

Beyond the Borders of Protest - Political Echoes of the Student Movement among Serbian Political Actors in the Region

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Abstract

This paper examines the reactions of political actors representing the Serb corpus in Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Montenegro and Croatia to the student protests that took place in Serbia in 2024. The research explores how transnational ethnonationalism, political loyalty and domestic political contexts shape the ways in which these actors interpret and respond to protest movements in the “kin-state”. Methodologically, the paper relies on discourse analysis of public statements and social media posts published between November 2024 and October 2025 complemented by a quantitative coding of evaluative positions on a five-point ordinal scale.

The findings indicate that political resonance with events in Serbia occurs selectively and primarily along the lines of political alignment with the ruling structures in Belgrade. Rather than expressing ideological or democratic solidarity, most actors reaffirmed regime loyalty and framed the protests as destabilizing or externally influenced. Opposition and civic-oriented figures, however, tended to articulate moderate or explicit support for student demands. The study contributes to understanding how transnational ethnonational networks function as mechanisms of political control and symbolic belonging across borders and how regional elites reproduce or challenge central narratives originating from Serbia.

Keywords: Transnational ethnonationalism, Political resonance, Serbia, Regional elites, Student protests

Introduction

The Context of Student Protests in Serbia (2024–2025)

In late 2024 and early 2025, Serbia witnessed a wave of large-scale student protests that challenged the country’s increasingly authoritarian political environment. Although the movement was organised and led domestically, its political and symbolic reverberations extended well beyond Serbia’s borders. The protests emerged as a response to escalating repression, institutional decay and the erosion of democratic norms, drawing the attention of both the domestic public and regional observers.

As the mobilisation evolved, it generated reactions from both civic and opposition circles within Serbia, as well as from political actors across neighbouring states with significant Serbian populations. Particularly revealing are the responses of parties and figures engaged in identity-based politics whose attitudes toward the protests expose the boundaries of transnational political solidarity within the so-called “Serbian world”. Republika Srpska/Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Croatia thus represent key arenas for examining how these identity-linked actors interpret and frame a civic movement that originated in Serbia.

Research Question and Objectives

The primary aim of this paper is to analyse how political parties and actors representing the Serbian corpus in Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Croatia responded to the student protests in Serbia, and to what extent these responses were shaped by factors such as ethnic loyalty, political opportunism and attitudes toward grassroots mobilisation (Beissinger 2007; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). This study hypothesises that regional reactions reflect loyalty to Belgrade rather than democratic solidarity

The approach enables an examination of whether transnational political resonance exists within the so-called “Serbian world” or whether these events merely expose the pragmatic limits of regional ethnic interconnectedness (Brubaker 2011; Wimmer 2013; Bieber 2020; Pavlović 2020; Ljubomirović 2022). By combining theoretical insights from the literature on transnational ethnonationalism, political resonance, and social movement studies with qualitative discourse analysis, the paper seeks to determine whether the protests in Serbia generated genuine cross-border political solidarity or, conversely, revealed its absence.

Theoretical framework

The 2024–2025 student protests in Serbia serve as a litmus test for the political dynamics of the “Serbian world”, a transnational space in which actors in Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Croatia mediate symbolic and political cohesion across borders. This study integrates three conceptual lenses: transnational ethnonationalism, political resonance with symbolic politics and elite responses to grassroots mobilisation (Tarrow 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Beissinger 2007; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Rather than treating the protests as a purely domestic event, the analysis examines public party statements, which are quantitatively coded for support, neutrality or rejection, in order to trace how proximity to Belgrade shapes cross-border loyalties. This approach empirically verifies whether the “Serbian world” functions as a communicative construct sustained by elite coordination tested during crises such as mass civic unrest.

Political resonance explains how events in one context generate mediated effects elsewhere, while symbolic politics reveals the use of narratives to affirm identity or delegitimise opponents (Tarrow 2005; Castells 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Student protests, as horizontal grassroots action, bypass hierarchies and challenge collective identity, while elite reactions range from defensive preservation of the status quo to opportunistic appropriation. Regional actors thus balance national loyalty, political gain and attitudes toward autonomous civic resistance, exposing the hierarchical rather than normative nature of transnational ethnonationalism. The framework interprets their discourse not as one-dimensional ethnicity but as strategic positioning within a Belgrade-centred power network.

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative–quantitative methodological framework in which the unit of analysis is an individual public statement issued by Serbian political parties from the

countries covered by the study: Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Croatia. The analysis includes statements issued through official party communication channels, such as press releases, media statements by party representatives, and verified social media accounts, over a one-year period from November 2024, when the student protests began, to October 2025.

The quantification of political attitudes was conducted using a core indicator in the form of an ordinal scale ranging from -2 to $+2$ designed to capture the evaluative orientation of each party toward the protests:

+2 – open and unequivocal support for the protests;

+1 – moderate or conditional support;

0 – neutral stance or absence of a clear position;

-1 – sceptical or delegitimising position without direct condemnation;

-2 – explicit condemnation of the protests and denial of their legitimacy.

All analysed statements were coded according to this indicator. For each political party, an average attitude score was calculated, providing an aggregate measure of its overall position toward the protests. This operationalisation enables: comparison of political parties within and across countries, identification of patterns of political solidarity with the Serbian authorities and detection of ideological lines of division in relation to the protests.

The results are presented through descriptive statistics and graphical representations of attitude distributions by party and national context, allowing for a clear visualisation of the structure of transnational political reactions.

To analyse political reactions to the student protests in Serbia from outside its borders, the paper further applies a qualitative research approach based on discourse analysis of publicly available statements, media coverage and digital traces of political actors belonging to the Serb political corpus in Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Croatia.

Table 1: Analysis Overview

Country	Number of analysed actors	Number of analysed statements	Percentage in the total sample
Republika Srpska	6	23	73 %
Montenegro	3	5	15 %
Croatia	1	4	12 %
Total	9	32	100 %

Source: Author's own data.

