

AD HOC MECHANISM ON THE CURRENT STATE AND THREATS TO HUMAN SECURITY,  
HUMAN RIGHTS, AND FREEDOMS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

**A REPORT ON THE CURRENT STATE  
AND THREATS TO HUMAN SECURITY,  
HUMAN RIGHTS, AND FREEDOMS  
IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

*Reporting Period: January 15 – March 31, 2025*

BELGRADE, April 15, 2025

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# INTRODUCTION

*The Ad Hoc Mechanism for Reporting on the Current State of Human Security in Serbia* is an expert-driven initiative, established on January 22, 2025, in Belgrade.\*

The goals of the *Ad Hoc Mechanism* monitoring are to systematically collect, analyze, and inform the public about the current state and threats to human security, human rights, and freedoms in Serbia. The findings for the given period are presented to domestic and international audiences in the corresponding *Ad Hoc Mechanism Report*.

This **Report on the current state of human security, human rights, and freedoms in the Republic of Serbia** covers the period from **January 15 to March 31, 2025**.

The *Report* is the result of monitoring and analysis of the causes, actors, and consequences of ongoing events such as protests, unrest, and riots, as well as the lack of action of state authorities and conduct of all involved parties – with a particular focus on the respect for human rights, freedoms, and security of citizens. It also includes data and analysis of patterns and actions that pose a risk of strengthening the radicalization of political activity, as well as violent extremism.

*The Report* addresses the practice of using existing mechanisms to monitor and inform both the domestic and international public and institutions about threats to human rights and freedoms, the rise of radicalization in public and political life, as well as incidents of violence and torture. It also addresses the standards of the Council of Europe, the UN, and the European Commission. Special attention is given to the actors involved and consequences of using emergency mechanisms.

*The Ad Hoc Mechanism* applies a multidisciplinary methodology in its research and analysis of the events and data under observation. The approach includes methods of data collection, classification, and analysis. Sources of information are publicly available documents, official statements, statistical reports, and analyses of state institutions, particularly: the president of the Republic; national, provincial, and local assemblies; the Government of Serbia and the Government of Vojvodina; mayors and, when necessary, other levels of executive power; judicial institutions: courts; public prosecution; the Ministry of Internal Affairs, especially the police, gendarmerie, and BIA; the General Staff of the Serbian Armed Forces, the Military Security Agency (VBA), and the Military Intelligence Agency (VOS); the Constitutional Court of Serbia; independent state institutions (the Protector of Citizens – Ombudsman, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, the Anti-Corruption Agency, the Commissioner for Protection of Equality); key social and political players (citizen and student movements, civil society organizations and initiatives, trade unions, the Serbian Orthodox Church, NGOs); electronic and

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\* Members of the of the *Ad hoc mechanism* expert group: Prof. Dr. Đorđe Alempijević (forensics), Sonja Biserko (coordinator), Ognjen Gogić (media and public narrative), Prof. Dr. Dušan Janjić (human security), lawyer Miloš Janković (human rights and freedoms), Jovan Krstić (prosecution activities), and Prof. Dr. Stevan Lilić (editor-in-chief)

print media; political organizations (political parties of the ruling coalition, parliamentary opposition parties and non-parliamentary parties, political movements, and initiatives).

*The Ad Hoc Mechanism* applied a multidisciplinary methodology for researching and interpreting data and events subject to monitoring and reporting. The process included the collection, classification, and analysis of data. Sources of information included publicly available documents, statements, statistical reports, and analyses from government institutions—specifically, the President of the Republic of Serbia; national, provincial, city, and municipal assemblies; the Government of Serbia and the Government of Vojvodina; mayors; and, when necessary, other levels of executive authority. Judicial institutions were also included, such as courts and public prosecution, as well as the Ministry of the Interior, particularly the police, gendarmerie, and the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA); the General Staff of the Serbian Armed Forces, the Military Security Agency (VBA), and the Military Intelligence Agency (VOS). The Constitutional Court of Serbia and independent state institutions were also part of the data sources—namely, the Protector of Citizens (Ombudsman), the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, the Anti-Corruption Agency, and the Commissioner for Protection of Equality. Additionally, the analysis took into account the actions of key social and political payers, including civil and student movements, civil society organizations and initiatives, trade unions, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and NGOs, as well as electronic and print media; political organizations, including ruling coalition parties, parliamentary opposition parties, non-parliamentary parties, and various political movements, and initiatives. All sources were systematized and processed according to the EUROSTAT methodology.

In the analysis of social and historical context, expert literature (monographs, articles, and policy papers – analyses, etc.) was consulted; relevant domestic and international documents; data from empirical research, as well as relevant sources from the media (both electronic and print). A multidisciplinary approach was applied in processing these sources, primarily utilizing political science, legal, sociological, and medical research methods.

In an effort to establish a methodological and thematic framework for comprehensive consideration of the issues relevant for monitoring, reporting, and preparation of the *Report*, a multidisciplinary approach was applied. The focus of the analysis is on the most important topics necessary for understanding the condition and trends regarding human security, human rights, and freedoms in Serbia.

## PART ONE: SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

The situation in Serbia, at the beginning of 2025, is marked by a structural crisis - deep social, primarily economic and socio-political crisis, characterized by rapid impoverishment of the broadest segments of society, now also affecting the middle class. At the same time, there is a swift accumulation of wealth among those connected to public infrastructure and private construction projects. Money laundering is significantly present in the financing of construction works.

Endemic corruption and the intertwining between organized crime and parts of the government have become a major driver of social stratification in Serbia. This is confirmed by data showing that, since 2014, when SNS established a monopoly over the control of public wealth and sociopolitical power – until 2023, Serbia has fallen to 104<sup>th</sup> place out of 180 countries<sup>1</sup>, according to Transparency International. The scale of corruption during these 13 years of rule is estimated at tens of billions of Euros. The absence of organized efforts, mechanisms, and institutional capacity to manage growing social inequality directly undermines human security of the majority of population.

A major cause of instability and insecurity is the conduct of the government and the media under its control. Current leadership lacks the capacity to effectively manage the crisis, stop the paralysis of institutions, break the media monopoly of authoritarian rule, create conditions for democratic elections, and allow for a shift of power.

The government's poor crisis management has shaken public trust. On top of that, internal divisions and the disintegration of the ruling coalition have caused government actions to directly deepen the crisis and threaten people's security. This includes, the use of propaganda and media to spread fear, insecurity, and promote intolerance, hate speech, and violence. Key actors in the destabilization and insecurity are various para-police and party-linked (so-called 'ultra' fan) groups. These groups play a leading role in creating an atmosphere of fear and violence, and they directly commit acts of violence against citizens and political opponents of the authoritarian government. Tolerating, and even encouraging their violence and involvement at all levels of government, from local to national, puts both public and national security at risk.

Since November 1, 2024, when the canopy collapsed at the railway station in Novi Sad, the gap between the government and citizens has grown deeper. Public distrust in the government's actions and policies has increased.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, both state and para-state violence against citizens has been on the rise. The government frequently uses emergency measures (such as deploying special police units, gendarmerie, and intelligence agency resources), even though a state of emergency has not been officially declared in line with

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<sup>1</sup> [Srdjan Cvijic](https://balkaninsight.com/2025/02/07/serbia-rising-student-protests-signal-beginning-of-end-of-vucic-rule), BIRN, Belgrade, February 7, 2025 08:12 (<https://balkaninsight.com/2025/02/07/serbia-rising-student-protests-signal-beginning-of-end-of-vucic-rule>).

<sup>2</sup> The increase in the number of citizens is also indicated by the fact that in March there were 1,697 public protests in 378 locations (towns and villages) across Serbia. (*in Serbian*), (<https://crt.rs/najmanje-1697-protesta-u-martu>).

Serbian laws (law on emergency situations, and the law on state of emergency), Serbian constitution or international standards. The actions of authorities, especially those of the Serbian president and government-controlled media, are a key factor in escalating political and social tensions, increasing security risks, and threatening the security, rights, and freedoms of citizens in Serbia.

In an effort to strengthen authoritarian rule, the government has created conditions that limit access to decision-making and public space for the opposition, dissenters, and a large number of citizens. As a result, many have turned to "taking to the streets" — through protests, strikes, blockades, and other forms of peaceful resistance — and started building alternative (professional, sector-based, and other) organizations and institutions. This wave of activism empowers citizens and shrinks the government's space for public control. Consequently, more and more people are becoming active in opposing the government. This trend began between 2020 and 2024 and grew stronger after November 2024.<sup>3</sup> A new social force has emerged in public life, with strong energy to mobilize and build solidarity among a large number of citizens — especially those unhappy with the current situation and government. The strongest opposition comes from the middle class and workers, particularly employees in public companies and institutions. They have formed a value-based and interest-driven alliance of many horizontal structures, which now lead the citizens' movement against authoritarian rule.

Efforts by the government to counter this trend have been unsuccessful. This is mainly because the top leadership, especially president Vučić, in an effort to avoid facing reality and the causes of the situation – and thus the government's and his own responsibility for the current state of Serbia – tries to shift public attention to external "enemies". The government follows a conspiracy theory, calling it a "color revolution." In response to the "color revolution", the government has turned to propaganda, corruption, and displays of force.

A turning point came on March 15, 2025, in Belgrade. During a protest of several hundred thousand people, the government responded by violating numerous laws, using excessive force, and even illegal methods of violence. This reaction discredited the government and became an obstacle to peacefully resolving the crisis in Serbia. The government took on the responsibility to avoid armed conflict and direct confrontations with protesting citizens. It is the government's duty to take legal action to control the presence and activities of para-military and para-police forces. What is especially worrying is that many of these groups are connected to organized crime, including narcotics trade.<sup>4</sup>

Since March 15, 2025, a new phase of the crisis in Serbia has begun. The country has been facing a serious security risk. This shift was also marked by a change in how the international community views the crisis. After months of ignoring student and citizen protests against the government, foreign politicians and officials - especially from the West and Russia – have started to speak out more. Based on reactions in print and electronic media, the message is clear: supporting Aleksandar Vučić's "stabilitocracy" is no longer seen as a guarantee of stability and security in Serbia or the region.<sup>5</sup>

Given the importance of the events of March 15, 2025, for the current situation and the future of human security, the main findings of this case study are presented in the chapter: ***Case Study: March 15, 2025 – The Largest Civic Protest in Serbia's History.***

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<sup>3</sup> The chronology of events and activities of the student-civil movement is presented in the Appendix to this Report.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/u-posljednja-dva-tjedna-dva-puta-razgovarali-sef-natoa-i-vucic-zasto/2653266.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/u-posljednja-dva-tjedna-dva-puta-razgovarali-sef-natoa-i-vucic-zasto/2653266.aspx>.

