

Interview

Ivana Dinić*

Serbia's New Student Movement: A Conversation with Dubravka Stojanović¹

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Abstract: Students at all the major universities in Serbia have been staging blockades and protests for the past three months in what is regarded as the largest student uprising in Serbia's recent history. The protests were sparked by but far transcend the collapse of the recently renovated canopy of the Novi Sad train station, which claimed the lives of 15 people. Ivana Dinić spoke to Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Belgrade Dubravka Stojanović about the causes of this unprecedented manifestation of civic activism and about the impact the protests could have on Serbia's democratisation process. Professor Stojanović was active in the antiwar movement in the 1990s and has remained at the forefront of the democratic struggle in Serbia ever since.

Keywords: students; protest; Serbia; history; civic activism

Introduction

“A touch of tenderness for at least a million years” – this is one of the recurring anthems heard amongst the students protesting in Serbia for the past three months, protests that seem to have caught everyone by surprise. The lyrics are from the rock ballad *Za milion godina* (For a million years), which was Yugoslavia's contribution to the Band Aid campaign in the mid-1980s and was performed by an ad hoc band consisting of the most popular singers from all over the country.¹ This song being performed 40 years later, and a scarce three and a half decades after Yugoslavia's conflict-ridden and nationalism-fuelled disintegration, has a powerful symbolic meaning.

1 “Yu Rock Mission – A Million Years (Live Aid 1985).” Live Aid YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGjsN-PSzUo> (accessed 26 February 2025).

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University teachers and professors were the first to stand alongside their students as they occupied educational institutions and suspended classes, supporting them as they denounced the Serbian government for failing to take responsibility for the collapse of the recently renovated canopy of the Novi Sad railway station that killed 15 people on 1 November 2024. These very same educators had previously considered the new generation of students to be generally apolitical and primarily focused on their individual well-being. They did not expect such capacity for mobilisation. The students' self-organised rebellion seems all the more surprising given the current global political dynamics. With the world apparently paralyzed in the face of the democratic backsliding and rapid turn to the right seen throughout Europe and the United States (US),² the protesters in Serbia have been calling people to run, march, and “pump it up!” (*pumpaj!*) – because if the heart of a society stops pumping, immediate death follows. The student demonstrators have been urging “Serbia” to “feel something, literally anything” (*Oseti nešto, Srbijo, bilo šta, bukvalno bilo šta*), which is also the title of a video made and produced by the students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade – among the first to initiate the blockades in November 2024.³

By producing videos for social media, the students have been trying to compensate for the lack of reporting about the protests by the mainstream media, most of which are under government control. On 17 March 2025, the students published, on *YouTube* and other social media channels, an artfully assembled new version of Yugoslavia's mid-1980s Band Aid campaign contribution. They gave it the title “Blockade: For a million years” and accompany it with the following comment, which emphasizes their collectivity:

“A project of FDU [Faculty of Dramatic Arts] with students from many Belgrade faculties, which celebrates our togetherness during our nearly four months of protests across Belgrade and Serbia. We stand together despite the challenges. Following up on our ‘15 for 15’ protest, the largest protest in the history of Serbia, this is our message: we continue, always and everywhere, together.”⁴

The “15 for 15” protest refers to the 15 minutes of silence held two days earlier, on 15 March, in memory of the 15 victims of the collapse of the canopy of the Novi Sad railway station.

2 Williams, Zoe. “The New World Order Is Exactly What It Looks Like. Are We Too Frozen with Fear to Name It?” *The Guardian*. 17 February 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/feb/17/the-new-world-order-is-exactly-what-it-looks-like-are-we-too-frozen-with-fear-to-name-it> (accessed 26 February 2025).

3 “FDU Dnevnik EP 1: “Oseti nešto, Srbijo, bilo šta, bukvalno bilo šta.” *YouTube* channel *Svi u blokade: FDU*, 20 February 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcoIOYBR9_U&t=301s (accessed 26 February 2025).