The reliability of the findings is ensured through the use of multiple data sources and temporal cross-verification, although the selectivity of media archives remains a limiting factor.

Research Question and Analytical Focus

The central research question of this study is: How did political parties and actors belonging to the Serbian corpus in the region respond to the student protests in Serbia, and how were these reactions shaped by ideological, identity-based and opportunistic factors?

The analytical focus is placed on several dimensions: the tone and content of public statements, the use of symbols and identity narratives, the presence or absence of political solidarity and the strategies of avoidance, neutralisation or appropriation of the protests.

Methods and Data Sources

The analysis includes parliamentary political parties and officials who explicitly identify themselves as representatives of the Serbs in Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Croatia who hold a notable presence in the public sphere and who, in any form, commented on the protests or the political situation in Serbia during the relevant period.

The research applies qualitative discourse analysis, grounded in the assumption that language shapes social reality, political attitudes and power relations, drawing on official party communications and releases from websites and social media; public statements and interviews by leaders in print and electronic media; reactions on X, Facebook and Instagram; and excerpts from parliamentary debates or public events.

Research Limitations

The study faces several methodological limitations, including the scarcity of explicit statements concerning the protests, which in some cases required the interpretation of indirect messages or symbolic silence. Access to statements was also occasionally constrained by the selective availability of media archives and the volatile dynamics of social media platforms.

Nevertheless, the discourse-analytical approach adopted here allows for the identification of contextual nuances and political calculations that often escape more formalised content analyses.

Reactions of Political Actors within the Serbian World

Republika Srpska

Alliance of Independent Social Democrats

During the observed period, a total of six public statements by political actors from the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) were identified as explicitly referring to the student protests in Serbia. All statements were coded according to the ordinal attitude scale (ranging from +2 to -2) where positive values indicate support for the protests and negative values reflect condemnation or delegitimation. The results demonstrate a consistently negative stance of SNSD toward the protests accompanied by pronounced political solidarity with the President of Serbia and the ruling party in Belgrade.

From a chronological perspective, a progressive intensification of rhetoric can be observed, primarily led by Milorad Dodik, the SNSD president and until August 2025 the President of Republika Srpska. In his initial statement from December 2024, Dodik adopted a critical tone, expressing empathy for all the victims while simultaneously warning against the broader political consequences of the protests (Nezavisne 2025). As he stated:

The tragedy that occurred in Novi Sad has deeply affected every person, not only in Serbia, but also all of us in Republika Srpska. These are moments when we all share grief and when it is natural to seek answers. However, in the conditions of global turbulence, any destabilisation of Serbia is dangerous for our people, and most harmful for the young people to whom the future of Serbia belongs. You, the youth of Serbia, need a stable and strong state. That is why I believe that you will show maturity and responsibility, because the further continuation of the blockades will not bring us closer to resolving the circumstances that led to this tragedy. On the contrary, such actions will be abused by those who do not care about solutions, but about politicising and weakening Serbia. And we are witnesses that your search for answers is being used for someone to come to power, through some transitional or who knows what kind of governments (Dodik 2024).

However, in January 2025 the rhetoric shifted toward a negative orientation (–1) and by February and March the discourse evolved into explicit condemnation (–2), framing the protests as an “attack on the state”, “coloured revolutions” and actions by “enemies of Serbia” (Dodik 2025a). The culmination of this alignment with Belgrade’s ruling structures was symbolically expressed by the attendance of senior SNSD and Republika Srpska officials at the large rally marking Serbia’s Statehood Day, held on 15 February 2025, in Sremska Mitrovica (Euronews 2025).

Statements by other SNSD officials further confirm the trend of increasing and subsequently consolidated support for Serbia’s ruling establishment. In March, Radovan Višković, SNSD vice president and until September 2025 Prime Minister of Republika Srpska, expressed skepticism toward the protests (–1) (RTRS 2025b) while Srđan Mazalica, head of the SNSD parliamentary caucus in the National Assembly of Republika Srpska, explicitly linked the protest movement to foreign political interests allegedly seeking Serbia’s destabilisation (–2) (RTRS 2025c).

Overall, the average value of the key indicator for SNSD stands at –1.17, indicating a stable negative positioning toward the protest movement and a growing narrative portraying the protests as a threat to Serbia’s stability and to transnational Serbian unity. The average score — $(+1 -1 -2 -2 -1 -2) \div 6 = -7 \div 6 = -1.17$ — confirms that the SNSD maintained a consistently negative position toward the student protests in Serbia throughout the observed period. The coded statements indicate an increasingly sharp rhetorical tone as the protests intensified, corresponding to the party’s strong political and symbolic alignment with the ruling authorities in Serbia.

SNSD’s Coalition Partners (Socialist Party, United Srpska, Socialist Party of Srpska, DEMOS, Democratic People’s Alliance, People’s Party of Srpska)

Alongside the statements of the SNSD leadership, six publicly available statements made by representatives of the coalition partners in the government of Republika Srpska were analysed, namely from United Srpska (US), the Socialist Party (SP) and the Socialist Party of Srpska (SPS). All statements explicitly referred to the student protests in Serbia and were coded using the same ordinal attitude scale (ranging from +2 to –2).