## PART TWO: GOALS AND OUTCOMES OF THE CONDUCT OF KEY SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS

### Conduct of the Ruling Coalition and the President of the Republic

The current political leadership of Serbia, including the president, are in a kind of defensive position. The government's conduct shows that Serbian leadership and most institutions are in a state of paralysis. The government's conduct is mostly reactive – responding to events, especially to the actions of civic and student movements. These responses are often delayed and inappropriate, and in some cases involve misuse of the police, prosecutors, private security, and para-police groups. These reactions do not match the goals that the government and its media claim to uphold, such as avoiding violence, protecting the constitutional order, and defending peace, stability, and the survival of Serbia.

This ineffective government action is due to the lack of social and political support needed to change existing policies. These are the policies which led the government and society into the state of emergency.

The roots of government's ineffective conduct lie primarily in its ideology of ethno-nationalist populism and the lack of political will and ability to fully face reality and adapt its policies to changing circumstances. At the core of the current government are corruption and monopolies in the economy, politics, and media.

The government approaches society and its citizens as a ruler to passive masses. This is evident in various activities, especially in orchestrated political and public events organized in support of the government. These are usually short-term actions like political campaigns, public gatherings during frequent elections, public announcements or celebrations of certain healthcare, economic, or infrastructure projects, and welcoming or sending off “powerful foreign friends”, like Putin, Macron, and others.

Mass gatherings are organized in the style of a “closed crowd”— in fenced-off areas like squares, stadiums, halls, or indoor venues, surrounded by party members, police, intelligence agents (BIA), and other “security” actors, including private security made up of football fan groups. This kind of setup creates the impression that the event and the main figure being celebrated are especially important. It also limits freedom of movement and expression of individuality.

Through political and propaganda campaigns, feelings of uncertainty and fear of foreigners are encouraged. More recently, this fear has been expanded to include threats to Serbia's territorial integrity. At the same time, an image is being built of the leader—Vučić—as “the man who knows everything,” and “the one who can protect the government and the people.”

In an attempt to slow down the erosion of public trust, the government and Vučić resort to public works, such as the “volunteer work campaigns” to “defend” Obrenovac and Šabac from floods in 2014. They also raise the level of “intolerance” and increase the presence of police and other “security forces”. This includes organizing military “exercises”, misusing anonymous threats of terrorist activities, and threatening to declare



a state of emergency. President Vučić himself often dramatizes crises, from police and military alerts, to mass protests and barricades by his supporters (such as the Serbian List), to armed actions by paramilitary groups (like the “Banjska” case).

Vučić’s numerous public appearances are characterized by ignoring reality, distorting facts, and belittling those who disagree with him, especially participants in the student and citizen protests, and members of the political opposition. He dismisses, discredits, and slanders them, calling them names like “traitors,” “thieves,” “nobodies,” “good-for-nothing,” “mob,” “fools,” “bandits,” and “terrorists.” He portrays them to the public as “puppets” in a “color revolution” funded by the “Collective West.” This style of public communication shows that Vučić does not adhere to the constitutional role of president as “the president of all citizens.” It is also possible that, like Putin, Vučić is using this approach to show that his goal, like a planned strategy, is to use the crises, political instability, and the state of emergency (announced by him as a “counter-revolution”), to secure enough support in order to legally and constitutionally strengthen his personal rule.

Vučić’s communication with the public is directly challenged by the student movement. This is partly because students’ response to his manipulations is clear, understandable, and concise, to most citizens. An example of this is the slogan: “You’re not in charge.” Vučić’s reaction to this style of communication, especially to the slogan, is marked by a strong sense of personal offense.

Serbian authorities, the SNS, and its loyal partners from the ruling coalition have, on several occasions, tried to respond to the protests of dissatisfied citizens with “counter-gatherings.” These public attempts to measure the support by counting and comparing the numbers of participants, did not go as Vučić had expected. It showed that public support was on the side of the student movement. This has led to a deeper divide between the government and the protesting citizens. Intensifying protests have caused uncertainty among the government supporters and accelerated internal reshuffling within the ruling coalition.

## Conduct of Key Political and Social Actors

**Civic and student movements.** The emergence and resistance of citizen and student movements are ultimately a response to the structural crisis and the current social, economic, and political situation in Serbia. Within this wave of resistance, student activism has become a key factor in changing public opinion and mobilizing citizens to push for change. This is supported by public opinion poll conducted by the non-governmental organization CRTA. According to their findings, around 64% of citizens support the students. Additionally, about 60% believe that student protests can lead to positive change and share the view that the president of Serbia is not the one in charge to address the students’ demands.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, 46% of respondents believe that Serbia is not “heading in the right direction,” while 38% think it is. The increase in optimism about the country’s future, as shown by the public poll data, clearly comes from the energy sparked by the student protests, not from trust in government policy or the state of the economy.

Students themselves do not see their movement or activism as political.<sup>7</sup> Still, it is undeniable that the student movement is, for now, the only actor with moral legitimacy and greatest trust from the citizens of Serbia. Additionally, it is evident that their actions have “shaken society, which is slowly freeing itself from

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<sup>6</sup> <https://cрта.rs/ubedljiva-podrska-gradjana-srbije-studentskim-zahtevima-i-protestima/>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://autonomija.info/olga-manojlovic-pintar-iz-studentskog-pokreta-radja-se-jedan-novi-ideoloski-pokret/>.

fear of the government." The undeniable energy coming from student activism is inspiring many citizens and motivating them to get involved in social issues.

The nature of student activism is largely misunderstood by the authorities and much of the public. What makes it unique is the way students clearly and directly express their demands, and communicate openly with the public—especially with “ordinary people.” This approach has helped raise awareness among citizens in over 200 towns across Serbia. From the beginning of the university blockades and nationwide protests, students have distanced themselves from all political parties. Party flags are not welcome at the gatherings, although some politicians attended as “ordinary” citizens.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, “their movement, their marches and walking through many towns, also shape who they are.”<sup>9</sup>

For now, students are actually the only social actors with moral legitimacy, and the only ones that society truly trusts. This also makes them an important political force. The biggest success of the protests so far is that they have shaken society to its core, helping people slowly overcome their authorities. However, the question remains: how will this energy turn into political action and lead to further freedom from repression?

The demand of both students and citizens under the slogan “we want justice” is a strategic goal that requires the full and complete truth to be revealed (that is why the students’ first demand was to publish all accurate and complete documentation and to determine the true causes and individual responsibility for the tragedy in Novi Sad). Since the responsible institutions have shown no signs of action, it is legitimate to raise this widely supported protest demand in the streets - insisting that the deep social crisis be resolved within the existing constitutional and legal framework.

The widely supported protest demand to bring power back to institutions (pump up) originally came from the students’ and citizens’ “non-political” actions for justice. However, to realistically reach a sustainable way out of the current crisis, this “non-political input” must lead to an “inclusive political outcome.” Since the student protests have clearly stated their positions, it is now up to others—especially the current opposition—to find a way to be part of that output.

Student activism in Serbia is unique and, by its nature, has become a “model to follow” in Serbia, across the region, and beyond.

The student protests have opened the door to major political possibilities - for a peaceful transition of power and for broader social change. This has also created an opportunity to reach a “social agreement” on a transitional process - from a hybrid regime to a democratic government. There are two possible scenarios: one is “optional”, the other is “mandatory.” The optional (and preferred) option involves a so-called roundtable of all interested parties - the government, the opposition, and a “third” party.<sup>10</sup>

All in all, civic - especially student - activism is helping motivate people to create the conditions for a new kind of politics and to build an alternative to the current situation and policies. This activism represents a new social and even political force that has strong public support, and could bring about real social and political change. This is also reflected in the *Letter to the People* published by students from the art faculties on March 9, 2025, during their blockade. In the letter, citizens were called upon to self-organize into

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nin.rs/politika/vesti/70391/opozicija-i-studenti-se-mimoisli-ko-ce-politicki-artikulisati-bunt>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://autonomija.info/olga-manojlovic-pintar-iz-studentskog-pokreta-radja-se-jedan-novi-ideoloski-pokret/>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.danas.rs/dijalog/licni-stavovi/bauk-prelazne-vlade/>.

assemblies: "All citizens, who are according to the Constitution the ultimate holders of sovereignty, should be included in discussion and decisions about the ongoing crisis. That's why we invite you to turn to your local self-governments and organize yourselves through direct democracy, using the citizen assembly model provided by law. Decisions should be made by those directly affected – and that means all of us. Everyone to the assemblies... What a student *plenum* is for us, the *citizen assembly* is for the people." However, due to deeply rooted centralization and corruption in the local self-government system, including in local community, these assemblies have been deliberately neglected. The strength of the student movement lies in direct democracy, which, unlike representative democracy, cannot easily be manipulated or corrupted."<sup>11</sup>

Since March 15, 2025, a network of citizen assemblies has spread across Serbia, reaching over 500 local communities by the end of March.

Students continue to firmly insist on fulfilling the demands made in November 2024.<sup>12</sup> Their determination is shown in the fact that the student *plenum* has set up two expert commissions. These include specialist from different fields who are reviewing documents and helping assess whether the demands are being met.

Students show their persistence in every public action they take. They did so at a large citizen protest in Kragujevac on February 15, 2025 - Serbia's Statehood Day, the anniversary of the 1835 Sretenje Constitution.<sup>13</sup> At the event, a letter was read aloud with a strong message: "Justice will not come with the footsteps of those in military boots, carrying full combat gear. It will come with the footsteps of those whose shoulders carry a head that thinks freely."<sup>14</sup> This is a clear message to the Serbian authorities and an announcement that at the next big gathering in Niš, on March 1, 2025, the *Student Edict* would be presented to the public. The Edict outlines principles of freedom, statehood, justice, youth, dignity, knowledge, solidarity, and the future. As stated in the document, these are the values students are fighting for - "a pledge to the future and to the country we want to live in."<sup>15</sup>

"Majanje po Niš" ("Bumming through Niš") as the largest public protest in the history of this city was informally called, set a stage for another mass gathering in Belgrade, on March 15.

The day after the protest in Niš (March 2), president Vučić announced that he would soon "call all of Serbia to Belgrade" to show that Serbia is "not a handful of oats." He also stated that "after the failed color revolution, a successful counter-revolution will follow." This announcement from the president pointed to

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/studenti-umetnickih-fakulteta-u-blokadi-objavili-pismo-narodu-pozvali-gradjane-da-se/p6fwvr4>.

<sup>12</sup> The four main students' demands: 1. Publish all documentation related to the reconstruction of the railway station and ensure criminal responsibility for the deaths of 15 people; 2. Identify and press charges against those responsible for attacks on students and professors; 3. Drop all charges against people arrested during student protests; 4. Increase the budget for higher education by 20%.

<sup>13</sup> The Sretenje Constitution, adopted in 1835, was one of the most modern, democratic, and liberal constitutions of its time. It was the easternmost reflection of the French Revolution. However, it didn't last long – it was abolished under pressure from powers at that time—(Turkey, Russia, and Austria), on March 17, 1835.