4 “Blokada: Za milion godina.” *YouTube* channel *Svi u blokade: FDU*. 17 March 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LI1H_o8FsnU

The students' calls to mobilise and their four key demands have resonated throughout the different strata of Serbian society. The protestors have pushed for 1) all documents on the shady construction of the railway station's canopy to be published; 2) the criminal charges against students who were arrested at the beginning of the protests to be dropped; 3) those who attacked and seriously injured students by driving a car into a group of protestors to be prosecuted; and 4) the budgetary expenditures for higher education to be increased by 20 %. Not only have people in Serbia been seen crying tears of joy in response to the protests, they have also been providing the students with food, blankets, and medication to support their actions throughout Serbia, even in the smallest villages. What is more, teachers, professors, lawyers, agricultural workers, bus and taxi drivers, pensioners, and actors have all played an active part in the protests, which culminated, in December, in a massive public rally gathering approximately 100,000 people in Belgrade's Slavija Square.⁵ Spectacularly, citizens from almost all of the former Yugoslav republics – Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro – as well as members of the Serbian diaspora in Germany, for example, began to gather in their respective cities to support the students from afar. The scale and intensity of the protest movement is not only unprecedented in Serbia's recent history, but is one of the largest in the entire history of European student movements.⁶

The Serbian government is led by President Aleksandar Vučić of the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS). The party has been in power for 13 years. In 2019, Freedom House downgraded Serbia's status from a low score in the "free" category (73 of 100 points) to only "partly free" status (67/100) when it comes to political rights and civil liberties. The 2025 report shows that Serbia's score (56/100) has continued to deteriorate considerably since then.⁷ The Serbian government reacted to the protests in an authoritarian manner, denying responsibility for the Novi Sad incident and countering the student movement with a mix of direct violence and attempted bribery. They also labelled the protest a "colour revolution" in reference to the non-violent protest movements in the post-Soviet and East European space in the early 2000s, which were supported by foreign donors seeking to promote democracy.

Although nowadays it is Vučić's government rather than the protestors that has the support of both the "East" (Russia, China) and the "West" (EU, US), the insistence

5 Stojanović, Milica. "Mass Rally Blocks Serbia's Capital Demanding Accountability for Station Disaster." *Balkan Insight*. 23 December 2024. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/23/mass-rally-blocks-serbias-capital-demanding-accountability-for-station-disaster/> (accessed 26 February 2025).

6 For a chronology of the events see Dinev, Ivaylo. "The Student Revolt in Serbia: Vučić's Nemesis?" *ZOIS Spotlight 2* (2025). 29 January 2025. <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/the-student-revolt-in-serbia-vucics-nemesis> (accessed 26 February 2025).

7 "Freedom in the World 2019: Serbia." Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2019>; "Freedom in the World 2025: Serbia." Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2025> (accessed 27 February 2025).

that the protests are being coordinated by foreign intelligence services resembled the technique used to crush dissent under Slobodan Milošević's nationalist government in the 1990s. Between 1998 and 2000, Vučić served as minister of information under Milošević, until, in October 2000, the latter was ousted from power by a combination of citizen protests and a strong political coalition in opposition (Vladisavljević 2016).

On 28 January 2025, bowing to enormous public pressure after, the day before, students were severely beaten by attackers emerging from the premises of the SNS in Novi Sad, Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned, as did the mayor of Novi Sad *Milan Đurić*, and some of the student demands gradually started to be met.⁸ The key demand to make the documentation about the construction of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad public remains unfulfilled, however. By publishing this information, the government would run the risk of revealing an assumed web of connections between the governing party, rampant corruption, the abandonment of construction control procedures, the political pressure to open the new train station before it was completed, and the dubious cooperation with the Chinese companies who executed the work, as well as the Hungarian company who supervised the construction. And so the students continue their blockades. They refuse to cooperate with political parties, either from the government or the opposition, and are calling upon the respective state institutions to do their job. They insist that their demands are not against the current regime per se, but against a system in which corruption has been claiming people's lives on a daily basis, no matter what party is in power. They have thus, astutely, "recognised the trap of [political] division" and focused on the rule of law.⁹

It is important to start unpacking some of the specific details of the movement while the protests are still ongoing, for at least two reasons. The first is the rather meagre coverage of the events in Serbia in the international media, which has rarely gone beyond the daily news. Interested citizens and scholars worldwide have found it difficult to familiarise themselves with the multilayered causes and deeper roots of the students' struggle. The second reason to look at the movement in more detail is to support the students of Belgrade's Faculty of Philosophy who have transformed one of their classrooms into an archive of the events and started collecting and classifying relevant documents and voices. They have clearly understood how important it is to preserve the authentic data and sources of the moment.