The findings indicate that the rhetoric of the coalition partners was fully aligned with that of the SNSD, displaying an even stronger rejection of the protests and a repeated emphasis on the need to preserve Serbia’s stability. Particularly prominent were the statements of Nenad Stevandić, president of US and speaker of the National Assembly of Republika Srpska, who consistently recorded the lowest score (–2) throughout the entire period of student mobilisation (RTRS 2025a; Stevandić 2025a). His discourse included narratives about the manipulation of students, the involvement of foreign intelligence services and the danger of intra-Serb conflict:

I will never understand that in Serbia, those who do not want to study or work beat those who do, especially the best students with an average of 10. That those for whom it is normal and pleasant to associate their own name with a compatriot, the Ustasha butcher Dinko Šakić, initiate protests against the president of Serbia, whose family was almost exterminated by the Ustasha. To stop and block Serbia, which has integrated national values with modern ones and restored the dignity of the state by raising its economy, army and infrastructure, and to subordinate it to a Serbia that has denied itself, sold off the economy, destroyed the army, knelt before both big and small and begged to maintain a minimal budget and miserable salaries and pensions. Should Serbia,

which has risen and risen, be given to autochauvinists and lazy people to run it for foreign masters and crush it once and for all? No one has that right, not the democratically elected government, not conscientious citizens, not all of us, wherever we are and work. The responsibility lies with the President of Serbia and everyone from him, from the highest officials to the last doorman, to say enough and enable the normal work of state bodies and the economy, and a normal and undisturbed life for all citizens of Serbia (Stevandić 2025b).

By contrast, Petar Đokic, president of the SP and minister of energy and mining in the government of Republika Srpska, adopted a more moderate position. In a statement delivered at a pro-government rally held in early February in Sremska Mitrovica, Đokic expressed rhetorical support for young people as political actors but omitted explicit endorsement of the protests as a legitimate form of mobilisation (−1) (Banja Luka 24 2025). Similarly, Goran Selak, president of the SPS and since September 2025 minister of justice in the government of Republika Srpska, characterised the protests through the prism of risks to Serbia's economic development and political stability (−1) (Srpska Info 2025).

Representatives of the other parties within the ruling coalition led by the SNSD did not issue public statements regarding the student protests in Serbia. Nevertheless, their attendance at joint events suggests a shared alignment and solidarity with the ruling party in Belgrade.

Overall, the average score for the coalition bloc aligned with the SNSD is calculated as $(-2 -2 -2 -1 -1) \div 6 = -1.66$. This result indicates that the coalition partners, particularly the US and its leader Nenad Stevandić, were even more uncompromising than the SNSD in their delegitimisation of the protests, with no publicly available examples of neutral or positive statements. From a discursive perspective, the protests were portrayed as externally orchestrated, potentially violent and destabilising, as well as a threat to "Serbian unity" and to the political order in Belgrade.

The coalition's shared narrative thus fits firmly within the construction of a transnational political interest interpreted as inseparably tied to the ruling authorities in Serbia.

Serb Democratic Party

In contrast to the coalition surrounding the SNSD, the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) displayed significant variation in public positions regarding the student protests in Serbia. A total of six of seven publicly available statements from the period December 2024 to September 2025 were analysed.

The first explicit expression of support for the demonstrators came from Ljubiša Petrović, mayor of Bijeljina, in December 2024 (+2), marking the first formal political reaction within Republika Srpska to the protests in Serbia. At that time, SDS president Milan Miličević adopted a considerably more reserved position (0), recognising the legitimacy of protests as a form of expressing discontent, yet without offering explicit support (RTRS 2024).

A notable shift occurred in March 2025, when Miličević publicly supported the demonstrators at a protest gathering in Belgrade (+2). He stated: "The youth of Serbia is walking with dignity on its path for justice... TO LIVE FREELY!" (Miličević 2025a). However, this public endorsement triggered internal divisions and open dissatisfaction within the party leadership, culminating in a more defensive tone (+1) in June when Miličević emphasised that the SDS had no official party stance on the issue (Dakić 2025b). SDS' MP Mirjana Orašanin further illustrates that the intra-party conflict over relations with Serbia had both institutional and identity dimensions, reflecting a tension between party discipline and political sentiment she stated that: "There are certain rules of conduct that everyone must

adhere to, and they are defined by the SDS Statute. The SDS Statute is for the SDS what the Constitution is for the Republika Srpska. We all have to adhere to it and only then can the SDS function at its full capacity” (Dakić 2025a).

Although, at the time, SDS member of parliament Maja Dragojević-Stojić issued a strong message of support for the students in December 2024 (+2), her statement was entirely individual in nature (Stojić D. 2024). After joining the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) in March 2025, she ceased public commentary on the protests. Consequently, her statement was not included in the aggregate SDS score, though it remains an important indicator of limited pluralism and internal fragmentation within the opposition bloc in Republika Srpska.

The final public statement on the protests in Serbia by an SDS official came in September 2025, when Ljubiša Petrović posted on his Facebook profile an image depicting the arrest of a young protester, accompanied by a caption expressing clear support for the students (+2) and hope for the swift resolution of the crisis (Petrović 2025).

The average score for the SDS — $(+2 + 0 + 2 + 1 + 0 + 2) \div 6 = +1.17$ — indicates that, although the party lacked a unified official position, it nonetheless demonstrated a moderately supportive stance toward the student protests and was among the few actors in Republika Srpska to express such support. In this sense, the SDS represents one of the rare, institutionalised channels of solidarity with the student movement within the entity.

However, this position also led to internal divisions and pressure on the party’s leadership, confirming that the issue of the protests transcended national borders while simultaneously exposing fractures within the opposition politics of Republika Srpska.

Party of Democratic Progress / Secure Srpska Movement

Unlike the SDS, the PDP articulated its positions on the student protests in Serbia to a much lesser extent. During the initial months of the protests, the PDP refrained from public commentary, suggesting a cautious and low-profile approach to the issue.

The first recorded statement by Draško Stanivuković, president of the PDP since December 2024, was given in January 2025 following a meeting of opposition leaders. In this statement, the protests were acknowledged as legitimate, yet it was emphasised that the students’ demands in Serbia had been “fulfilled”, and that dialogue represented the best solution without explicit alignment (0) (Mondo BiH 2025). This position can be interpreted as a strategy of avoiding direct political confrontation, particularly in light of the party’s sensitive relationship with Serbia’s ruling structures.

