and the dismissal of those among them holding public office. Soon, other faculties across the country joined.

Any discussion of the Serbian protests would be incomplete without addressing the charge of nationalism. Critics have raised objections about the use of derogatory terms such as “Šiptari” (a pejorative for Albanians) and “pederu” (a homophobic slur) at some protests. Suroi has claimed that the movement has turned toward nationalism (Suroi 2025). Similarly, Martens in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* argues that the students embrace nationalist rhetoric, pointing to chants and symbols appearing at demonstrations (Martens 2025).

Yet such criticisms require careful contextualization. The analysts emphasize that these are isolated incidents involving small groups, often hooligans or football fans rather than students themselves, and they do not represent the movement, which maintained strict non-violence and political independence despite encountering external provocations (Đukić 2025). As Hasa emphasized early on, “the few nationalist symbols or flags that have been spotted here and there are not representative of the protest as a whole. These are isolated cases that do not reflect the movement’s principles” (Hasa 2025). The student organizers have consistently urged participants to come without party or ideological symbols, even if controlling crowds of tens of thousands is practically impossible.

Some of the phrases that the critics describe as nationalist are more ambiguous in context. The chant “Aco, Srbine” is used less to express nationalism than to question President Vučić’s claim to represent national interests, while the insult “pederu” (faggot) while unquestionably problematic, functions largely as a general derogatory expression rather than a targeted slur. This does not justify such language, but it suggests a more nuanced dynamic than straightforward nationalist mobilization.

If we want to know what students actually think, the most reliable evidence comes from systematic research. The survey conducted by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (IFDT) and the Faculty of Political Sciences (FPN), surveying plenum participants at multiple Belgrade faculties from January to May 2025, involves nearly 1000 students and thereby provides representative data. The sample captures students actively involved in the blockade movement, offering insight into their genuine values and political orientations. The findings are striking: an overwhelming majority of Serbian students embrace liberal values, giving an average score of 8.9 out of 10 to the question “How important is it for you to live in a country governed democratically?” When asked to identify the highest societal priority, students most frequently chose social justice, the rule of law, and democracy (Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju 2025, 8, 10).

The survey data confirms what observation of the protests suggests: Serbian students are mobilized primarily by pro-democratic values. They seek social justice, freedom, and democracy. The National Youth Council of Serbia (*Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije*, KOMS) research documents significant shifts in young people’s attitudes during 2025. As Milica Borjanic reports, “The biggest changes brought by the student movement relate to the way democracy is valued and understood. Today, 60 % of young people believe democracy is the best form of governance, compared to 40 % last year. Previously, around 60 % of young people said Serbia needs a strong leader, but now, for the first time, over 50 % say it does not” (Beta 2025b). Political scientist Boban Stojanović argues that those demanding ideological declarations from students are acting in bad faith: “The only real social divide at the moment is between the government characterized by a lack of freedom, corruption, national betrayal and absolute inequality – and a new student or political movement whose values are freedom, justice, tolerance, the fight against corruption and the protection of national interests” (See: Kljajić 2025). The movement’s greatest strength lies precisely in its

inclusiveness, its ability to unite citizens across conventional ideological divides around fundamental democratic demands.

At the same time, the movement is not immune to the structural risks that accompany prolonged mobilization. Fatigue, fragmentation, and the challenge of institutional translation remain tangible constraints. Moral authority can galvanize broad support, yet it does not automatically generate sustainable organizational capacity. Similarly, the deliberate avoidance of ideological positioning, initially a source of inclusiveness, may become more difficult to maintain once electoral competition demands programmatic differentiation. Acknowledging these vulnerabilities does not diminish the movement's democratic significance; it situates it within the broader dilemmas of contemporary democratic renewal.

One fact remains clear: students repeatedly turned to Europe in their search for justice. In April 2025, eighty students cycled more than 1,400 kilometres from Novi Sad to Strasbourg to meet with European lawmakers, and soon after, another group ran nearly 2,000 kilometres to Brussels to present their concerns to EU institutions under the slogan "No one's tired! We're running to Brussels!". When they wanted the world to hear them, they looked west – toward the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the broader European democratic tradition. This is not the behaviour of nationalists seeking isolation, but of young citizens demanding that Serbia meet European standards of democracy, accountability, and the rule of law.