<sup>14</sup> <https://autonomija.info/procitano-studentsko-pismo-u-kragujevcu-kraj-je-zimskog-sna-a-java-obecava/>.

<sup>15</sup> The Student Edict contains eight key points: freedom, the state, justice, youth, dignity, knowledge, solidarity, and the future. "Serbia is a country of free people. Freedom is not a gift – it is a fundamental right, tied to the dignity of every citizen. Freedom is the foundation of our democratic society, our laws, our words, and our thoughts. The state is a common good of all citizens. Serbia's institutions must serve the people and build trust – not be tools of power for a few. We stand for a country where the law is the supreme authority, and where holding public office means serving citizens, not enjoying privilege."

March 15 as an important date for both the government and the citizens of Serbia. This pivotal moment for the citizens' rebellion against the government was significantly influenced by the coordinated use of state resources and violence, which is covered in a separate section of this *Report* (see: *Case Study: March 15, 2025, in Belgrade*).

## Conduct of Institutions (Government Bodies and Independent Institutions)

The current state and conduct of institutions show a serious institutional crisis. Most institutions—ranging from the national and provincial parliaments to many city and municipal assemblies—have been made passive by the will and decisions of those in power. The electoral choice of citizens who voted for the opposition has effectively been suspended. The opposition is being blocked from doing its job—through political pressure, administrative obstacles, and even misuse of the police—in the assemblies where they were elected. This has blocked the normal, peaceful, and democratic way of governing society. At the same time, an already strong trend of centralized decision-making is growing. Institutions are being directly controlled by the president and his closest associates. For example: the president chairs important government meetings; the speaker of National Assembly chairs committees and working groups; security and intelligence services, as well as the army, follow the president's political decisions; the president often presents himself as the supreme commander—even though there is no state of war in Serbia.

Some institutions are in a state of “deep freeze”—for example, public prosecutors who act under instructions from the political leadership, as well as the Commissioner for Access to Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, and the Commissioner for the Protection of Human Rights. In practice, such conduct often goes against the current Constitution and laws. Overall, the functioning of institutions is weak and depends on political will—mainly on president Vučić, who controls the existing political monopoly.

**Conduct of Judicial Authorities.** The work of judicial authorities during the reporting period was observed through the lens of their main role, as defined by the Constitution of Serbia. That role is to ensure legality, legal certainty, and the rule of law by making decisions and carrying out legal and practical actions based on the Constitution, international law, and national laws—to protect human rights and uphold the legal system.

This *Report* applies a case study approach, with key findings presented in a separate section (*Protection of Citizens' Right to Physical and Mental Integrity*).

**Conduct of the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office.** In handling specific criminal cases – like the collapse of the canopy and the police brutality at the public protest “15 for 15” (15 minutes for 15 victims in Novi Sad)—public prosecutors in Serbia acted with serious weaknesses in both their institutional and legal capacity.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> MEDEL (Gaboriau Simon and Bottcher Hans Ernst), Analytical Report on the State of the Judiciary in Serbia, Belgrade, 27.06.2012 – Chapter: “1) Unacceptable Violation of Basic Principles”. After a failed reform of the judiciary, public prosecutors in Serbia were left institutionally weakened, especially in terms of human resources. According to the Criminal Procedure Code and the Law on Public Prosecution, the current system, its resources, and Constitutional solutions prevent further professionalization of the prosecution.

The new role of the “master of criminal procedure” now requires a different model of public prosecution—something more like a unified “State Advocacy Office”. This supports the idea to set up a unified system, instead of the existing organization of public prosecution. The very name “Public Prosecutor's Office” is seen as outdated by many professional associations of prosecutors.

Public prosecutors, as party to the proceedings, did not fulfill their duty to actively pursue charges.

In the case of collapsed canopy, the prosecutor's office did not assign the case properly. Instead of giving it to the department for corruption and serious crime, it was handled by the general crime department and labeled simply as an "accident." This happened despite strong indicators of high-level corruption, such as wrong instructions given to the contractor and subcontractors, and big discrepancy between the planned costs and the amount actually paid.

At the same time, another prosecutor's office in Belgrade (the Higher Public Prosecution) worked on the same case, also through its general crime department. This created confusion over which office was really in charge, especially when the Office for Organized Crime got involved. Later, a prosecutor from Novi Sad was moved to a higher position in the Office for Organized Crime without going through the legal selection process. The prosecutor's office used a legal shortcut that experts say violates the Constitution. This shortcut mechanism was also used more broadly to promote prosecutors to higher positions without following proper legal steps.<sup>17</sup>

All in all, the public prosecutor's office did not fully take on its role in the criminal process as recommended by Recommendation Rec (2000)19 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the role of public prosecution in the criminal justice system.<sup>18</sup> The main reason is the delay in forwarding the case to the competent authority – the Special Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime.

Based on the facts presented, it can be concluded that the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office is responsible for the entire process, including the negative effects of too many binding instructions from higher to lower prosecutors, and the influence of the media on the independence of public prosecutors.

It is also clear that prosecutors, even at the lowest level, must ask for instructions from higher-level prosecutors in any criminal case that is directly or indirectly related to corruption. This way, the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office allows violations of the public integrity of the prosecutorial function. At the same time, this raises serious concerns about how the prosecution is managed internally, especially, regarding possible external influence.<sup>19</sup> *By the end of the reporting period, these concerns were confirmed through a worrying*

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<sup>17</sup> 1. A special Public Prosecution Reform Index (PRI) revealed shortcomings in the work and management of public prosecution system in the Republic of Serbia, yet without addressing the deeper legal, legislative, and political reasons for such a state of affairs. Nevertheless, this document is considered empirical evidence of the lack of institutional and operational capacity in public prosecution, measured by 28 professional factors according to the methodology of the American Bar Association (lawyer's association).

2. The PRI factors of the American Bar Association (ABA) were designed to serve multiple functions. First, they enable leaders and decision-makers to use these findings to prioritize and focus reform efforts. Second, the ABA and other organizations providing rule of law assistance can use the PRI results to create more effective programs aimed at improving the quality of the prosecution system. Third, the PRI will allow donor organizations, leaders, NGOs, and international organizations to access information about the structure, nature, and state of the prosecutorial system, which would otherwise be difficult to obtain in countries where the PRI has been implemented. Fourth, in combination with the JRI and LPRI, the PRI contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how the rule of law operates in practice. Fifth, PRI results can serve as a springboard for local advocacy initiatives, such as educational campaigns on the role of prosecution in a democratic society, human rights issues, the drafting of legal acts, and comprehensive efforts to improve regulatory alignment with established international standards for prosecutorial functions.

<sup>18</sup> Recommendation Rec(2000)19 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Role of Public Prosecution in the Criminal Justice System; <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/coeministers/2000/en/31721>.

<sup>19</sup> The Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office is responsible for the "overall negative effect of the excessive number of mandatory instructions from higher prosecutors to lower prosecutors and the influence of the media on the independence of public prosecution, where experts have concluded that, although it is not clear how strong external influence is on the work of the Republic Prosecutor, it has been noted that there is likely a situation in which the public prosecution may be influenced by

*incident - when the president of the Republic publicly stated his intention to replace prosecutors who, in his view, were not prosecuting according to the law. This prompted a justified response from the judiciary.*<sup>20</sup>

The Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office holds major responsibility for the weak institutional and operational capacity of public prosecution in Serbia. Key principles like hierarchy, delegation, and substitution were used in ways that suggest manipulation of personnel — focusing on controlling staff instead of building knowledge and expertise. There's also institutional responsibility because the prosecution lacked clear priorities, especially in handling high-level corruption cases. Experts described this as a "Random Box" approach — where cases are handled randomly, like drawing from a lottery, showing a careless and unprofessional attitude toward crime. Specifically, the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office allowed a consistently high number of prosecutions for "abuse of official position" each year. But compared to cases of bribery and corruption, the numbers are extremely unbalanced. This shows a poor strategy for tackling corruption — where a lack of evidence and weak efforts by prosecutors and police are being covered up in the pre-investigation phase by over-focusing on lesser offenses related to official duties.

In the case of the collapsed canopy, facts that could be seen as signs of grounds for suspicion were not properly examined. These facts point to a series of mistakes in carrying out a civil contract, which resulted in unlawful payments and disbursements.<sup>21</sup> There was random and unprofessional conduct by the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office. For example, the involvement of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade in the investigation led to the contamination of evidence, followed by long delays in confirming the indictment.<sup>22</sup> This weakened both the legal profession and the courts, making them unable to deal with the problem of "high-level corruption" caused by public officials.

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its own perception of what individuals with political power want from them, particularly based on media reports. It should be noted that some media outlets, according to reports, are controlled by political parties. It has also been reported that prosecutors, even at the lowest levels, must seek instructions from higher prosecutors in the hierarchy on any criminal matter that is at least indirectly related to corruption (ABA ROLI, p. 32).

<sup>20</sup> [https://uts.org.rs/category/aktuelno/saopstenja/Nearly\\_600\\_Judges\\_and\\_Prosecutors\\_Sign\\_Statement\\_in\\_Response\\_to\\_President\\_Aleksandar\\_Vučić's\\_Statement\\_That\\_'Prosecutors\\_Who\\_Do\\_Not\\_Protect\\_Order\\_and\\_the\\_Law\\_Will\\_Be\\_Replaced'](https://uts.org.rs/category/aktuelno/saopstenja/Nearly_600_Judges_and_Prosecutors_Sign_Statement_in_Response_to_President_Aleksandar_Vučić's_Statement_That_'Prosecutors_Who_Do_Not_Protect_Order_and_the_Law_Will_Be_Replaced'). Radovan Lazić, a member of the Presidency of the Prosecutors' Association of Serbia, states that more judges have signed, as there are approximately four times as many judges as prosecutors in Serbia's judiciary, and they continue to sign.

<sup>21</sup> Expert Group findings: The following facts were identified: 1) Key documents that the contractor was legally required to provide are not publicly available; 2) There is no dynamic plan explaining how the deadlines were shortened for opening the Station Building to the public; 3) There are inconsistencies and contradictions in the construction Logs; 4) The Construction Book is missing; 5) There is no documentation showing the as-built state of completed work; 6) There are no approvals from the relevant authorities; 7) There is no record of a conservator being appointed or any independent technical inspection; 8) The investor and contractor share undisputed joint responsibility for the project; 9) A technical inspection was never carried out; 10) Many documents are missing, likely due to corruption — which the Expert Group sees not just as economic, but also as political corruption, because the available and missing documents raise serious suspicion about what may have been hidden.