However, by August 2025, Stanivuković publicly shifted his tone. In an interview with Euronews Serbia, he openly stressed the importance of supporting Aleksandar Vučić and characterised the protests negatively as a potential source of violence and destabilisation (−2) (Euronews Serbia 2025). This change suggests a clear alignment of the PDP with the current authorities in Belgrade, effectively positioning the opposition narrative in the Republic of Srpska as a discourse of stability and unity.

Throughout the entire observed period, no official decision of the PDP Presidency nor collective party statement was identified, and no other senior party representatives commented on the issue.

An additional complication arises from the organisational transformation of the party toward the end of the observed period. In October 2025, the PDP effectively ceased to function as an independent political entity by joining a broader political platform — the Secure Srpska

Movement. This development raises questions of institutional continuity and thus limits the interpretative scope of the findings as the party's political positioning and future relevance remain uncertain.

The average score for the PDP — $(0 + (-2)) \div 2 = -1.0$ — indicates a predominantly negative discourse overall, marking a departure from the oppositional support for the protests represented by the SDS and reflecting a strategic adjustment to the political realities of relations between Belgrade and Banja Luka.

List for Justice and Order

Unlike other political actors in the Republic of Srpska, the List for Justice and Order (LZPR) adopted the most consistent and explicit position regarding the student protests in Serbia. Throughout the observed period, Nebojša Vukanović, the party's president, and other LZPR members continuously expressed direct and unequivocal support for the students in Serbia through public appearances, blogs and video messages while simultaneously calling on citizens of Republika Srpska to show solidarity and civic engagement.

Given the large number of such statements and the absence of any neutral or reserved positions, an aggregated coding approach was applied whereby all messages were uniformly classified as +2 on the core scale of attitudes toward the protests. Consequently, the aggregate and average score for the party amounts to +2.00, representing maximum support within the applied evaluative framework.

This position places the LZPR in sharp contrast to both ruling and opposition actors in Republika Srpska. Unlike the SDS, which demonstrated internal divisions and shifts in tone, and the PDP, which moved from neutrality to supporting the authorities in Serbia, the LZPR emerged as the only party that consistently viewed the student protests in Serbia as a legitimate and desirable form of political struggle.

In addition to its discursive support, several instances of physical presence of Vukanović and his associates at rallies in Belgrade were recorded, further confirming the activist and transnational dimension of the party's political engagement. These elements indicate that the LZPR perceives the student protests in Serbia as part of a shared political space in which the struggle against corruption and authoritarian tendencies is being waged.

Ultimately, the LZPR represents the most confrontational opposition actor in Republika Srpska vis-à-vis the authorities in Serbia and most closely corresponds to the ideal type of political subject that regards student protests as both a legitimate means and a desirable goal of social mobilisation.

People's Front

The People's Front (NF), led by Jelena Trivić, represents a political actor in Republika Srpska that, throughout the entire observed period, positioned itself in opposition to the student protests in Serbia. Unlike other opposition parties that hesitated to articulate a clear stance or leaned toward supporting the protests, the NF avoided neutrality from the outset and adopted an explicitly delegitimising discourse toward both the protesting students and the opposition actors in Serbia.

In a series of statements issued between November 2024 and June 2025, Jelena Trivić characterised the protests as an attempt to overthrow the government and provoke civil conflict, directly linking the events to alleged foreign actors and those “who wish to see Serbia brought to its knees” (BN 2025a). Her criticism targeted both the opposition parties in Serbia

and the student movement, which, according to the NF's narrative, served the interests of "hostile structures" (Srpskainfo 2024).

Within this discourse, the protesters' demands were portrayed as illegitimate and ideologically directed against Serbian identity, suggesting that the movement had been politically instrumentalised rather than genuinely civic in nature.

In line with its consistent and publicly expressed support for Aleksandar Vučić and the institutional authorities of Serbia (Klixportal 2025), all analysed statements of the NF are classified at -2 on the core attitude indicator. As no deviations from this position were recorded, an aggregated coding approach was applied, resulting in a final average and composite score of -2.00 .

The stance of the NF thus represents the most negative position toward the student protests among all analysed actors in the Republic of Srpska. Unlike the SNSD, which criticised the protests from the standpoint of a ruling party, and the PDP, which eventually aligned itself with Serbia's government, the NF stands out as the only opposition actor that from the very outset ideologically aligned its discourse with the narrative of the authorities in Belgrade framing student mobilisation as a threat to political stability within the broader "Serbian world".

This normatively charged discourse indicates that during the observed period, the NF positioned itself as the structurally closest opposition party to official Belgrade and the most responsive actor to transnational political dynamics in relation to Serbia.

Summary Overview of Quantified Political Reactions

To enable deeper empirical validation of findings and to more clearly observe the differences in political positioning, all analysed statements of political actors in Republika Srpska were coded according to a pre-defined political support index (-2 to $+2$). This index provides a framework for illustrating the continuum between the open condemnation and delegitimisation of the protests, through neutral or reserved positions, to explicit and unequivocal support for the student protests in Serbia.

The following table presents a comprehensive summary of the quantified results by political party, clearly identifying the patterns of communicative and political behaviour observed throughout the analysis:

The analysis of public statements and communication patterns of political parties in Republika Srpska during the period November 2024 – October 2025 reveals that the student protests in Serbia functioned as a litmus test for assessing the political alignment of domestic actors toward the ruling structures in Belgrade. Party positions did not reflect genuine concern for student activism or democratisation but rather served as a secondary indicator of attitudes toward Serbia as the "homeland state" and its current political leadership.

Quantitatively, the recorded scores range from $+2$ (unequivocal support for the protests) to -2 (open condemnation and delegitimisation). This numerical differentiation provided a clear picture of two polarised groups of parties as well as a smaller number of actors who attempted to maintain a moderate and dialogic approach.