Both aforementioned *emic* articles capture well this sentiment among the students.

The European Union has supported the government of Aleksandar Vučić over the years, essentially sustaining a stabilitocracy in Serbia, despite the regime manoeuvring between the EU, the United States, and Russia. This, along with the fact that the EU is strongly supporting lithium exploitation along the Western border of Serbia, which raises the question of land pollution, but also given that it remains silent regarding the student demonstrations, has led to widespread scepticism towards the West (Beširević 2025, 35).

On the map of the world, we from the Balkans are never 'good enough.' That is why our workers can be exploited. That is why, when we demand democracy—the so-called Western invention—European support is absent. Moreover, it is on Vučić's side. That is why our rivers can be drained and our land ravaged for mining lithium, needed to protect Western Europe's clean air oases while they sell us their outdated, pollution-spewing cars (Knežević 2025, 59).

Seen from this perspective, it is more accurate to describe Serbian youth not as Eurosceptic but as not Euro-naïve – strategically sceptical for reasons grounded in experience. It took the EU nearly a year to adopt a resolution supporting the movement and criticizing Vučić, during which time he was publicly received and praised by Macron, von der Leyen, Scholz, and others. Nationalism could indeed re-emerge if students feel abandoned or betrayed, alone in their struggle. This does not deny the presence of nationalist tendencies among Serbian students – reflecting broader patterns in Serbian society – but rejects nationalism as the movement's defining feature. In this sense, Hasa and Pollozhani rightly warn in the *Berliner Gazette* that Serbia remains "a deeply nationalist society with a history shaped by the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, marked by extreme ethnic and ultranationalist sentiments, which continue to persist today, including among young people and students" (Hasa and Pollozhani 2025). Yet, as Serbian scholars already concluded early on into the protest, advocating for a more explicit and concrete EU support, the fact remains that "the EU and the Serbian citizens fighting for democracy are natural allies, and their interests in Serbia align closely"

(Burazer, Vulović and Vasiljević 2025, 16). If anything, nationalist currents serve as a caution: without explicit, unequivocal, and robust EU support, the movement risks drifting in a direction it otherwise seeks to resist.

About this issue

In the opening contribution, “The Framing Potential of Headlines: Student Protests in Serbia 1996–1997 and 2024–2025”, Danica Trifunjagić and Daniela Simon offer a comparative analysis of the Serbian printed media’s reporting about the two largest, seminal student protests in recent Serbian history – those of 1996–1997 under the regime of Slobodan Milošević and the ongoing protests of 2024–2025 during the presidency of Aleksandar Vučić. Taking into consideration the protest’s visibility, evaluative orientation and headline vocabulary in over 3,000 articles from state-aligned (*Politika*) and independent (*Naša Borba*, *Danas*) newspapers, the authors reveal a striking continuity in framing strategies of the state-aligned and independent/oppositional outlets across three decades. As they argue, *Politika*, as a representative state-aligned media outlet, consistently minimized protest visibility by publishing fewer articles, downplaying major protest events, highlighting disruption, blockades, public order, and the impact on everyday life, amplifying official statements. Independent outlets, of which *Naša Borba* was the most prominent during the 1996–1997 protests, and *Danas* is today, provided more visibility to the protests, student demands and insistence on institutional accountability, framing them as legitimate civic action. Moreover, the authors provide close reading of the content, showing that seemingly neutral reporting in *Politika*, by providing generous space to state officials’ statements, often functioned as de facto delegitimization of the protests and marginalization of protest claims. According to the authors, such application of the framing theory through quantitative indicators – such as sentiment coding, headline vocabulary and lexical analysis – has broader significance for understanding media behaviour in authoritarian contexts and demonstrates how newspapers, rather than merely reflecting events, actively structure the symbolic interpretation of protest.