There is hardly a more competent interlocutor and partner to create one such document than Dubravka Stojanović, Professor of Contemporary History at the

8 Rujević, Nemanja. "Serbia Protests: What's Next After Prime Minister Resigns?" *Deutsche Welle*. 28 January 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/serbia-protests-whats-next-after-prime-minister-resigns/a-71438997> (accessed 26 February 2025).

9 Baccini, Federico. "Serbia: The EU and the Responsibility to Support Student Protests." *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa*. 30 January 2025. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Serbia/Serbia-the-EU-and-the-responsibility-to-support-student-protests-235879> (accessed 26 February 2025).

University of Belgrade. Professor Stojanović has published extensively on Serbian and European history, covering the period since the 19th century, focusing on topics such as modernisation, democratisation, and elites (e.g. Stojanović 2022, 2008, 2003, 1998), as well as nationalism, specifically since the 1990s (e.g. Stojanović and Kamberović 2021; Stojanović 2017; 2000). In addition, she has, for many years, worked in the field of textbook analysis and comparison as well as the training of history teachers (e.g. Stojanović 2023, 2023a, 2009, 2004).

Equally significant is Professor Stojanović's participation in peace activism on the streets of Belgrade dating back to the first antiwar protests in Yugoslavia during the 1990s. The years between the 1980s and the 1990s were her formative years as a historian. From this, she learned with particular intensity how difficult – and how important – it is to keep emotions and opinions in check when researching history by taking all levels of society into consideration, striving for the most comprehensive picture possible on the basis of all available sources, while remaining conscious of the partiality and fragmentation of those sources as well as of the politicisation they may undergo in the very archives where they are maintained (Stojanović 2021).

A Conversation with Dubravka Stojanović

Ivana Dinić (ID): In 2021, you contributed a piece to this journal about being a trainee historian in Belgrade in the late 1980s (Stojanović 2021). The article conveys in a very lively manner not only what was happening under the rule of Slobodan Milošević at the time but also how it felt. Can you describe what it felt like to be a historian back then compared to what it feels like now? What are the parallels, if any, between the reasons and motives for resistance and protest back then and today?

Dubravka Stojanović (DS): One of my professional “problems” has been that the questions I have dealt with as a historian were constantly opened up in the present, in my personal life. I was researching the creation of Yugoslavia, and then witnessed Yugoslavia falling apart. I was interested in the integration of Kosovo into the Serbian state in 1912–1913, then Kosovo declared independence. I was dealing with the urbanisation of Belgrade, and observed the process of deurbanisation in the very same city. I have been dealing with globalisation, and that too is falling apart before our eyes. For the past 30 years, I have been working on making history textbooks better, and they have got worse and worse. This is a tragic balance.

One of the topics I have been particularly concerned with is the democratisation of Serbia. This was the focus of my doctorate in the 1990s, which dealt with the period regarded as the “golden age” of Serbian democracy (1903–1914), during the reign of King Petar Karađorđević. While I was writing my thesis, under Milošević, it did not look as

though democracy would ever return, so that I could study the question in peace, at a distance. However, there was a regime change in Serbia in 2000, Milošević was overthrown, and the democratic parties of the opposition came to power. My doctorate started to take shape before my eyes, so to speak. Or to be more precise, the key problems of democratisation that were so visible in my historical research at the beginning of the 20th century very quickly made their presence known at the beginning of the new century as well. And it is an uncomfortable feeling when, as a historian, you recognise what is happening, you know what the causes are, and how it ends. Much like when a doctor knows the history of an illness. The medic can prescribe medication, the historian can write and speak, but when it comes to a serious illness – neither can help.