At one end of the scale are the ruling SNSD and its coalition partners—US, SP and SPS—which almost uniformly occupied positions between -1 and -2 . These parties collectively framed their discourse around the need for a strong and stable Serbia, portraying the student blockades as a form of external manipulation, an attempt at a "colour revolution" and a threat

to national unity. Within this frame, the SNSD initially adopted a somewhat softer tone (+1 in December 2024) but soon fully embraced a defensive narrative that mirrored the rhetoric of the authorities in Belgrade. US, through numerous statements by Nenad Stevandić, maintained the most consistently negative stance (average -2) while SP and SPS expressed milder forms of institutional support for Serbia's government (average -1).

At the opposite pole stands the LZPR, the only party to have offered explicit, sustained, and active support for the student protests, with an average score of +2. Unlike other opposition parties, Vukanović's LZPR fully identified its political engagement with the goals of the student movement, framing it as a symbol of broader resistance to authoritarianism and corruption (Gerila.info 2024). This case illustrates that the protests in Serbia were not viewed merely as an act of solidarity but as a political metaphor for the internal struggle of the opposition within Republika Srpska.

The SDS occupies a more complex position. In the early phases, the analysis shows a moderately positive tone (0 to +2) accompanied by visible internal divisions between party president Milan Miličević, who publicly supported the protests, and segments of the party leadership that preferred neutrality. This ambivalence resulted in an average score of +1.17. The SDS is also the only party where political reactions to the protests had tangible organisational consequences ranging from internal conflicts and leadership reshuffles to perceptions of external pressure from Belgrade.

The PDP initially maintained a neutral tone, calling for dialogue and de-escalation, but by mid-2025 it had shifted completely toward support for Serbia's government and President Aleksandar Vučić. This reversal, accompanied by internal political changes and the subsequent formation of the broader Movement for a Secure Srpska, placed the PDP within the bloc of parties whose identity rested on institutional alignment with Belgrade rather than on solidarity with civic movements.

Similarly to the PDP but even more ideologically rigid, the NF led by Jelena Trivić stands out as a party that categorically rejected the protests from the outset, adopting a discourse centred on "foreign interference" and "state destabilisation". With three statements, all coded at -2, the NF occupies the most hardline position in the analysed spectrum, almost entirely aligned with the narratives of pro-regime media in Serbia.

Taken as a whole, the results confirm a high degree of political homogenization among ruling and pro-Russian parties alongside significant fragmentation within the opposition, with the LZPR standing as the only actor demonstrating a consistent normative and communicative stance. The overall average score of all parties (-0.7) indicates that the dominant reaction in Republika Srpska was negative, defensive and loyal to the regime, further confirming the discursive interdependence between the political field of Republika Srpska and the narrative of Serbia's authorities regarding the alleged destabilisation of the state.

In a broader sense, these findings suggest that the attitudes toward the student protests in Serbia are not merely a matter of domestic politics within Republika Srpska but a manifestation of transnational political loyalty. The political elites in Republika Srpska perceive developments in Serbia as a signalling arena that requires adaptive alignment—not as an autonomous sphere of civic engagement but as a test of political fidelity and stability within the "Serbian world".

Montenegro*New Serb Democracy*

The president of the New Serb Democracy (NSD), Andrija Mandić, commented on the protests in Serbia following the large rally held at Slavija Square on March 15. In a statement for Montenegro's Prva TV, Mandić adopted a neutral stance toward the student protests, noting that he did not wish to interfere in Serbia's internal affairs while expressing hope that the youth of Serbia would not be manipulated for political purposes (Tanjug 2025a). He emphasised that both the government and the young people of Serbia possessed sufficient wisdom to find a compromise solution, expressing confidence that President Aleksandar Vučić and the student plenums would jointly overcome the crisis. This statement can be interpreted as conditional support coupled with an appeal for dialogue (+1).

Mandić's party colleague Marko Kovačević, the mayor of Nikšić, was among the first signatories of the "Right to Life" petition launched in January 2025, which called on state institutions to halt the "dehumanisation and demonisation" of President Aleksandar Vučić. The petition was also signed by Milan Knežević, president of the Democratic People's Party (DNP).

After his March 15 statement, Andrija Mandić did not make further public comments on the protests, nor did he explicitly endorse Serbia's ruling authorities. On 15 September, during the celebration of the Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and the National Flag, a military parade titled "The Strength of Unity" was held in Belgrade attended by Mandić in his capacity as President of the Parliament of Montenegro.

Mandić's moderate approach cannot necessarily be interpreted as support for the student protests. The limited number of public statements and his absence from several protest-related events up to March 2025 were noted by Vesna Mališić, editor-in-chief of the weekly Radar, who remarked that this indicated Mandić had not "placed all his bets on Aleksandar Vučić" but also that he sought to avoid jeopardising his position as speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament (Vijesti 2025).

The combination of Mandić's neutral position and Kovačević's symbolic act of support through the petition suggests a degree of inconsistency within the NSD's internal policy, though this did not lead to any major intra-party crisis of the kind observed in the SDS in Republika Srpska.

Democratic People's Party

The president of the DNP, Milan Knežević, actively commented on the protests in Serbia, expressing support for the government led by Aleksandar Vučić in what he frequently described as a struggle against a "colour revolution".

His first statement related to the student protests came in December 2024 during an appearance on the television, where he stated that he would be a "hypocrite" not to support the students but added that they should "remove political influence and the backing of certain anti-Serb elements" (Antena M, 2024). This statement can be assessed as sceptical (−1) though it did not amount to a direct condemnation of the protests or their demands.

In January 2025, Vladislav Bojović, a DNP member of parliament, described the protests in Serbia as "shameless abuse" of the big tragedy in Novi Sad, and the government in Serbia "exposed to an organised attack and onslaught of certain structures operating from behind" (Deutsche Welle 2025). This statement constitutes an open condemnation of the protests and is therefore assigned a score of −2.