Jovan Bliznakovski and Astrea Nikolovska, on their part, compare the current protests in Serbia with the protests in North Macedonia against the Nikola Gruevski’s regime (2015–2017) to identify mechanisms that enable democratic opening in the regional context marked by what they call “the conditions of state capture”: a system of rule which extends far beyond formal state institutions to include media, civil society and economic networks, producing a deeply embedded system of political clientelism and dependency. The authors emphasize some notable similarities between the two protests: persistent, long-lasting civil unrest provoked by structurally cognate spark – the Wiretapping Affair and the Novi Sad canopy collapse, respectively – that tacitly exposed government corruption and abuse of law; citizens’ pressure on entrenched systems through bottom-up, grassroots mobilization, investigative journalism and watchdog activism. Moreover, both protests gathered supporters from various social strata, transcending ethnic and religious divisions. Yet, despite these and other structural similarities such as dominant-party rule and institutional capture, the outcomes have been altogether different. The Macedonian protests thus resulted in a coordinated unification of civic-political opposition and unequivocal support and sustained EU/USA engagement, and ultimately in a democratic regime change. In contrast, Serbia’s protests remain led by students who, even after entering the political arena, still distance themselves firmly from political parties, and EU and USA officials have for long and by and large

remained silent despite escalating repression. By this token, the authors' analysis suggests that these two structural factors – sustained international support and synergy between student-civil and political opposition- are required to enable a successful democratic opening in an authoritarian-stabilitocratic regime, but also warn about the limits of “bottom up”, citizen agency as driver of systemic change without its synergy with other structural factors.

Ljubica Djordjević, Katinka Beretka and Jelena Mihajlov focus on the notable differences in the responses to the current protests among national minorities in Serbia. Namely, while Serbian minorities were previously typically reserved in providing their support to civic mobilization, they assumed a more visible role in this protest, often openly expressing their ethnic identity through banners in native languages, minority flags and even traditional attire, while simultaneously advancing universal civic demands for the rule of law and anti-corruption. Certainly, the authors recognize that Serbian minorities – as the protest in general – did not escape the apparent polarisation in Serbia; thus, while some formal minority actors (political parties and national councils) implicitly or even explicitly supported the government through clientelist coalitions, civic initiatives demonstrated unprecedented cross-ethnic solidarity, most notably in Novi Pazar where Bosniak and Serbian students protested jointly. Moreover, they also remind us that both the regime and protesters deployed ethnic rhetoric, including derogatory speech targeting Croats and Roma, alongside the aforementioned controversial chants like “Aco Šiptare”. Despite these tensions, the authors argue that this wave of protests revealed a potential for more inclusive citizenship, as political cleavages prevailed over ethnic ones and the narrative of historical hostilities and antagonism failed to resonate broadly, especially among the youth. Thus, the authors argue that, even in a constrained environment with still unresolved historical grievances and ambivalence between minority and majority ethnic groups, civic movements can serve as spaces for democratic pluralism and (more) inclusive citizenship that transcend ethnic boundaries.

Ivan Ejub Kostić examines how Bosniak Muslim students at the State University of Novi Pazar (DUNP) understand their participation in Serbia's 2024/2025 student protests. Based on qualitative fieldwork with 31 semi-structured interviews conducted during the author's stay in Novi Pazar, the study reveals that their engagement cannot be fully explained through general frameworks of anti-corruption protest or democratic dissatisfaction alone. Rather, it must be understood through the intersecting lenses of minority status in Serbia, Sandžak's peripheral position, Islamic self-identification, and collective memory of the 1990s wars. The findings show that DUNP students enter the protest space not as passive minority actors or representatives of a narrow ethno-national agenda, but as politically conscious participants who articulate demands for accountable institutions while simultaneously critiquing nationalism, institutional discrimination, and historical revisionism. Their participation functions as a corrective force within the student movement—simultaneously solidaristic in supporting common civic struggle yet insistent that this struggle must not reproduce nationalist narratives that carry traumatic historical legacies for the Bosniak community. The article argues that their presence expands the movement's political horizon toward a more inclusive social contract in Serbia, one that recognizes minority experiences as constitutive elements rather than tolerated exceptions.