<sup>22</sup> "The investigation was compromised from the very beginning": Five months after the canopy collapse - what the Inquiry Commission found - N1 Jovan Rajić reminded that "the investigation was compromised from the very beginning. On the day of the tragedy, a bulldozer came to clear the rubble as if it were an illegally built structure, not the site of a fatal accident. They just removed everything, as if that solved the problem. Now, months later, the police are acting on instructions like that — it is irresponsible. Rajić said, "This whole story — from the delayed indictment, to the involvement of various prosecutors — looks like an attempt to delute the case, destroy evidence, and make it impossible to reach the truth or full responsibility". He added, "If the prosecution had treated this properly from the start, seeing it as a case of corruption, linked to other problems, this Inquiry Commission might have never been needed. But that angle — corruption — was completely ignored". He also pointed out that the very first statement from the court shaped the direction of the investigation: it claimed there was no political responsibility or corruption, only technical matters. And that message has been repeated ever since. "The goal of the Inquiry Commission," he said, "is to make sure this is not forgotten and to shine



The conduct of the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office was clearly influenced by outside pressure — specifically, by the current ruling political power. This is shown by the fact that the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office failed to carry out a full, effective, and thorough investigation, even though there were serious indications and suspicions that some kind of device — possibly an acoustic device or other so-called "less-lethal weapon" — was used against citizens gathered at the public protest "15 for 15" on March 15, 2025, in Belgrade. Furthermore, the decision of the First Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade to classify the case as an act of terrorism committed by an unidentified person, and to take action on it, was unlawful. This decision overstepped the authority of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade and interfered with the investigation.

There is strong suspicion that an acoustic device or a similar tool — which can be considered as a "less lethal weapon" — was used as a means of force against a peaceful protest. This raises serious concerns that Serbia's security sector has failed to maintain proper control over the procurement, circulation, and possession of such weapons. According to Serbian law, this type of weapon is not explicitly banned. As a result, national laws do not define or classify such identify such weapons, nor they regulate their use or provide oversight mechanisms. This lack of regulation leads to a lack of public awareness and oversight.

On its part, the Supreme Public Prosecution failed to apply the principle of evidence corroboration through independent verification of materials obtained from ministries, intelligence services, and the military. In this case, such a principle would involve confirming the authenticity of evidence via an independent expert institution. As a result, when assessing whether an acoustic device was present or used at the "15 for 15" public gathering in Belgrade, no independently confirmed evidence was obtained.

The influence of political leadership—especially the president —is clear from his many public statements, as well as from a statement by outgoing prime-minister Vučević, who suggested that foreign intelligence agencies (such as the FBI and FSB) should be involved in this process. This suggestion, however, overlooks the fact that these agencies are not licensed to conduct court expert analysis, since their findings also have to be verified in courts. Only independent expert bodies—such as scientific institutes affiliated with universities—are authorized to perform such roles.

The Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office failed to legally assess the actions of government and police officials who created confusion about the possession and use of acoustic devices. These actions could be seen as abuse of official position for personal gain, given that a private company received unjustified payments from the state budget as commission fee for an unlawful, unethical, and harmful contract.

## Crisis in the Security and Intelligence Community

Serbia's security strategy is based on three main legal acts, but all of them have serious flaws. There are laws that regulate the work of the state security and intelligence services (such as the Law on the BIA, the Law on the Basics of the Security System of the Republic of Serbia, and the Law on the National Security

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a light on the corrupt side of this story." Petrović Škero said, "The rush to finish the project for the investor completely overrode concerns for quality and safety." She added that the committee felt the need to speak out publicly—even though EXPO isn't directly related to this station—because the new EXPO law includes provisions that, in the EU, would be considered corruption-prone. Rajić concluded: "Three months after the canopy collapse, a draft law appeared that basically legalizes the exact kind of behavior that caused the collapse."

Council).<sup>23</sup> However, these laws are incomplete and not aligned with national strategies. For example, there is no effective oversight of the security services. Also, key players in intelligence work are not involved in the work of the National Security Council or the Parliamentary Security Committee. The security services are highly politicized. Senior positions are often filled without open competition or clear and consistent criteria. Moreover, these services are often led by individuals who held leadership roles during the Milošević era. This legacy continues to shape important processes today. As a result, many documents are still classified as military or state secrets—even though they contain information that could shed light on unresolved events from the 1990's that continue to weigh heavily on Serbian society. Examples include the 1998 murder of young Serbs at the "Panda" café in Peć, the 1999 NATO bombing of the RTS building, and the killing of two soldiers in Topčider.<sup>24</sup>

In 2021, as part of efforts to crack down a possible "color revolution" and prepare for a "counter-revolution," a new body was created: the *Working Group for Combating Color Revolutions*. There is no public information available about the group's activities. However, based on publicly accessible data, it appears that this group works with Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).<sup>25</sup> The group's mandate is to monitor opposition activists, NGOs, and independent journalists; to regulate the work of NGOs, and to propose measure to counter mass unrest and attempts to destabilize the system.<sup>26</sup> In this work, as well as in cooperation with Russia intelligence, president Vučić relies on the support of deputy prime-minister Aleksandar Vulin, who is the most vocal public supporter of both this collaboration and the fight against "color revolutions."

Since the beginning of the protests over the collapsed station canopy, security services have focused on strengthening their own organization and equipment. They have also increased formal and informal loyalty checks among their personnel and within their network of informants. Only limited information reached the public after a meeting on December 28, 2024, between then prime-minister Vučević and security agency heads—just after a major protest at Slavija Square in Belgrade. At that time, president Vučić publicly stated that there was a "potential loyalty deficit" among lower-ranking members of the military, police, and intelligence services, and even mentioned a "color revolution infiltrating the security sector." Given the language used—clearly aligned with that of the *Working Group for Combating Color Revolution*—it is likely that a series of internal purges followed, including forced early retirements and transfers to less sensitive positions. One apparent criterion for removal was **sympathy for or support of the student movement**. This first affected the **Ministry of the Interior, Military Security Agency (VBA), and Military Intelligence Agency (VOA)**, and then spread to **public institutions** such as the **University Clinical Center in Niš, public utility companies, judiciary, public prosecutors' offices, educational institutions**, and even the **Chamber of Commerce of Serbia**.

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<sup>23</sup> Security services are public authorities responsible for protecting the sovereignty, stability, and security of the Republic of Serbia and its citizens. These include the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Security Information Agency (BIA), the Military Security Agency, and the Military Intelligence Agency. The scope of their work encompasses the protection of national security, public order, sovereignty, and the constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia.

<sup>24</sup> Research by the Centre for Civil-Military Relations, "*Private Security Companies in Serbia – Friend or Threat?*" (2008); *Security Policies in the Western Balkans*, edited by Miroslav Hadžić, Milorad Timotić, and Predrag Petrović, (in Serbian), Centre for Civil-Military Relations, Belgrade, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> <https://crt.rs/ubedljiva-podrska-gradjana-srbije-studentskim-zahtevima-i-protestima/>;  
<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-protiv-objene-revolucije/33320734.html>.

<sup>26</sup> <https://n1info.rs/vesti/ap-srbija-i-rusija-u-zajednickoj-borbi-protiv-objenih-revolucija/>.



A major security challenge for the government, key social actors, and regional stability is to **avoid excessive use of force or armed conflict with citizens**, and most importantly, to **bring paramilitary and unofficial police groups under control**, especially those connected to organized crime, and narco-business.<sup>27</sup> Whether this issue is a priority for the Working Group or the entire security and intelligence community, will only become clear when more information is publicly available. From this perspective, a comprehensive analysis of the events of March 15 will provide many important answers.

The situation in the Ministry of the Interior is marked by uncertainty and poor coordination. For instance, the position of police director has remained vacant for years. Since June 2024, the salaries for approximately 46,000 employees have been paid from the accounts of the national electricity company (EPS) and a major betting chain. One of the effects of this payment arrangement is that “people feel humiliated, and the issue of loyalty and potential information leaks is raised as a priority.”<sup>28</sup> Faced with the growing scale and territorial spread of the citizens’ protests, a major problem for the government is the shortage of personnel and the reluctance of many police officers to intervene against civilians. Often, the private security companies are involved, and their employees sometimes act outside the legal framework.

Many of these companies operate in a kind of grey area. This is evident from the lack of reliable data on the number of companies and the number of employees in this sector. The reason for this is the absence of a unified registry for these companies. It is estimated that around 3,000 of such companies operate in Serbia, employing between 30,000 and 50,000 people, and possessing approximately 47,000 weapons.

Some private security companies have used, in violation to the law, equipment that poses a serious threat to human health and safety (such as military-grade devices like Garrote).

### Case Study: Belgrade, March 15, 2025

As part of mobilizing citizens for a peaceful protest, the student movement organized protest marches under the name *Walks to Belgrade – These Feet Are Not Small*. Following an established practice, the organizers informed the public through social media and direct communication.<sup>29</sup>

The organizers of the “15 for 15” protest - 15 minutes for 15 victims of the canopy collapse at the railway station in Novi Sad - informed the public about the event program using the usual methodology. For the first time, they also announced that the location of the main stage or gathering point might change, which was initially taking place in front of the National Assembly and the Presidency building, or Pionirski Park. With this announcement, the Protest Safety Working Group acknowledged threats posed by the authorities, especially president Vučić. They also took into account the fact that, one week before March 15, city authorities began reconstruction work on this and several nearby city squares and streets. These works progressed slowly and were completely suspended by 13 March. According to a plan prepared well before the “15 for 15” protest, these so-called “infrastructure works” were aimed at making it harder for people to attend the protest and reducing the turnout. The security risk was further increased by an operation that

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/u-posljednja-dva-tjedna-dva-puta-razgovarali-sef-natoa-i-vucic-zasto/2653266.aspx>.

<sup>28</sup> <https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/policija-15-mart-rezim-nasilje>.

<sup>29</sup> The main idea was explained: to include other towns in our plan in order to show unity, solidarity, and determination in our common goal – fulfilling the students’ demands. Students from Bor, Subotica, and nearby areas would also join the initiative. The goal was also defined as “to provide mutual support among participants in the student movement and to raise public awareness about the students’ demands and current events in Serbia.”

could be described as the "occupation of Pioneer Park" by government supporters, carried out in coordination with city authorities and other institutions.

On their part, the organizers of the citizens' protest did everything within their power and responsibility to inform the public about the potential risks. To reduce those risks, they issued clear and detailed instructions to help ensure the protest remained peaceful. They also sent a strong message: March 15, 2025, should be "*a day Serbia will not forget.*"<sup>30</sup> The message was directed at the public, the authorities, and especially, President Vučić.