Beyond television appearances on pro-government media, Knežević was also highly active on social networks. In July 2025, he posted a message on Facebook titled “Instructions for Getting an A”, alluding ironically to the protesting students (Informer 2025a). The instructions include a series of “tips” that often use derogatory words. This statement is likewise coded as –2.

Following an incident at a basketball game in which Serbian fans booed former president of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, Knežević again reacted: “Would the blockers have booed Tonina Picula as well as Dodik, if he had come to the game? No, they would applaud him. If (Albin) Kurti had also come, it would have been impressive for some of those people. That would send a message that Belgrade is open to all non-Serbs. All blockaders and NGOs would declare (Aleksandar) Vučić the man of the year if he recognised Kosovo, sentenced Dodik and imposed sanctions on Russia” (Tanjug 2025b). This statement is also coded –2.

Overall, the sample of statements from DNP officials is somewhat larger than that of the NSD, offering a clearer pattern of consistent opposition to the student movement and discursive alignment with the official positions of the Serbian government.

The average score for the DNP — $(-1 - 2 - 2 - 2) \div 4 = -1.75$ — indicates a distinctly negative stance toward the protests in Serbia. Compared to the more cautious approach of the NSD, this represents a much sharper position aligning closely with the construction of a transnational political interest perceived as inseparably linked to Serbia’s ruling authorities.

Within this framework, the protests are defined as a “colour revolution” aimed not at challenging the regime of Aleksandar Vučić but at undermining the Serbian state itself.

Socialist People’s Party of Montenegro

The Socialist People’s Party of Montenegro (SNP) did not issue any official statements regarding the protests in Serbia. It neither expressed support for the students nor explicitly aligned itself with the government’s position. The only public communication that can be indirectly associated with the protests occurred in July following accusations by Dragan J. Vučićević, editor-in-chief of the pro-government television outlet *Informer* in Serbia, who claimed that the SNP was financing a “colour revolution” and contributing to efforts to overthrow the government in Serbia as well as to weaken President Vučić. In response, the SNP issued a statement rejecting all allegations, clarifying that its cooperation with the aforementioned agency was limited to developing a new framework for the party’s strategic communication identity. The statement concluded by reaffirming that the SNP maintains positive relations with the Serbian Progressive Party and President Aleksandar Vučić (Informer 2025b). This constitutes the only public intervention by the SNP that indirectly can be linked to the student protests, reflecting a generally neutral stance on the issue.

Croatia

Among the Serbian-oriented parties in Croatia, the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS) stands out as the key political representative having secured all parliamentary mandates reserved for the Serb minority since the 2003 elections. Consequently, SDSS officials play a central role in the Serb National Council (SNV), which functions as the self-governing body of Serbs in Croatia in matters concerning minority rights.

In the context of the student protests in Serbia, the reactions of representatives of the Serb community in Croatia, particularly those of the SDSS and SNV, were marked by a moderate and conciliatory tone. Unlike many political actors in Republika Srpska and Montenegro, the SDSS discourse avoided narratives of “foreign interference” and did not include elements of

explicit support or condemnation of the protests. Instead, the emphasis was placed on preserving stability and promoting tolerant dialogue within Serbia.

In January 2025, an incident during the SNV's Orthodox Christmas reception, when Jelena Milić, Serbia's ambassador to Croatia, left the event, indirectly brought into question the Serbian community's position on the protests. Milić explained her gesture as a reaction to the tone in which the SNV had expressed support for young people in Serbia, which implicitly reflected Belgrade's distancing from the civic mobilisation (N1 Srbija 2025). The SNV, however, maintained a reserved stance without retracting earlier messages of solidarity with Serbia's youth. This event can be interpreted as a symbolic moment of divergence between the diplomatic and minority narratives, where the SDSS and SNV, while refraining from explicit political endorsement, nonetheless expressed empathy and understanding toward the social discontent of young people (+1).

The SDSS leader, Milorad Pupovac, publicly commented on the situation in Serbia several times during January and March 2025. His statements were characterised by three interrelated elements: a distancing from Serbia's internal political processes, concern over potential divisions and intolerance and an emphasis on the importance of Serbia's transformation into a more open and just society.

In January, Pupovac stated that the SDSS "cannot participate in political processes in Serbia" but at the same time expressed a desire for "a Serbia of tolerance and mutual recognition", a statement coded as neutral (0) (Danas 2025). In the same period, responding to attacks on Serb cultural institutions in Croatia, Pupovac condemned chauvinistic rhetoric and reaffirmed the importance of freedom of expression and civic courage (+1).

Pupovac's most significant statement regarding the student protests came in March 2025 when he recognised the legitimacy of the protesters' motives, emphasising that "no matter how much it may seem that the protests are influenced from the outside, it is more important to understand what motivated people to take part in them". He also explicitly opposed attempts to label ethnic Serbian students from Croatia as participants in the protests. This statement affirming the social dimension of the movement without direct political identification is evaluated as moderate support (+1) (N1 Hrvatska 2025).

Taken together, the SDSS and related organisations such as the SNV sought to maintain a moderate, non-confrontational and reflective position supporting the civic dimension of the protests while avoiding any open confrontation with the authorities in Belgrade. This approach reflects a broader pattern of political behaviour typical of the Serbian minority in Croatia balancing institutional loyalty with ethical solidarity toward social movements in the "homeland".

In comparison with political actors in Republika Srpska and Montenegro, the SDSS demonstrates the highest level of communicative moderation and institutional responsibility. The discourse of Pupovac and the SNV is characterised by the absence of confrontational language, a clear distance from Serbia's internal political dynamics and a latent support for the social energy of the protests as an expression of the need for democratisation (Radio Dunav 2025). This position reflects the broader nature of minority politics pursued by the SDSS, striking a balance between ethnic solidarity and a pragmatic orientation toward stability and Croatia's European framework.