Apparently, unlike minorities in Serbia, political representatives of Serbs in the region generally did not display much enthusiasm about the protest, as Lončar and Lozo demonstrated in their article “Beyond the Borders of Protest - Political Echoes of the Student Movement among Serbian Political Actors in the Region”. More precisely, they combined

discourse analysis of 32 public statements with a quantitative scale to measure support or condemnation, in order to examine how political actors that represent the Serb community in Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Montenegro and Croatia responded to the 2024–2025 student protests in Serbia. The picture that the authors paint is rather complex and uneven, revealing that reactions of political actors were shaped primarily by political alignment with Belgrade and vested political interests rather than by democratic solidarity. In Republika Srpska, ruling parties – SNSD (Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata – The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats) and their coalition partners, aligned with the official rhetoric from Belgrade, consistently delegitimized protests as a threat to national unity, while the opposition remained somewhat fragmented and ambivalent, with SDS (Srpska demokratska stranka – The Serb Democratic Party) “moderately supportive” and LZPR (Lista za pravdu i red – For Justice and Order) being “the only party to have offered explicit, sustained, and active support for the student protests.” In Montenegro, Serb political leaders somewhat refrained from commenting on the situation, with the NSD (Nova Srpska demokratija – New Serb Democracy) as part of the ruling coalition oscillating amid internal divisions, DNP (Demokratska narodna partija – Democratic People’s Party) openly supporting Vučić, and SNP (Socijalistička narodna partija – Socialist People’s Party) being notably silent on the issue. Thereby, the Independent Democratic Serb Party, as effectively the sole political representative of the Serbs in Croatia, is the only leading Serb party in the region that expressed (albeit moderate) empathy with the protesters, while also avoiding confrontation. The authors conclude that transnational ethnonationalism within the so-called “Serbian World” (a concept championed by Vučić and some right-wing intellectuals promoting unity among the Serbs in Serbia and in the neighbouring countries), “functions primarily as a mechanism of political control” securing hierarchical political loyalty to Belgrade, rather than genuine solidarity.

By scrutinizing how online media in Serbia and Croatia framed the 2024–2025 student protests, Davor Pauković and Marko Roško complete the discursive analysis of the media in this issue. Using frame analysis of 200 Croatian articles (*Index.hr* and *Direktno.hr*) and 140 Serbian articles (*N1 Serbia* and *Informer.rs*), they examine how post-conflict imaginaries and historical antagonisms shape protest coverage, situating the unrest within the context of post-Yugoslav Serbian–Croatian tensions and contested historical narratives. As they demonstrate, Croatian media, regardless of ideological leaning, overwhelmingly supported the protests, framing students as legitimate democratic actors and distancing Croatia from Serbia’s authoritarian rule of Aleksandar Vučić. In sharp contrast, Serbian pro-government *Informer.rs* portrayed Croatia as a hostile external conspirator, with vast majority of articles employing antagonistic frames and frequently invoking “Ustaša” labels to depict Croatian media and politicians as orchestrators of a “colour revolution” orchestrated by foreign enemies, while *N1 Serbia* offered predominantly neutral or sympathetic portrayals of Croatian involvement. In effect, the authors argue that the current protests should not be understood as merely domestic political events, but also as transnationally mediated spectacles framed through the historical lenses of burdened Serbian–Croatian relations, re-enacting their memory politics: for Croatian media, the protests reinforce Croatia’s self-image as a European success story, while for pro-regime Serbian media, they activate wartime narratives to delegitimize domestic dissent through foreign-enemy framing.