However, for Vučić, the protest scheduled for March 15 became a serious concern when it became clear that the students weren't backing down and would be strongly supported by citizens from Belgrade and across Serbia. Starting on March 9, the president began making his daily public statements, warning of violence and saying that everyone involved would be held accountable: "Everyone who takes part will be arrested. It may take us 15 minutes, maybe an hour, or two—but the state will know how to act like a state, no question about it. We will call for peace, tell them not to try anything violent, but I know them and, and unfortunately, I've always been right so far... He added: "They know March 15 must not be a "D-Day". They should continue fighting for their demands, not be remembered for someone getting hurt during an attempt to break into the National Assembly." (...) "Many will end up behind bars for committing crimes, and the others will realize that they were misled by politicians who falsely promised change through violence. "So, on Saturday evening", he said, "We will blow the final whistle."<sup>31</sup> These "announcements" placed full responsibility for any unrest on the protest organizers, framing the event as the failed end of a so-called "color revolution". With open mockery, Vučić even said he had already created a textbook cover and written several pages about how he defeated the color revolution.<sup>32</sup>

After publicly announcing that he would "blow the final whistle" on the "color revolution," Aleksandar Vučić went a step further at a the meeting of the Main Board of the SNS, where he announced a "counter-revolution", According to him, this event would take place on March 28 and 29, 2025, in Belgrade, and would be described as "the biggest freedom-loving gathering in Serbia's history"—a protest, of "honest, decent, and honorable people."<sup>33</sup>

After the meeting of the SNS Main Board, on March 12, Vučić used the main news show (*Dnevnik*) on the public broadcaster RTS to repeat his threatening predictions. His remarks, along with RTS host Bojana Mladenović calling the students a "mob," sparked a swift response—a spontaneous student blockade of the entrance to the RTS building. This was another moment where students demonstrated their determination and ability to protest peacefully. At the same time, they made it clear that the government was trying to stoke fear and distrust among citizens ahead of the upcoming protest.

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<sup>30</sup> "Let it be clear to everyone – we will not stop, we will not let them ignore us, we will not let this day pass in silence. This is our moment. This is our voice. Let everyone know – on March 15, Serbia is in Belgrade" (Leaflet "15 for 15").

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/665726/vucic-u-subotu-ce-nesto-pokusati-nasiljem-tada-cemo-odsvirati-kraj>

<sup>32</sup> "You will laugh when you see how I technically started working on it, but I will focus on it seriously once all this is over. I hope to finish it during the summer, and I truly believe it will be a bestseller because I think many nations and their leaderships around the world will be able to gain valuable experience and learn how to peacefully, without the use of force, fight against color revolutions, how to defeat the enormous amounts of money used against you to overthrow sovereign and independent states."

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/665726/vucic-u-subotu-ce-nesto-pokusati-nasiljem-tada-cemo-odsvirati-kraj>

Neither the warnings from the organizers of the “15 for 15” protest nor statement from members of the diplomatic corps, stressing that every participant on March 15 must be safe and that it is the government’s responsibility to ensure their freedom of movement<sup>34</sup>—were not enough to stop Vučić from carrying out his already prepared plan to break up the “color revolution.”

Vučić also announced that there would be “surprises in the coming days,” when the public finds out who had received money to carry out the “color revolution” in Serbia. He particularly emphasized the role of the “criminal organization” USAID, claiming that it USAID allegedly transferred €190,000 through the NGO-CRTA for a project “*To make the Trash Go Away*.” Vučić claimed that the “trash” referred to his party and government, even though the project he mentioned was actually related to the construction of a regional waste disposal site in Zrenjanin.

It is most likely that this plan is the result of the work of the *Working Group for Combating Color Revolution*. The plan included the establishment of a “protection zone.”

In Pionirski Park, in front of the office of the president of Serbia, a sort of camp was established as part of the government's preparations to respond to the citizens' protest on 15 March and the later "counterrevolution" announced by Aleksandar Vučić. The camp was surrounded and protected by multiple obstacles, which, in addition to the tractors, included fences typically used by the police to secure public gatherings and other events. Inside the camp, a "human shield" was organized. This shield, during the camp's several days of existence, consisted of thousands of people: several dozen "students who want to study," hundreds of SNS officials and employees from public institutions across Serbia, members of the Serbian community from Kosovo who, after leaving the Kosovo institutions, were receiving "temporary social assistance" from the Serbian state budget, for whom staying in the camp was considered a "work duty." The overall tone and presence in the camp, framed as the “defense of Serbia and its president,” were defined by hundreds of private security guards and members of football fan groups. Among them were also former members of the disbanded “Red Berets” unit (a special operations unit disbanded after its involvement in the assassination of prime-minister Zoran Đinđić), and over 200 members of the paramilitary group that took part in the armed attack in northern Kosovo (known as the Banjska incident). There were also individuals involved in war crimes during the military operations in Kosovo—such as Goran Radosavljević Guri, former commander of gendarmerie and head at the training center Petrovo Selo at the time when two American citizens, the Bitići brothers, were killed there. The activities of “blowing the final whistle” on the “color revolution” also involved hundreds of members of criminal groups associated with narcotics trade.<sup>35</sup> A large number of regular police officers—including gendarmerie, special units, and public security forces—were also deployed, along with members of Serbia’s Security Intelligence Agency (BIA). There are indications that members of the Serbian Armed Forces were involved in organizing and carrying out these operations.

The "15 for 15" protest was the largest citizens' protest in Serbia’s recent history. Unofficial estimates suggest that between 400,000 and 500,000 people took part.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/saznajemo-zapadne-ambasade-apelovale-na-vucica-da-se-osigura-bezbednost-ucesnika-protesta/>.

<sup>35</sup> <https://n1info.rs/vesti/malisc-radar-dosao-do-podatka-da-je-u-beograd-stigla-grupa-koja-je-ucestvovala-u-organizaciji-banjske/>.

<sup>36</sup> <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/videos/2025/3/15/janjic-neformalna-procjena-je-da-je-400-do-500-hiljada-ljudi-na-protestu-u-beogradu>.

The protest officially began around 5 p.m. at Slavija Square, with students reading out their demands. At 7 p.m., a symbolic fifteen minute silence began. The silence was interrupted by an attack on protesters gathered on the plateau between Pionirski Park and the National Assembly. The attack came from Pionirski Park and nearby buildings, and was carried out by pre-positioned groups, including paramilitary-style units. A swift and well-coordinated response by the Protest Safety Working Group, event stewards, and many protesters—especially military veterans and bikers—helped protesters leave the area safely, after which a special police unit took control. However, another attack followed on protesters in Kralja Milana Street. In this attack, an "unknown device" was used - most likely a "sonic devise", also known as a "sonic cannon" - against thousands of participants in what became the largest public protest in Serbia's history.

The government has tried to reduce this entire event to just a political and media debate. President Vučić and the authorities claim that "there was no violence" and that no device of any kind was used. The minister of interior backed the President's initial claim but gave some conflicting statements—ranging from absolute denial to admitting that "something" might have been used. Meanwhile, the prosecution has launched an investigation to find out what really happened.<sup>37</sup> They even called in help from Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB).

Faced with the possibility of an independent and even internationally monitored investigation, into the use of illegal devices against citizens, Vučić said: "If it's proven that security forces used a sonic cannon at the protest in Belgrade on March 15, I will resign... I am telling you now—if our troops used a sonic cannon... I will no longer be president. You pathetic liars, shame on you." At first, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Defense, and the Security Information Agency (BIA), strongly denied possessing or using such a device. Later, they acknowledged having these devices but continued to deny using them. At the same time, several actions were taken to steer the investigation. Vučić asked justice minister Maja Popović to find out who was spreading claims about the use of the "sonic cannon", while the Public Prosecutor's Office instructed the Ministry of the Interior to conduct an investigation.

The confusion grew even more when Serbia's deputy prime-minister, Vulin, publicly thanked the Russian special services for providing information that helped in the fight against the "color revolution."<sup>38</sup>

A credible and transparent investigation should not only determine which device was used, where, when, and how it was obtained, but also who carried out this act. Most importantly, it should reveal who planned it and who gave the order. The outcome of the investigation will likely determine whether this act will be legally classified as a criminal offense.

Finding out who planned the use of violence against citizens will help answer the question: was it police brutality or an act of state terrorism.

Although all the facts about these security incidents have not yet been established, it is clear that: the use of this device against peaceful protesters is primarily the responsibility of the government; this act deepened the divide between the authorities and the people; it posed a threat to the lives and health of a large number of people; and many citizens turned to medical and legal aid organizations for help. The Ministry of the Interior reported 56 injuries—not counting those affected by the "unknown device". These numbers, along with 31 arrests and a few isolated disturbances, suggest that the protest was largely

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<sup>37</sup> See the section titled "Conduct of the Supreme Public Prosecution for further details.

<sup>38</sup> <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vulinovo-priznanje-u-suzbijanju-protesta-pomaze-nam-ruska-obavestajna-sluzba/>.

peaceful. However, the government's orchestration of "blowing the final whistle" pushes Serbia into a high-risk security situation. Of particular concern is the fact that the government has made that risk worse by turning a blind eye to the political use of paramilitary groups—some of which are closely linked to organized crime and narcotics trade.

## PART THREE: STRATEGY FOR MANIPULATING THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE

### The Role of Electronic and Print Media in Reporting Citizens' Protests

Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), the public broadcaster and the most-watched and influential source of information in the country, is often criticized by the opposition, students, and independent journalists lacking objective reporting and for downplaying the protests. Still, RTS maintains a certain level of balanced programming compared to commercial national TV stations. Given that it is funded by taxpayers, public expectations from RTS are particularly high.

In contrast, commercial TV stations with national frequency—such as *TV Pink*, *TV Prva*, *TV Happy*, and *TV B92*—act as the backbone of the government's propaganda machine. Their reporting lacks objectivity, relies on sensationalism, and suppresses any alternative viewpoints. A significant portion of their income comes from public funds through advertising by state-owned companies, which ties them even more to political power.

In addition, through the cable network operated by Telekom Srbija, a media space has been created where pro-government channels like *K1*, *Tanjug TV*, *Kurir TV*, and *Informer TV* dominate. Telekom Srbija is majority state-owned, with over 50% of shares held by the Republic of Serbia, which makes it a key player in shaping the media landscape. These outlets act as mouthpieces for the government – they focus on discrediting the opposition, targeting students, and spreading conspiracy theories. They air special programs, fake documentaries, and debates that exclude opposition voices, further closing off public space to different opinions.

Tabloids like *Informer*, *Kurir*, *Alo*, *Večernje novosti*, and *Politika* play a big role in shaping how people—especially older citizens—see things every day. These are daily newspapers that have both print editions and websites, so they influence people both through kiosks and social media. Their front pages often use war language, label people, and dehumanize those involved in protests. These media don't just ignore the real reasons behind the protests—they twist the events and present them as conspiracies, coups, or foreign interference.

They also contribute to normalizing *narratives about foreign agents and frequently target the NGO sector*—all with the aim of reinforcing the image of the opposition as an internal enemy.

### Case Study: Media Manipulation and Public Narrative

#### *The Beginning: The Collapse of the Canopy and Denial of Responsibility*

On November 1, 2024, a canopy structure at the Novi Sad railway station collapsed, resulting in the deaths of 16 people. That same evening, President Vučić expressed surprise, claiming that the canopy had

*“never been reconstructed”*—a statement that was later proven false.<sup>39</sup> In the days that followed, pro-government media tried to downplay the responsibility, suggesting that “accidents happen.” The narrative implied that the canopy construction was problematic from the initial built in the 1960’s, aiming to shift the blame from the current authorities to alleged technical flaws from past decades. At this stage, a discourse of avoiding responsibility, denying any connection with the system, and shifting the narrative was established.