In contrast to the negative and polarised discourse dominant in the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro, the SDSS's average score of +0.75 indicates a mild yet consistent positive

resonance toward the student protests in Serbia, confirming that within the Serbian political corpus across the region there exist nuanced and differentiated approaches to civic forms of resistance.

Analysis of Patterns

Based on the findings presented by country, the following section provides a synthetic overview of the patterns of political reactions and their transnational implications.

The political responses of actors belonging to the Serbian political corpus in Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Croatia reveal recognisable behavioural patterns stemming from a combination of ideological proximity and institutional dependence on Belgrade and value-based orientations toward civic forms of resistance.

Although the contexts differ, all three cases display a clear dividing line between political entities that perceived the protests in Serbia as a threat to stability and those that interpreted them as a legitimate expression of democratic participation.

Summary of Results

Table 2 presents a summary of the quantified political reactions to the student protests in Serbia categorised by country and political party. The results are expressed through the average score on an ordinal scale ranging from -2 (condemnation) to +2 (support).

Table 2: Summary

Country	Actor	No. of Statements	Average Code	Dominant Pattern of Reactions
Republika Srpska	SNSD	6	-1.17	Delegitimisation of the protests, support for the Serbian authorities
	SNSD's Coalition Partners	6	-1.66	Rejection of the protests, narrative of external influence
	SDS	6	+1.17	Moderate and selective support, intra-party tensions
	PDP	2	-1.00	Neutrality → support for Vučić, adaptation to the authorities
	LZPR	Aggregated	+2.00	Activist and open support for the protests
	NF	3	-2.00	Open condemnation of the protests, loyalty to Belgrade
Montenegro	NSD	1	+1.00	Conditional support, call for dialogue
	DNP	4	-1.75	Sharp condemnation of the protests, narrative of a "colour revolution"
	SNP	-	-	No official statement
Croatia	SDSS/SNV	4	+0.75	Moderate, non-aggressive support for the civic dimension of the protests

Source: Author's own data

Dominant Narratives

The qualitative discourse analysis reveals that the political messages of the analysed actors clustered around several dominant narrative frameworks:

1. The Narrative of Stability and State Defence – characteristic of the ruling structures in Republika Srpska (SNSD and its coalition partners) and pro-Serbian parties in Montenegro (DNP). This framework employs elements of security rhetoric ("attack on the state" and "colour revolution") and defines the protests not as a form of social dialogue but as a threat to state integrity and order.
2. The Narrative of Democratic Solidarity – most clearly expressed in the discourse of the LZPR and certain members of the SDS. This framework interprets the protests as an

authentic expression of civic resistance and an opportunity for regional solidarity in the struggle against authoritarianism.

3. The Narrative of Neutrality and Institutional Caution – present in the discourse of the SDSS in Croatia and the NSD in Montenegro. These parties avoid direct confrontation, maintaining a balance between ethnic loyalty and the need to preserve institutional legitimacy within the states in which they operate.

4. The Narrative of Loyalty to Belgrade – most evident in the discourse of the NF and the DNP, where political positioning is shaped not by attitudes toward the protests themselves but by the degree of alignment and support for Aleksandar Vučić and Serbia's ruling structures.

Transnational Patterns

When the results are observed comparatively, three broader patterns of transnational resonance can be identified:

1. Homogenization of regime-loyal actors: Parties closely aligned with the authorities in Serbia (SNSD, US, DNP, NF) occupy almost identical positions, employing the same vocabulary and motifs such as stability, foreign influence and Serb unity.

2. Fragmentation of the opposition: Opposition parties in Republika Srpska and Montenegro lack a shared approach. While some (LZPR, parts of the SDS) demonstrate civic solidarity, others (PDP, NF) adapt their discourse to Belgrade's political narrative.

3. Peripheral autonomy: In Croatia, the SDSS and SNV maintain the highest degree of discursive independence, expressing moderate empathy toward the students but remaining outside the ideological confrontation with Belgrade.

Ideological Resonance and Political Opportunism

Empirical findings confirm that the reactions to the student protests in Serbia were not driven by normative commitments to democracy but rather by the position of each actor within the hierarchy of the transnational Serbian political space.

Ruling parties and their close allies responded defensively while marginalised opposition structures perceived the protests as an opportunity for political identification and the redefinition of their own legitimacy.

In other words, the students became a symbolic test of loyalty. For some, a threat to the established order, while for others an opportunity for moral reaffirmation.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that the student protests in Serbia during 2024–2025 served as a litmus test of political resonance within the so-called Serbian World, a network of political and symbolic ties linking Serbian parties and actors beyond the borders of the home state.

The reactions analysed in Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Croatia clearly demonstrate that transnational solidarity within this space is neither automatic nor normatively grounded but is instead primarily shaped by vertical relations of power and loyalty toward the political centre in Belgrade.

The results confirm the argument that transnational ethnonationalism within the contemporary Serbian political sphere is not grounded in cultural unity but in political consensus around authority. For most parties in Republika Srpska and Montenegro, political

alignment with Belgrade has an instrumental character which provides access to resources, legitimacy and protection within nationally divided societies. In this sense, the student protests, although formally an internal event within Serbia, become a symbolic threat to the stability of that relationship as they affirm alternative sources of political legitimacy such as spontaneous, civic and non-violent forms of mobilisation. (Brubaker 2011; Bieber 2020)

This dynamic demonstrates that the transnational dimension of ethnonationalism is not expressed through support for democracy in the “homeland” but rather through the defence of the existing regime as the guarantor of identity continuity. Consequently, the concept of the Serbian World emerges as a politico-communicative construct whose sustainability depends on the control of narratives and elite coordination, rather than on genuine social cohesion.