The last, but not the least, contribution tackles more explicitly regional significance and potential for protests regional cooperation. In “Student Mobilization against Corruption in N. Macedonia and Serbia: The Potential for Regional Transnational Anti-Corruption

Networks”, Ivan Stefanovski takes the Serbian–Macedonian parallels further, by examining current Serbian protests in the context of the North Macedonia’s “Who is Next?” initiative following the 2025 tragedy in Kočani, a deadly nightclub fire that claimed 63 young lives. Using qualitative discourse analysis and interviews, the author identifies three key transnational processes: diffusion, domestication and externalization. Both mobilizations feature strong anti-corruption master frames demanding transparency and institutional accountability, with extensive in-country diffusion reaching hundreds of locations. Despite activists denying organised cooperation, Stefanovski finds evidence of “unrecognized cross-border diffusion”, where similar tactics and symbols — such as the “bloody hands” motif — are adopted without formal coordination. Domestication is absent, as both movements target domestic rather than supranational actors, reflecting scepticism toward EU officials perceived as legitimizing the ruling regimes. The two differ, however, insofar as the Serbian movement also engaged in “externalization” through awareness-raising actions such as long-distance marathons to Strasbourg and Brussels.

In sum, this special issue traces perceptions, implications and broader significance of 2024-student protests, either in the region or by Serbian minorities. Several articles offer comparative and/or discourse analysis of its media portrayal in relation to the previous student protests in Serbia or civil protests in North Macedonia and Montenegro, and its depiction in media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and North Macedonia, while others focus on the cross-border cooperation and the transformative potential of the protests in and beyond Serbia.

Taken altogether, these contributions suggest that the student-led protests in Serbia have a broader regional significance.

First, the protests have demonstrated that civic mobilisation in the Western Balkans is not exhausted, and that authoritarian stabilisation is neither complete nor irreversible. The comparison with North Macedonia’s 2015–2017 episode is instructive less as a template than as a diagnostic: it shows which mechanisms enable democratic opening under conditions of state and societal capture, and which of them the Serbian movement has yet to generate. Similarly, the parallel with the “Who is Next?” initiative in North Macedonia reveals a pattern of unrecognised cross-border diffusion — shared anti-corruption master frames, “bloody hands” symbolism and silent repertoires — that points to the existence of a regional repertoire of contention, even in the absence of formal coordination.

Second, the contributions on national minorities show that, possibly for the first time in recent memory, political cleavages prevailed over ethnic ones: Bosniak, Hungarian and other citizens expressed their ethnic identities while advancing universal civic demands; displaying interethnic solidarity in Novi Pazar, Niš and elsewhere became one of the movement’s most visible features. At the same time, the analysis of Serb political actors in Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Croatia demonstrates that the vaunted “Serbian world” functions primarily as a mechanism of political control rather than genuine solidarity. Reactions to the protests divided almost perfectly along lines of loyalty to Belgrade: ruling parties delegitimised them, while only relatively marginal opposition actors, and the SDSS in Croatia, expressed measured solidarity. The protests thus became a litmus test that exposed the hierarchical, rather than normative, character of transnational ethnonationalism.

Third, the media analyses reveal that the protests are also a transnational spectacle, framed through the sedimented memory of the 1990s. Croatian media, across the ideological

spectrum, overwhelmingly supported the protests and read them as confirmation of Croatia's own European trajectory, while pro-government Serbian media framed Croatia as a hostile external conspirator, reviving Ustaša imagery to delegitimise domestic dissent. This asymmetry shows that the protests have become a site where competing national memories and geopolitical self-images are negotiated — and that the outcome of that negotiation will influence and shape regional relations well beyond the movement's immediate demands.

For all the uncertainty, this issue is therefore imbued with hope in – and dedicated to – the new, young and fresh political agency personified in Serbian students. While being ideologically diverse and incoherent on the surface, with inherently polyphonic voices and slogans that occasionally veer in uproar and rage against the machine, as is of course the case with any and all massive, messy, tiringly lengthy street movement, their hearts are in the right place. What is at stake in the Serbian student-led protests is not only governmental alternation, but the rearticulation of democratic imagination under conditions of institutional decay. By combining horizontal deliberation, moral framing and eventual engagement with representative mechanisms, the movement unsettles both authoritarian stabilitocracy and the complacency of procedural democracy. Its electoral outcome remains open. Yet regardless of that outcome, it has already expanded the horizon of what appears politically possible in Serbia and, by resonance, in the wider region — a resonance that the contributions to this issue document in its media framings, its minority solidarities, its transnational echoes and its unresolved dilemmas.

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