### *First Protests and the Creation of the Narrative on “Violent Opposition”*

In early November, daily protests and symbolic blockades of intersections began in Novi Sad and Belgrade, at 11:52, the time of the canopy collapse. Minutes of silence were held in memory of the victims. Pro-government media responded immediately by spreading the narrative that “the protests are harassing ordinary citizens,” focusing on “annoyed passersby.” The reporting was sensationalist, featuring statements from “ordinary passersby” who were “in a hurry to see a doctor,” “going to work,” or “picking up their children.” On several occasions, such passersby appeared on camera, and it was later revealed that some of them were activists of the ruling party. Once this information became public, such staged reports stopped appearing, further suggesting that the previously spread media image was intentionally constructed. The goal was to shift empathy away from the victims of the canopy collapse to the allegedly affected citizens “whose movement was supposedly hindered by the blockades,” while demonizing the protesters.

A few days after the protests began, an incident occurred in Novi Sad in front of the City Hall during a commemoration and protest for the tragedy. At one point, a small group of unidentified individuals started smashing windows and attempted to enter the building. Some protesters, according to reports, tried to set part of the entrance hall on fire. The police were deployed nearby but did not prevent the attack or intervene at the early stage of the incident, raising further suspicion about possible tolerance or even approval of the violence.<sup>40</sup>

Although there was no evidence linking the protesters to the violence, the government and pro-government media immediately began promoting the narrative on “violent opposition” trying to destabilize the country. President Vučić stated that these were “horrificing violent protests against the Republic of Serbia,” and the incident was used to launch a broader campaign to criminalize the protests. Even though none of the attackers were identified, and security services did not provide information about the organizers, the incident served as the starting point for a media campaign to discredit the protests.

### *Targeting Students and Demonizing Protesters*

In December, the narrative becomes more extreme: students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts made their demands and blocked their faculty building. Soon after, pro-government media published their personal information (e.g. the passport details of Lazar and his brother), accusing them of being “paid activists,” “foreign agents,” and “an extended arm of Croatian intelligence services.” The smear campaign reached its peak when tabloids published stories portraying the students as “anarchists who want chaos.” At the same time, media outlets like *N1* and *Nova S* were labeled as “traitors.”

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<sup>39</sup> N1, “Vučić on the tragedy in Novi Sad: The canopy was not renovated”, (*in Serbian*), November 1. 2024. <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-o-tragediji-nadstresnica-nije-obnavljana/>.

<sup>40</sup> 021.rs. “PHOTO, VIDEO: What happened in Novi Sad – Memorial, destruction of the City Hall, Vučić before the Progressives.” (*in Serbian*), November 6. 2024. <https://www.021.rs/story/Novi-Sad/Vesti/392492/FOTO-VIDEO-Sta-se-dogodilo-u-Novom-Sadu-Pomen-razbijanje-Gradske-kuce-Vucic-pred-naprednjacima.html>.



In the second half of November, tensions escalated at universities after students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) were physically attacked by unidentified individuals during a moment of silence held to honor of the victims of the Novi Sad tragedy. Later investigation revealed that some of the attackers were linked to the ruling party. The attack sparked a wave of solidarity across Serbia, prompting FDU students to initiate a blockade of their faculty. Soon, the blockades spread to other faculties in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, and Kragujevac. Students formulated a set of joint demands for ending the blockades, including legal action against those responsible for the attacks.<sup>41</sup>

Right after the student blockades began, pro-government media launched a coordinated campaign targeting student representatives. Tabloids portrayed the students as “mercenaries,” “foreign agents,” and “the extended arm of Croatian intelligence services,” while front pages labeled them as “anarchists who want chaos.” At the same time, national TV channels and pro-government cable networks began targeting media outlets that reported on the students’ views—such as *N1* and *Nova S*—labeling them as “traitorous” and “anti-state.”

An example illustrating how the tabloids treated students was the publication of passport photos of the Stojaković brothers, Lazar and Luka, in the newspaper *Večernje novosti*. These photos were used to fabricate a narrative claiming that the student protests were “led by Croats,” since the Stojaković brothers also held Croatian passports. Tabloids used this to imply a connection between the students and Croatian intelligence services. However, the brothers had dual citizenship because their father, who fled to Serbia during the “Storm” operation in 1995,<sup>42</sup> was born in Croatia. This fact was deliberately left out by pro-government media, and the students’ identities were used to discredit the entire student movement.

#### *A Narrative on Separatism and Civil War*

On February 15, 2025, on Serbia’s Statehood Day, a gathering was held in Sremska Mitrovica where president Aleksandar Vučić presented the so-called “People’s Declaration on Vojvodina.” The declaration was adopted by acclamation during the event. It emphasized the unbreakable bond between Vojvodina and Serbia, stating that “Vojvodina is not just a part of Serbia — Vojvodina is Serbia.”<sup>43</sup>

This event was part of a broader government campaign that, without any real evidence, linked opposition initiatives to separatist goals. As part of this effort, special media content was broadcast, including pseudo-documentaries like *Dossier: Vojvodina* (on TV Informer) — portraying opposition figures, NGOs, and student movements as part of a plot to separate Vojvodina from Serbia.<sup>44</sup> This film and similar media content reused an old narrative from the 1990’s, invoking the threat of foreign enemies and internal traitors, labeling

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<sup>41</sup> *N1*. “FDU students call for blockades of all faculties and demand prosecution of the attackers from Friday”, (in Serbian), Nov. 20, 2024.

<https://n1info.rs/vesti/studenti-fdu-a-pozivaju-na-blokade-svih-fakulteta-i-traze-procesuiranje-napadaca-od-petka/>.

<sup>42</sup> *021.rs*. “Return of the Nineties: *Novosti* targets students because of Croatian citizenship.” (in Serbian), February 8, 2025. <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/397831/Povratak-devedesetih-Novosti-targetiraju-studente-zbog-hrvatskog-drzavljanstva.html>.

<sup>43</sup> *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. “Declaration on Vojvodina: What effects does its adoption produce?” (in Serbian), RFE, February 15, 2025. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/deklaracija-o-vojvodini-efekti-usvajanja/33350396.html>.

<sup>44</sup> *Informer*. “Dossier Vojvodina: The truth about plans to break up Serbia – documentary film tonight at 9 PM”, (in Serbian), Feb. 15, 2025. <https://informer.rs/politika/vesti/989190/dosije-vojvodina-dokumentarni-film>.



protests as anti-national acts. The goal was to mobilize public support and sentiment around the idea that the “state was under threat.”

### *Incident in Front of the RTS Building – Using Disinformation to Discredit*

A few days before the large protest on March 15, during a student gathering in front of the RTS building in Belgrade, an incident occurred in which a plainclothes police officer, L.B., was injured. President Vučić quickly posted a photo of the injured officer on social media, claiming that students had attacked him using brass knuckles. In his statement, he wrote: “These violent people think they can get away with anything. They can’t.”

Soon after, videos began circulating on social media clearly showing that the plainclothes officer was actually hit by a member of the gendarmerie, likely by mistake in the chaos.<sup>45</sup> In an audio recording that later leaked to the public, the officer L.B., himself confirmed that he was hit by a fellow officer.

Despite the evidence, pro-government media ignored the facts and continued to push the narrative that students were violent, radicalized, and dangerous. RTS downplayed the footage in its report, stating only that “students claim” that the officer was hit by another officer. This case is a clear example of an attempt to criminalize the protesters by manipulating information.

### *Sonic Cannon: Manipulating Reality*

On March 15, 2025, during the largest civil protest in Belgrade up to that point, a minute of silence was held at 7:00 PM for the victims of the collapsed canopy. At that moment, a wave of unease spread through the gathered protesters. A group of people spontaneously moved apart, and many of them said they heard a strange, high-frequency sound that caused physical discomfort – dizziness, pressure in the head, and nausea. Based on witness accounts and videos shared online, there was suspicion that a so-called “sonic cannon” had been used against the protesters.

That same evening, President Vučić denied the use of any special device, calling those who made such claims “pathetic liars.” The next morning, the Ministry of the Interior, the Security Information Agency (BIA), and the Serbian Armed Forces released coordinated statements denying that they owned and used such a device. The Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office announced that anyone “spreading panic or false information about sonic weapons” would be prosecuted.<sup>46</sup>

However, in the evening of March 18, minister of interior, Ivica Dačić, admitted that the police possessed a sonic device, but claimed it was “sitting in boxes in a warehouse” and had not been put into use. The next day, March 19, opposition media and politicians published contracts for the procurement of long-range acoustic device (LRAD), along with photos showing a device mounted on a vehicle in front of the National Assembly. Dačić later acknowledged that the device had, actually, been “unpacked” and then showed a gendarmerie vehicle with LRAD device mounted on it, even demonstrated how it works.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> [https://n1info.rs/vesti/video-na-snimcima-se-jasno-vidi-da-je-policajca-povredjenog-ispred-rtis-a-udario-zandar/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com/](https://n1info.rs/vesti/video-na-snimcima-se-jasno-vidi-da-je-policajca-povredjenog-ispred-rtis-a-udario-zandar/?utm_source=chatgpt.com/).

<sup>46</sup> *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. “A Sound Cannon and Government’s Reaction”, (in Serbian), RSE, March 19, 2025. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbiaj-zvucni-top/33363225.html/>.

<sup>47</sup> *Nedeljnik*. “Dačić on the LRAD device: We use it for warnings, and its use as a sound cannon is prohibited”, (in Serbian), Nedeljnik.rs, March 19, 2025. <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/dacic-o-lrad-uredjaj-koristimo-za-upozorenje-a-zabranjeno-je-koriscenje-u-funkciji-zvucnog-topa/>.

Many citizens who attended the protest reported symptoms like nausea, dizziness, and ear pressure to healthcare facilities in Belgrade, including the Emergency Center. However, none of these institutions publicly shared how many cases were reported or confirmed that the symptoms were related to high-frequency sound exposure. Opposition media and some doctors claimed that medical staff were instructed to avoid commenting on the matter.<sup>48</sup> Pro-government media did not publish any of the citizens' testimonies, even though many were shared on social media, in opposition outlets, and by protesters. Instead, those who spoke about the disturbing event were portrayed as being misled or as manipulators themselves.

### *The Odžaci Case – Fabricated Assassination and “Civil War”*

On March 22, 2025, in the evening, a shooting occurred in the municipality of Odžaci, where a man, B.M. (45), was injured and taken to the Clinical Center of Vojvodina with life-threatening injuries. Initially, the incident was treated as a local criminal case, but pro-government tabloids (*Informer*, *Alo*) quickly spread a narrative claiming it was a politically motivated attack, emphasizing that a “supporter of the protest shot a member of the SNS.”