And it was these fundamental problems with democratisation that saw Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić become an autocracy again. So once again I've got my hands full! This, of course, does not mean that Serbs are genetically predestined to be autocrats or that Serbian society as a whole is autocratic per se, but rather that there are certain problems in that society that lead to the creation of a party-state system. And the party state gradually suppresses all means of articulating different opinions, which must eventually be taken to the streets. Protests were more frequent in Milošević's time because the situation was more severe with wars, sanctions, and hyperinflation. Vučić has now successfully corrupted important parts of society and has won international support, which taken together has numbed society.

But the collapse of the canopy in Novi Sad was the catalyst for the rebellion. Even those employed in primary and secondary education or farmers and pensioners who have been listening to Vučić's promises for years, but in the end got nothing, are now protesting. This unscrupulous policy culminated in the loss of 15 human lives – an excessively high price to pay. This is why the current movement is so broad and strong.

ID: You were an active member of the antiwar movement in the 1990s. Was the support for the protests back then different from the support students are receiving now? And how are today's protests logistically and organisationally distinct from those of the 1990s?

DS: There are huge differences – these protests are incomparable with any earlier ones. Previously, there was always a specific political impetus. The student protests in 1992 were over the start of the war in Bosnia and the sanctions imposed on Serbia by the United Nations. The biggest protests, which went on every day for more than three months from 1996 to 1997, were because Milošević had committed electoral fraud in the local elections. As a result, the students' demands were concentrated on these specific political issues. At that time, the opposition was far more powerful, so in addition to student protests, there were also protests by the opposition. Today's opposition has no authority, and this is a problem for the current protests. This is why the citizens spontaneously organised themselves in support of the students, a move that proved to

be unbelievably creative, because the citizens themselves now decide on the form of protest. For example, one day actors were “marching” in the streets and the citizens joined them to create a huge protest “river”. Or another example is the citizens providing support on one of the most sensitive issues at the moment – the suspension of the work of primary and secondary schools initiated by secondary school graduates, joined by the teachers who interrupted their classes in solidarity with the students. The enormous pressure the government has exerted on the teachers to resume work resulted in a powerful movement of parents blocking school entrances so that teachers would not be subjected to educational inspections. So now we have parents defending the teachers who have closed the schools. This was unthinkable before.

What is also different about these protests is how they are organised. More specifically, the students use direct democracy. Student plenums take place at each faculty for several hours a day, adhering to a well-prepared agenda and a precisely defined length timed with a large stopwatch displayed on a screen. Once the plenum is over, students withdraw to their working groups, which are located in different classrooms and discuss what was voted on in more detail. The next morning, the working groups then prepare material for the new plenum. At the end, everything is discussed and adopted by the general plenum that takes place in the building of the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade, which has also been occupied. Classrooms have been rearranged, with some becoming storehouses, others dormitories, still others being transformed into medical stations and psychological counselling centres, while the history students have created an archive to store and classify all documents and objects. We often joke about handing the building over to students even after the blockades are over, because the toilets have never been so well equipped – there are toothbrushes and toothpaste, shaving kits, various types of wet wipes and tissues, soaps...

An important difference between the current protests and all the previous ones is that these do not have a leader. In the past, there were always student leaders who, as a rule, immediately entered politics once the protests were over, thus losing the legitimacy they had gained. This time, there is no leader. Different student representatives appear at the television studios each time, and our students from the Faculty of Philosophy even gave their statements anonymously because they were speaking on behalf of the plenum. This is why Aleksandar Vučić cannot even delegitimise the movement because he does not have anyone specific to focus on. Someone has even said – Vučić does not know what to do with these young people because they are from a generation that grew up playing video games – they know how games work.

The last major difference is that this generation of students refuses to cooperate with any political parties or other organizations. On the one hand, this is a good choice, because it makes them acceptable to a much wider circle of citizens, even those who do not support the opposition or who up until yesterday had voted for Vučić. This enables the student movement to maintain its purity and strong ethics. On

the other hand, however, it is not clear how they can achieve a change of government without political organisations. This is the key question at the moment.