The reactions of political actors demonstrate that the resonance of political events in Serbia unfolds selectively and in accordance with local political contexts (Tarrow 2005; McAdam et al. 2001). In Republika Srpska, where the political system is deeply intertwined with Belgrade, resonance takes the form of reflexive loyalty as the ruling bloc automatically internalises the narrative of the “external enemy” while the opposition oscillates between value-based solidarity and institutional opportunism.

In Montenegro, resonance is partial and mediated: parties of the Serbian political corpus employ the rhetoric of defending Serbia to strengthen their own national credibility within the Montenegrin political arena.

In Croatia, by contrast, political resonance assumes a symbolic and ethical dimension as SDSS and SNV express empathy toward the social demands of students without entering into open political confrontation.

This differentiation indicates that the intensity of resonance is inversely proportional to the degree of institutional autonomy of Serbian communities—the greater the autonomy, the more moderate the response.

The student protests in Serbia represent a paradigmatic case of grassroots mobilisation that undermines the vertical model of political control. The reactions of political elites across the region display a defensive behavioural pattern in which civic energy is reframed as a security concern.

Ruling structures in Republika Srpska and Montenegro sought to “translate” the student protests into the familiar language of ethnonational loyalty, thereby neutralising them as a political threat. Conversely, oppositional actors with a pronounced civic orientation such as LZPR and parts of the SDS recognised in this student mobilisation a model with transnational emancipatory potential.

This tension between elite politics and grassroots politics reveals a deeper crisis of representation within the Serbian political sphere: civic resistance emerging from Belgrade is not perceived as a call for democratisation but rather as a potential assault on “national unity”. In this paradoxical dynamic, democracy itself becomes framed as an external challenge rather than an internal communal value.

Based on the comparative results, it can be concluded that within the so-called “Serbian political space” there is no genuine transnational political solidarity but rather a symbolic imitation of it. While ethnic unity is continually reaffirmed in public discourse, in practice it

amounts to loyalty to an authoritarian centre, leaving minimal room for autonomous political action.

In this sense, the protests functioned as a mirror reflecting the limits of that unity. Instead of jointly defending the right to free expression, most actors reacted through the prism of their own political interests.

In contrast, minority actors such as the SDSS and SNV in Croatia as well as oppositional structures in Republika Srpska and Montenegro, although numerically small, demonstrated the capacity for differentiated reasoning and a critical distance from the dominant discourse. This confirms that the fractures within transnational political unity are most visible on the periphery and among those who derive no benefit from reproducing the authority of the political centre.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the reactions of political actors belonging to the Serbian political corpus in Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Croatia to the student protests in Serbia during 2024–2025. By combining qualitative discourse analysis with a quantification of political stances, the research aimed to determine the extent to which these events generated political resonance across the region, and whether they revealed any form of genuine transnational solidarity within the so-called “Serbian World”.

The findings demonstrate that the reactions of political actors were highly asymmetrical and structured primarily along lines of political loyalty rather than according to democratic values or civic engagement principles.

Key Findings

The analysis identified three main behavioural patterns among political actors.

First, the ruling parties in Republika Srpska and Montenegro (SNSD, US, DNP and their allies) consistently delegitimised the student protests, framing them as a “colour revolution” and a threat to Serbia’s stability. These reactions reflect a high degree of dependence on the political centre in Belgrade and confirm the existence of a transnational political loyalty in which support for the regime is equated with the preservation of national unity.

Second, the opposition parties displayed significant fragmentation. While the LZPR consistently supported the protests, recognising them as a symbol of broader resistance to corruption and authoritarianism, the SDS oscillated between support and neutrality, facing internal divisions and political pressure. Meanwhile, the PDP and the NF, though formally opposition forces, gradually adopted the discourse of the ruling authorities in Belgrade, demonstrating how political opportunism in the regional context often outweighs ideological consistency.

Third, Serbian political actors in Croatia represented through SDSS and SNV maintained a moderate and diplomatic tone, expressing measured solidarity with the civic dimensions of the protests but avoiding confrontation with Serbia’s government. Their position illustrates that within institutional minority politics it is possible to preserve ethnic identity while maintaining distance from the political instrumentalisation of the “national question”.

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms that transnational ethnonationalism in the contemporary Serbian political sphere functions primarily as a mechanism of political control rather than as a form of cultural solidarity. The cross-border resonance of political

events in Serbia is selective and hierarchical. The intensity and tone of reactions are proportional to each actor's degree of dependence on Belgrade. This demonstrates that the so-called "Serbian World" operates as a communicative sphere of political loyalty and not as a democratic community of shared values.

At the same time, the concept of political resonance helps explain how the same event, in this case the student protests, can produce different interpretive effects depending on the local political context. In Republika Srpska and Montenegro, resonance takes the form of reflexive regime defence, while in Croatia it manifests as a symbolic expression of ethical empathy. This differentiation confirms that the transnational political space is not monolithic but rather interwoven with local calculations, ideological adaptations and institutional constraints.

Political and Social Implications

In practical terms, the research suggests that civic mobilisations in Serbia possess a limited emancipatory reach within the regional context as they are primarily perceived through the lens of regime stability rather than as a legitimate expression of political participation. Instead of fostering transnational solidarity among actors of the Serbian political corpus, the dominant model remains one of vertical loyalty toward Belgrade, which constrains the development of horizontal networks of civic initiatives.

At the same time, the cases of LZPR, segments of the SDS and actors such as the SDSS demonstrate that fragments of an alternative political imagination exist within the region — networks that, although marginal, reveal the possibility of a different form of solidarity grounded in democratic values rather than ethnic homogeneity. These examples indicate the potential of grassroots politics to open a space for the transnational transformation of political culture within the broader Serbian political sphere.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its systematic empirical foundation, the study is constrained by selective source availability and incomplete capture of informal (especially social media) communication. Future work should compare other regional ethno-national groups, track media narrative shifts during analogous events, and examine loyalty-solidarity patterns in protracted crises to deepen understanding of transnational resonance dynamics.

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