A special broadcast on TV Pink that evening aired with a title suggesting a possible civil war, using phrases like “Serbian blood has been spilled” and “students have started an armed confrontation.” Branko Babić, a businessman close to the government, appeared on the show, labeling the protests as a threat to the country's stability.

The man identified as the shooter, M.M. (78), a taxi driver and retired policeman, turned himself in to the police after feeling his safety was at risk due to media reports and threats of lynching on social media. The police stated that no investigation was opened against him, nor was he suspected of any crime. However, his name and photos continued to appear in tabloids and on web-portals, which kept pushing the disinformation campaign even after the official denials.<sup>49</sup>

Independent media and opposition activists revealed that neither the attacker nor the victim held prominent political positions, and there was no evidence of a political motive behind the conflict, claiming that the incident was fabricated to discredit the protests.

In response to this manipulation, citizens of Odžaci organized a protest under the slogan “Odžaci are not afraid,” emphasizing that the local community rejects propaganda aimed at causing fear and division.

This case serves as a clear example of a propaganda tactic in which a local incident is used to construct a narrative of violence, chaos, and internal enemy, undermining the legitimacy of the protests and creating a false image of a country in chaos caused by the protesters.

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<sup>48</sup> Vreme. “Silence of the Emergency Center and symptoms of the alleged sonic attack”, (in Serbian), Vreme, March 18, 2025. <https://vreme.com/vesti/cutnja-urgentnog-centra-i-simptomi-navodnog-zvucnog-udara/>.

<sup>49</sup> Vreme. “Shooting in Odžaci – Tabloids are Making Up the Civil War.” (in Serbian), Vreme, March 23, 2025. <https://vreme.com/drustvo/pucnjava-u-odzacima-tabloidi-vec-izmisljaju-gradjanski-rat/>.

## Media Engineering and Narrative Control: Strategies of Denial, Demonization and Intimidation

### *Gaslighting – Denying Reality as a Control Strategy*

The term "gaslighting" refers to the systematic denial, relativization, and distortion of reality in order to create doubt in people's own perception of events.

The authorities used this tactic on multiple levels: Sonic Cannon: physical symptoms and mass experiences of citizens are denied. Later, the existence of the device was acknowledged, but its role was redefined.

Incident in front of RTS: A footage showing that a police officer struck another police officer is ignored; only the initial narrative about violent students is maintained.

The Odžaci Case: A citizen who was targeted with no reason remains exposed to stigmatization, even though the police confirmed he was not under investigation, while protesters are accused of attempting to incite a civil war.

This pattern aims to disempower citizens, undermine their trust in their own perception of events, and prevent organized resistance. It creates a public atmosphere where there seem to be two parallel realities: one documented by facts and testimonies, and the other constructed by media under government control.

Pro-government media avoid reporting on the core aspects of the protests - there is no coverage of the number of protesters, their demands, messages, or speakers. Protesters are rarely, if ever, given space to express their views publicly, while protests are either completely ignored or reported solely through the lens of isolated incidents. This creates an informational vacuum, making the protests invisible to those who rely on pro-government media.

### *Narrative on "Civil War" and Ethnonationalist Mobilization*

Throughout the protests, the government narrative has been that the opposition, students, and NGOs seek to provoke chaos, bloodshed, and tear the country apart. This narrative is used to "control damage" among the ruling party's electorate and to intimidate neutral citizens.

The main points of this narrative are:

- Reviving the ethno-nationalist rhetoric from the 1990's by invoking terms like "traitors," "separatists," "internal enemies," and "foreign agents";
- Bringing up the trauma and resentments from the wars in the former Yugoslavia, frequently referencing "Sarajevo," "Zagreb," and "Pristina" as centers of conspiracy against Serbia;
- Special broadcasts like "Dosije: Vojvodina" which, in a documentary-like style, suggest that the protests are part of a separatist and subversive agenda.

The aim of this narrative is to make the protests seem like a threat to the state, rather than a legitimate struggle by citizens for accountability and justice. The government positions itself as the only factor of stability and peace, while any expression of dissatisfaction is portrayed as part of a conspiracy.

### *Demonizing and Dehumanizing the Opposition*

Opponents of the regime are not portrayed as people with different political views, but as enemies – foreign mercenaries, traitors, thugs, even terrorists.

Students are labeled as extremists, linked to foreign powers, Croatian intelligence services, and even criminal networks.

NGOs are targeted as centers of a “color revolution” with foreign funding networks.

Independent media that do not follow the government’s narrative are called “foreign agents” and “liars.”

The purpose of these narratives is twofold: to delegitimize any form of political or civic resistance, and to prepare the public to accept possible repressive measures.

#### *Role Reversal – Shifting from System Responsibility to a Narrative on Threat*

Instead of taking responsibility for systemic failures (such as the collapse of the canopy), the government builds a narrative in which it presents itself as the victim. Criticism of the authorities is portrayed as an attack on the state, rather than a call for justice.

President Vučić positions himself as the last line of defense against chaos – the only guarantor of peace and stability. Any form of criticism, whether it comes from universities or civil society, is interpreted as part of a coordinated attack. Claims of assassination plots, foreign interference, and violent plans to seize power are repeatedly echoed.

## PART FOUR: CONDUCT OF POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS

### Ruling Coalition Parties

Members of the ruling coalition often claim in public that they have strong support from the majority of citizens and that they are fully capable to deal with current challenges. At the same time, they tend to oversimplify the problems they face. For example, they portray student movements as groups of manipulated young people or just kids. In an effort to instill fear and present the leader as being under threat, they often call for so-called “all-Serb unity” and talk about the need to create a movement with the aim to “defend the leader and the state.” The list of “enemies” and “haters” seems to grow rapidly. According to Vučić, the main threats come from “collective West” and “those in the region who have always served foreign interests and always seek support from the international community, instead of talking to Serbia.” The political opposition and anyone with different opinions — whether about Serbia’s direction or topics like lithium mining in Jadar — are also seen as threats.

Since November 2024, political leadership and political life in Serbia have faced a trend of strengthening the existing form of authoritarian rule, along with continued partial economic and infrastructural reforms that are unsustainable in the medium term. The lack of political will to change and Government’s inability to shift current policies, have deepened and widened the gap between the authorities and the society — that is, the public — on many political and everyday issues. This has raised the question of the immediate future of Vučić’s rule, and whether a change of government is coming.

### Parliamentary Opposition Parties

The parliamentary opposition does not have a unified approach or coordinated strategy, both in the parliament and in public. Occasionally, there is *ad hoc* cooperation and solidarity, but the effects of such efforts are limited and far less powerful than the influence of student and civic activism. So far, there is no clearly defined political alternative being offered in contrast to the ruling party’s policies. Some parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties—especially local initiatives, movements, and citizen groups—share common ground with student protests and are actively involved in civic activism and supporting student efforts. This is especially visible in Vojvodina (e.g., Novi Sad, Zrenjanin, Indija), but also in central Serbia (Belgrade, Niš, Zaječar, Kraljevo, Valjevo, Čačak, Kragujevac, Čuprija, etc.).

Recognizing these shared activities and demand for change, the authorities, especially president Vučić, runs a campaign to criminalize and dehumanize the opposition, especially pro-European parties. At the same time, the authorities try to fully exclude the opposition from the work of local, provincial, and national assemblies. This includes measures to prevent the physical presence of opposition councilors and MPs in parliamentary sessions. They are also not hesitant to use police and gendarmerie forces in this effort.

There have been various incidents in the Serbian parliament so far, from throwing water, pulling microphones, generating massive noise with “vuvuzelas” (long horns blown by soccer fans) and whistles, holding up banners, to physical fights. However, no pyrotechnics have been used. Similar incidents have happened in other parliaments, like those in Priština, Rome, Budapest, Kyiv, Tirana, and New Delhi.

Past incidents, especially recent ones, haven’t helped the opposition in stopping the government from passing laws. But these current events are unfolding at a time when mass student protests have been ongoing for months, following the tragedy in which 15 people died and two were seriously injured after a canopy collapsed in Novi Sad. Most state universities are under blockade, some primary and secondary schools have joined the boycott, and large protests have been organized by students across cities in Serbia—thus creating very different political context.

It is hard to say who benefited more from the incidents in the National Assembly – the government or the opposition. On the one hand, many believe that the opposition undermined the student protests through these incidents, giving the authorities a justification for its narrative about an attempted violent takeover. On the other hand, some people on social media praised the opposition’s “active approach,” saying it was better than passively boycotting the session.

## PART FIVE: THE STATE OF PROTECTION OF CITIZENS' RIGHT TO PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

In this Report, *the Ad hoc Mechanism* starts from the concept of **human security**—a framework focused on protecting individuals from threats that can endanger their lives, dignity, and fundamental rights. This concept includes: **health security** (protection from diseases, epidemics, safeguarding mental health, and ensuring access to healthcare); **personal security** (protection from ill-treatment, violence, crime, and conflict);<sup>50</sup> and **political security** (protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms).

During this reporting period, there has been a noticeable increase in threats to personal security. This includes a growing risk of violence, particularly for participants in peaceful protests—such as violence by members of organized crime groups—and threats from extremists targeting citizens' physical security. The situation is also worsened by the lack of rule of law, especially in the form of disrespect or selective application of laws. There has been a rise in public attacks by public officials—including the president of the Republic, the speaker of the National Assembly, members of the government, and local and provincial authorities—targeting journalists, political opponents, activists, and civil society organizations and initiatives. A particularly worrying trend is the use of decisions made by the outgoing government to condition or limit economic and social rights. For example, protesters have had their income reduced, and recipients of social assistance—especially those from Kosovo (designated by the Serbian Government as a region of special social concern)—have reportedly been pressured to take part in pro-government political

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<sup>50</sup> During the period covered by this *Report*, forensic experts of the Ad hoc Mechanism (forensic medicine specialists from three university centers in Serbia) were not able to establish direct contact with victims whose security was threatened by various human rights violations, such as torture and ill-treatment. As a result, they had no opportunity to examine or analyze medical records related to physical injuries, such as medical reports, discharge summaries, or similar documents.

Therefore, medical data were collected from publicly available sources (media reports, published facsimiles of medical records, etc.).

Information about individual events analyzed during this reporting period was obtained from media articles, electronic media, and social networks (X, Instagram, Facebook, etc.). In some cases, publicly available photos of incidents or injuries and/or video footage were obtained through these channels. If the material met minimum quality standards for interpretation, it was taken into consideration and analyzed.

Although the number of sources was relatively high, the lack of direct contact with victims and the inability to review the collected documentation or access evidence from official investigations significantly limited the work of the forensic experts during this period.

In addition, no contact was made with lawyers representing individuals who were subjected to ill-treatment or torture, or those who suffered physical injuries during incidents involving suspected human rights violations. This includes both defense lawyers representing individuals charged with crimes (e.g. on suspicion of committing the criminal offense of obstructing a law enforcement officer in the performance of security duties) after being injured during police actions, and lawyers representing victims of torture in criminal proceedings against police officers accused of ill-treatment.