ID: One of the slogans seen on a protest banner in Germany in support of the current student movement was: “You call it stability; we call it dictatorship!” This can be also interpreted as a message to the current international community, particularly the European Union and Germany, which until recently were very cautious about expressing support for the student protests. To what extent is the reaction of the international community different than in the 1990s? And how is the current global balance of power – from Donald Trump in the United States to similar phenomena throughout Europe – impacting the success of the protests that seem to stand in stark contrast to current political trends?

DS: Unlike in the 1990s, the international community is now a part of the problem, not the solution. Trump is everything Vučić would like to be, so, among the opposition in Serbia as well as in Europe, the United States as it is right now should be perceived as an opponent, not as an ally. This is a tectonic shift because since the First World War, with a couple of short breaks, the Atlantic alliance has been a source of strength for Europe.

And in the midst of this dramatic situation, the EU seems not to understand a thing about the Balkans. It missed the opportunity to integrate the region which arose during the last quarter of the century, and thus, in the heart of Europe, opened up a space for the dangerous influences of various competing forces. This was very short-sighted. The EU emphasised that integration was complicated, that it was expensive. It was both complicated and expensive to integrate the whole of Central Eastern Europe, then Bulgaria and Romania, not to mention how much more complicated and expensive it is to integrate the Balkans now with Russia, China, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia all very present in the region.

Added to the great disappointment of not being integrated into the EU was the politics of stabilitocracy, which saw support for local authoritarian leaders in the name of a supposed guarantee of stability for the region. Not to mention the clear neocolonial attitude reflected in the notion that for us in the Balkans autocracy is the solution, while for Europe it is democracy. We have witnessed just how inaccurate this position is in the recent elections in many EU countries which saw undemocratic and far-right parties come out on top, not to mention Brexit and Trump. Not only do the authoritarian leaders in these countries bring about domestic conflicts by abolishing all means of articulating alternatives and discontent, but they are also dangerous for the region. This is because they use nationalism to consolidate and maintain their power, trying to solve internal problems by creating external crises, which in the case of Serbia is a great danger for Bosnia, Kosovo, and even Montenegro. However, the EU still appears to be blind to the protests in Serbia, which involve students, farmers, teachers, lawyers,

artists ... and continues to support Vučić instead. This approach has been scandalous since the beginning and has turned many once strongly pro-European people away from Europe. The region now finds itself sandwiched between Trump and Putin, and Brussels seriously seems to be considering leaving it to them to deal with the Balkans. Too many mistakes have been made in this regard.

Joking bitterly, we used to say that this wave of neofascism was initiated by us, in Serbia, with the arrival of Milošević to power in the late 1980s. At the time, this was quite in contrast to the global trends reflected in the fall of the Berlin Wall, the unification of Europe, and the American New World Order, when it was believed that the liberal ideology had definitely won. I have written several times that we were the avant-garde back then, as everybody is imitating us today!

Now we are being the avant-garde again, but in a much brighter sense. Today's protests in Serbia are in complete contradiction to political trends worldwide. As the authoritarian right wins more and more elections, and democracy suffers unprecedented blows, on the streets of Serbia, we have a new generation fighting for everything Trump is against – the separation of powers, the strengthening of institutions, a more just welfare state, solidarity ... So, in a moment of yet more great disappointment in the EU, all we have left is to joke bitterly that we are still the avant-garde and the rest of the world will come to support the values which we are fighting for today.

ID: Unlike the international community, Serbia's neighbouring countries almost immediately started organising support rallies for the Serbian students. This has happened in Zagreb, Rijeka, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Podgorica, Banja Luka... One of the slogans seen in Rijeka read *Ko nas bre pomiri?! (Who in the world managed to reconcile us?!)* and one of the songs being played at most of the protests is *Za milion godina (For a million years)* – the Yugoslav contribution to the Band Aid campaign in the 1980s, performed by singers from the whole of Yugoslavia. How has the current student movement contributed to regional reconciliation?

DS: This is very exciting. Especially to those of us who have never accepted that the disintegration of Yugoslavia was “natural”. It was the ideological construction of European anticommunists and domestic nationalists, who collectively referred to this state as an “artificial” creation. Yugoslavia was not a mere communist project, rather an idea that arose in the final decades of the 19th century based on the concepts of German and Italian unification. Some of the research I have done on “everyday Yugoslavism” has shown the deep, not exclusively political foundations of the state that emerged in 1918. In the final years of the 19th century, the press reported extensively on the welcoming ceremonies for Croatian artists in Belgrade, the exaltation that followed their performances, crowded squares and standing ovations. Or, for example, on the welcome, accompanied by embraces and kisses,

given to Slovenian students who came to Kragujevac to help the population that was threatened by floods. The entire year of 1904, in which the Serbian King Peter was crowned, was marked by events with “Yugoslav” in their name: The Yugoslav Exhibition, the Congress of Yugoslav Journalists, the Congress of Yugoslav Youth, the Congress of Yugoslav Teachers... Up until that year, all Serbian political parties had proclaimed the creation of Yugoslavia as their goal. Thus, the state that emerged after the dissolution of Austria-Hungary was not simply a “Versailles creation” but was based on social and political foundations that had been ready for a long time. It arose in response to the need of these societies to escape their crampedness, localism, and provincialism. One of my favourite quotes describing this need for a common state is by one of its ideologues, professor and linguist Ljuba Stojanović: “For us, Yugoslavia was the opening of a window!”

Many said, at the beginning of the 1990s, that if you blew a little harder, Yugoslavia would instantly collapse. This was something that was first heard in 1941 and then repeated in 1991. From these two historical moments, people even drew conclusions about this being some kind of destiny, as though history ran over Yugoslavia every 50 years and brought about its collapse. I have always claimed the exact opposite. In 1941, Hitler and his allies forcibly divided Yugoslavia, which provoked a strong partisan counter-movement whose main policy was in fact the restoration of Yugoslavia. The wars of the 1990s showed how much violence, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and ultimately genocide it would take for the country to disintegrate.

If we take such a historical analysis as our starting point, then today’s support for Serbian students in the states created by the breakup of Yugoslavia becomes easier to explain. This year marks 30 years since the end of the war in Croatia and Bosnia. This is a very long period in which the states that emerged after the dissolution of Yugoslavia have been able to demonstrate their economic and political capacities. The results are mostly poor. Slovenia and Croatia have made the most of the liberal market reforms by joining the EU. But the dissatisfaction is obviously great, especially in Croatia. There is also a party state, boundless corruption, and the election results are known in advance. Bosnia-Herzegovina is falling apart largely due to the actions of the leadership of Republika Srpska, but the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is not functioning either. Montenegro is in a state of constant crisis and division. Macedonia is stagnating or backsliding. So, in light of all this – what have these countries achieved? In the past, nationalists could claim that they were unable to thrive because of Yugoslavia – now it is clear how untrue this was. Yugoslavia struggled to function due to much deeper social and political issues, and these were certainly not solved by its disintegration!

The student movement in Serbia has raised the very issues that plague all post-Yugoslav societies. Thus, the support seen throughout the former Yugoslavia was not expressed out of mere solidarity, but came from an in-depth understanding of common problems. The ideas of community that were formed before Yugoslavia came into

existence persisted after its bloody disintegration – in the new generation. It turned out that these ideas are still necessary today because the societies of small states are too weak to fight alone. Hence the slogan “One World, One Struggle”, because this struggle requires unity and solidarity. In other words, it requires values contrary to the nationalism that has divided us.

ID: Speaking of music – what are your thoughts on the songs being played during the protests? There is a mixture of genres, from the abovementioned YU Rock Mission Band Aid song and the song by the Yugoslav rock'n'roll band EKV, *Zemlja* (Country), to the student anthem *Gaudeamus Igitur*, to the Italian antifascist anthem *Bella Ciao*, but also including *Vostani Serbie* (Rise up, Serbia), which was the anthem of the First Serbian Uprising in 1804. Can you describe the predominant sentiment of these protests based on the songs played?

DS: It is indeed an interesting mix. Folk music is also being played, *Izadi, mala* (“Come outside, darling”), for example. The students now are attempting to, as they say, be apolitical and not to open up deep political divisions. This can also be seen in the variety of protest songs, through which they have shown that *Bella Ciao* and *Vostani Serbie*, whose text Dositej Obradović wrote in 1804 in honour of the First Serbian Uprising and which bears a national symbol, can be sung together. But the music they have chosen is first and foremost strongly symbolic and carries the messages that are crucial for this protest. By quoting EKV's lyrics, “This is a country for us, this is a country for all our children”, for instance, students are saying that they will no longer give up this country to usurpers who seek to destroy it, and that they will no longer flee, but will fight for it. This is a huge change compared to the previous generations who adopted the slogan – “just graduate and emigrate”. “For a million years” was, as you say, the Yugoslav contribution to Band Aid in the 1980s, but the point is that it was sung by the most famous singers from all Yugoslav backgrounds – it is quintessentially Yugoslav. It was performed by an ad hoc band called “YU Rock Mission”, and one of the key lyrics in the chorus says: “Don't you ever be afraid/Love is stronger/The children in us know everything/The right path to new dreams”, which perfectly describes the atmosphere in Serbia over the past three months.

Currently, the most popular song in the protests is the remastered version of *Mi plešemo* (We are dancing) by the famous Croatian New Wave band Prljavo kazalište, except that now the students are singing – “We are pumping!” (*Mi pumpamo!*) – and this phrase has become the slogan of the movement. Another one of the most important songs is Đorđe Balašević's *Ne lomite mi bagrenje* (Don't break my locust trees). One of the verses of this song is: “There wouldn't be all this blood if everything was according to the law”. Balašević, an internationally known Serbian singer and songwriter from Novi Sad, was accused of writing the song during a major wave of nationalism in Serbia in the late 1980s as an expression of protest against the situation faced by Serbs in Kosovo, who

it was claimed at the time were not sufficiently protected by law. Now these words have acquired a completely new meaning because, with students' demand for accountability for the Novi Sad deaths, one of the main goals of these protests is the rule of law. This is such a strong message that when Croatian MEP Gordan Bosanac, in an attempt to awaken the bureaucratised European Parliament, finished his brilliant speech with the verse "don't break my locust trees",¹⁰ everyone in the former Yugoslavia knew this was their new cry. A cry against lawlessness, the mafia, corruption... A cry for justice.

ID: In the interview you gave to the Serbian weekly *Nedeljnik*,¹¹ you pointed out that the biggest fear within any protest movement is the emergence of new leaders with old nationalist ideas and underlined that nationalism as an ideology is still prevalent in the region. Do you see these protests as a chance to take a different path based on what we have seen so far?

DS: The apolitical nature of this protest has made it possible to attract citizens who would otherwise not support the opposition, and probably also those who previously supported the government. The marches students in Serbia have been undertaking in recent weeks, covering hundreds of kilometres, have led to a kind of collective enthusiasm. Entire villages have been accompanying the students on their routes, bringing them food and embracing them. It is almost like a parareligious ritual. This is extremely important for changing public opinion, which has been captured due to the state having almost complete control of the media. The students have countered this state of affairs by positioning themselves above the political parties, enabling them to gain this kind of trust and legitimacy. According to the latest public opinion polls, as many as 80 % of the citizens support the students.¹²

But the danger is that this movement will either die out because it does not have a political focus or that it will be taken over by individuals who are even more to the right of the political spectrum than Vučić, and who would advocate an end to EU integration and the policy of freedom of movement, a war on Kosovo, the secession of Republika Srpska from Bosnia-Herzegovina, and so on. Strong dissatisfaction can be

¹⁰ "Evroposlanik iz Hrvatske: Naš zadatak je da ne damo autokratama da lome bagrenje." *N1*. 19 February 2025. [https://n1info.rs/vesti/evroposlanik-iz-hrvatske-nas-zadatak-je-da-ne-damo-autokratama-da-lome-bagrenje/\(accessed 26 February 2025\)](https://n1info.rs/vesti/evroposlanik-iz-hrvatske-nas-zadatak-je-da-ne-damo-autokratama-da-lome-bagrenje/(accessed%2026%20February%202025)).

¹¹ Rosić, Branko. "Ova vlast negira osnovne ljudske vrednosti, zato je studentski pokret tako uspešan i moćan: Dubravka Stojanović za novi broj *Nedeljnika*." *Nedeljnik*. 30 January 2025. [https://www.nedeljnik.rs/ova-vlast-negira-osnovne-ljudske-vrednosti-zato-je-studentski-pokret-tako-uspesan-i-mocan-dubravka-stojanovic-za-novi-broj-nedeljnika/\(accessed 26 February 2025\)](https://www.nedeljnik.rs/ova-vlast-negira-osnovne-ljudske-vrednosti-zato-je-studentski-pokret-tako-uspesan-i-mocan-dubravka-stojanovic-za-novi-broj-nedeljnika/(accessed%2026%20February%202025)).

¹² "Istraživanje koje Vučić ne želi da vidi: Otkriveno koliko građana podržava studentske proteste – brojka je ogromna." *N1*. 19 February 2025. [https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/istrazivanje-koje-vucic-ne-zeli-da-vidi-otkriveno-koliko-gradjana-podrzava-studentske-proteste-brojka-je-ogromna/\(accessed 26 February 2025\)](https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/istrazivanje-koje-vucic-ne-zeli-da-vidi-otkriveno-koliko-gradjana-podrzava-studentske-proteste-brojka-je-ogromna/(accessed%2026%20February%202025)).

exploited, and the fact that for more than 40 years there has been a ruling nationalist ideology in Serbia with no more viable alternative opens the space for such a solution.

ID: Finally, one question about the future – what would you see as the biggest success or victory of the protests? Would you describe their impact as more “cathartic” and spiritual in the sense that some hope has been awakened that political change is still possible or that the level of fear in society has decreased? Or do you also think there have been some very practical contributions regarding how to shape the future of universities and how citizens can organise themselves through more direct democracy – as in the case of the *Pobunjeni univerzitet* (University in rebellion) initiative? Also, how do you view the recent proposal made by a number of prominent members of civil society on the forming of a temporary, transitional government to fulfil all the students’ demands and enable fair conditions for holding new elections?

DS: Many share the view that a temporary, expert government would be the only solution at this point in time. It would have to liberate the media and judiciary and organise free elections. Without these steps there can be no fundamental political shift. However, the students rejected the idea of a transitional government because they are persisting with their demands. Nevertheless, the student movement has already achieved a lot. We have got a new, mature generation of young people who will not give up their fight and who are led by the values of common good. Remember that the 1968 student protests in Belgrade lasted six days in June, but a generation emerged that went on to carry out all the cultural and political changes that were called for here, despite the fact that they had been defeated in 1968. De Gaulle, too, defeated the students in 1968, but lost the referendum the following year and withdrew from power.

With the new generation, we also got new institutions. You mention *Pobunjeni univerzitet* (University in rebellion). This was initiated by us at the Faculty of Philosophy as, I hope, a permanent platform that will bring together professors from all universities across Serbia and strengthen their struggle in the future, no matter what government is in power. Primary and secondary school teachers denounced the submissiveness of their four unions to the country’s leadership. Without obtaining prior consent from their respective members, the unions had agreed to the government’s proposal to introduce certain pay rises in return for an end to all strikes. In response, the teachers created an independent body called PULS, which now leads the protests and organises the suspension of classes. Students joined forces with farmers who, along with their tractors, now regularly stand guard over the student protests, protecting them from the bullies close to the government. These scenes are memorable and important for the awakening of all groups in society. Professors and students, who had previously been distanced from real academic discussions by the Bologna system, which resulted in students being dedicated to merely collecting credits, have now returned to the big societal debates. They have discovered a new closeness, support, and trust. So, I want to believe that whatever the political result

might be right now, what will remain are these much deeper societal changes that will prevent authoritarianism from surviving, and ultimately from being revived.

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Bionote

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