For these reasons, this report presents only illustrative cases (see Part Five – Uninvestigated Death of Dalibor Dragijević at the Bor Police Station).

events or to confront citizens with opposing political views. Institutional dysfunction is also a major issue, including the delayed, inefficient, and biased work of public prosecutors, slow court proceedings, and poor performance of the Protector of Citizens' Office—especially in its role as the national mechanism for the prevention of torture. There have also been repeated abuses by security services, as shown in the analysis of the events that occurred on March 15, 2025, in Belgrade.

The *Ad hoc Mechanism* indicates that torture and ill-treatment are still present in police practice in Serbia during the reporting period. International and domestic sources—such as the CPT, UN Special Rapporteurs, and the Protector of Citizens—point to ongoing issues during arrests, interrogations, and protests. Even though there are legal standards in place, in practice there are systemic failures and clear need for reforms. Timely forensic medical examinations are essential for providing evidence that support victims and allow for prosecution of those responsible.<sup>51</sup>

According to reports, the most common methods of torture include physical violence such as punching, slapping, kicking, electric shocks, and suffocation with plastic bags. Injuries are also inflicted using objects such as baseball bats and metal chains. These methods leave serious physical and psychological consequences and are often used to force confessions or intimidate arrested and detained persons.

In recent years, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in public protests. During the protests, but also during the arrest and detention of protesters, there were many reports of the use of force. It is worth noting that, although police records often stated that no visible injuries were observed, medical staff in detention facilities documented physical injuries that did not match the official police reports. In 2024, numerous incidents of police brutality were recorded. For example, Dalibor Dragijević died in police custody in Bor in April, and Ilija Kostić, sustained serious injuries in Novi Sad. These cases received significant media and public attention, highlighting the urgent need for reforms and greater responsibility and efficiency of institutions—not only in prosecuting such cases and addressing impunity, but also in implementing effective preventive strategies.

The period starting with the collapse of the canopy above the main entrance of the railway station in Novi Sad, on November 1, 2024, began with the justice system and security services of Serbia already burdened by serious shortcomings and failures in their previous work. Numerous instances of conduct inconsistent with applicable laws and constitutional provisions guaranteeing human rights—provisions that are directly applicable—have led to a profound erosion of public trust in the institutions. A widespread perception has emerged that the rule of law<sup>52</sup> in Serbia is under threat, that the constitutional principle of separation of powers<sup>53</sup> has been undermined, and that the ruling political group, centered around the Serbian Progressive Party, has—contrary to the Constitution<sup>54</sup>—brought state power under its control, or

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<sup>51</sup> The protection of citizens' physical and psychological integrity entails a set of legal and institutional mechanisms safeguarding bodily inviolability and mental well-being as a fundamental human right, guaranteed by numerous international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and various Serbian laws. Specific aspects of the protection of this right include: the right to a fair trial and protection against unlawful deprivation of liberty; prohibition of torture and ill-treatment; prohibition of corporal punishment; the right to medical safety and informed consent; the right to privacy and protection of personal data; and the protection of mental health.

<sup>52</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Article 3

<sup>53</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Article 4, Paragraph 2 and Article 3, Paragraph 2

<sup>54</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Article 5, Paragraph 4



more precisely, under the will of its leader.<sup>55</sup> These concerns have deepened over the five months following the collapse of the canopy, up to the date of this report. We present the most well-known cases.

**Uninvestigated death of Dalibor Dragijević at the Police Station in Bor.** Dalibor Dragijević died on April 7, 2024, at the Police Station in Bor. In a statement issued the same day, the Ministry of the Interior claimed that his death was due to natural causes. However, a few days later, the public learned through the media that Dalibor had in fact died a violent death as a result of torture. This was the conclusion of forensic experts from the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Belgrade, who performed the autopsy and documented and described his injuries in detail. This revelation caused public outrage, which grew even stronger in the following period due to a complete lack of information from the Higher Public Prosecution in Niš about the progress of the case. A particularly troubling fact is that, despite numerous requests, the prosecutor denied Dalibor's father right to access the case file and learn the details of his son's death uncovered by the prosecution. Furthermore, requests from the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights for basic information about the case were also denied, with the explanation that sharing such details could allegedly jeopardize the pre-investigation procedure. Despite repeated appeals by the legal representative of Dalibor's father to the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Niš, the Appellate Public Prosecution in Niš, and the Republic Public Prosecutor, requesting the proceedings be expedited and made more effective, the case remains—almost a full year later—stuck in the pre-investigation phase. It is clear that the police officers carrying out the pre-investigation steps under the prosecutor's orders have still not submitted all relevant facts about Dalibor's death, which involved their fellow officers. As a result, no formal investigation has yet been launched. The delays and inefficiency—especially the tolerance and justification of such conduct—suggest that both the police and the prosecution have contributed to delaying the truth about the torture and killing of Dalibor. It is also telling that the Protector of Citizens initiated the procedure to oversee the police conduct only two months after Dalibor's death, and to this day, the public and or those who submitted individual requests have not received a single update about the actions taken. This is contrary to the Law on the Protector of Citizens which sets a three-month deadline to conclude such process.

Despite the statement from the Ministry of the Interior<sup>56</sup> and initial media reports<sup>57</sup> claiming that Dragijević died of natural causes, reporting by *Radar* suggests that the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Zaječar was informed "of a preliminary finding that the death was violent"<sup>58</sup>, right after the autopsy was completed. However, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Zaječar stated that it "did not receive the

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<sup>55</sup> Since May 2023, the president of the Serbian Progressive Party has been the outgoing prime-minister Miloš Vučević. However, the former party president and current president of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, remains the most influential figure and de facto leader of the party. He frequently plays a leading role in government sessions and directly issues instructions to the Government and its ministers. "The suspect who helped the offender after a crime has died."

<sup>56</sup> "A suspect in helping an offender has died after a committed crime," Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia – (in Serbian), Press Release, April 7, 2024; available at: <http://www.mup.gov.rs/wps/portal/sr/aktuelno/saopstenja/a4e68161-ae13-4aa4-b676-49a7d0eb2c2b>.

<sup>57</sup> "Although an autopsy was ordered, it is already certain that Dalibor Dragijević died of a heart attack," according to *Republika* on 07.04.2024 in the article "HEART GAVE OUT! It's not true that the brother of the missing girl's killer, who died in prison, was healthy! NEIGHBORS REVEAL UNKNOWN DETAIL FROM DALIBOR DRAGJJEVIĆ'S LIFE!"; available at: <https://www.republika.rs/hronika/hronika/532296/nestala-devojica-dalibor-dragijevic-drugi-srcani-udar>.

<sup>58</sup> "Plastic bag over the head, boot on the neck", (in Serbian), *Radar*, Issue 7, 25.04.2024; available at: <https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/policijska-tortura-kesa-na-glavu-i-cizma-za-vratom/>.

autopsy report of D.D. and cannot confirm the claims published by some media outlets,” according to *Blic*, quoting Miodrag Canović, the Chief Public Prosecutor in Zaječar.<sup>59</sup>

It is publicly known that in the early morning hours, Dalibor Dragijević “felt unwell, and despite the timely response of police officers and doctors from the Bor Health Center who tried to resuscitate him, he died at 3:10 a.m. The medical examiner declared it was a natural death.”<sup>60</sup> We also know that “Dalibor Dragijević was arrested on April 6.”<sup>61</sup> Additionally, information shows that between the time of his arrest and his death, Dalibor Dragijević was not in police custody in Bor the entire time: “Police officers from Belgrade gave almost identical statements, saying they took Dalibor Dragijević out of the Police Station in Bor around 3:00 p.m. on April 6 and brought him back 12 hours later, reporting he had fallen ill. Officers from the Bor station said they had arrested him and then handed him over to colleagues from Belgrade.”<sup>62</sup>

On April 25, 2024, the media reported that, “after receiving the autopsy report from the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Belgrade, the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Zaječar submitted a request to transfer jurisdiction in the case of Dalibor Dragijević’s death.”<sup>63</sup> The same article quoted a statement from the Zaječar Prosecutor’s Office saying, “This is in line with the *Methodology for Conducting Investigations in Cases of Ill-Treatment by the Police*.” In fact, “The Appellate Public Prosecutor’s Office in Niš authorized the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Niš, to take actions and measures to determine the circumstances under which Dalibor Dragijević died on April 7, 2024, in accordance with the *Methodology for Conducting Investigations in Cases of Ill-Treatment by the Police*, as prescribed by the Mandatory General Guidelines of the Republic Public Prosecutor No. O. 3/17 dated September 26, 2017.”<sup>64</sup>

So, as soon as the autopsy report was received, it was clear to the Public Prosecutor’s Office in Zaječar that Dalibor Dragijević’s death was violent and related to ill-treatment or torture. About three weeks have passed since Dragijević’s death.

The investigation in this case was taken over by the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Niš; however no publicly available information has been released regarding the progress of the proceedings. For instance, approximately four months after the case was transferred to Niš, in September 2024, it was reported that the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Niš “rejected [...] a request for access to public information

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<sup>59</sup> “Chief Public Prosecutor responds to media reports that one of the suspects in the murder of Danka Ilić died a violent death: Here’s what he said”, *Blic*, 19.04.2024; available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/oglasio-se-javni-tuzilac-za-blic-nakon-navoda-da-je-dalibor-dragojevic-premino/z2bhr7g>.

<sup>60</sup> See above: *Republika*, 07.04.2024, article “HEART FAILED! It’s not true that the brother of the missing girl’s killer, who died in prison, was healthy! NEIGHBORS REVEAL UNKNOWN DETAIL FROM DALIBOR DRAGIJEVIĆ’S LIFE!”, (in Serbian).

<sup>61</sup> See above: *Blic*, 19.04.2024: “The Chief Public Prosecutor responds to media reports that one of the suspects in the murder of Danka Ilić died a violent death: Here’s what he said.” (in Serbian).

<sup>62</sup> “Covering up a brutal police killing”, (in Serbian), *Radar*, Issue 40, 10.12.2024; available at: <https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/dalibor-dragijevic-policijsko-ubistvo/>.

<sup>63</sup> “Latest information about death of Dalibor Dragijević in police custody in Bor: This is prosecution’s response”, (in Serbian), *Telegraf*, 25.04.2024; available at: <https://www.telegraf.rs/english/3879623-latest-information-about-death-of-dalibor-dragijevic-in-police-custody-in-bor-this-is-prosecutions-response>.

<sup>64</sup> “The Prosecutor’s Office has reported: It is known who is taking over the case of the violent death at the police station in Bor,” *Direktno*, 26.04.2024.; available at: <https://direktno.rs/vesti/hronika/523660/dalibor-dragijevic-nasilna-smrt-bor-policijska-stanica.html>.

concerning the death of Dalibor Dragijević.”<sup>65</sup> Moreover, “during the eight-month period in which the autopsy report has been with the prosecution in Niš, no formal order to launch an investigation has been issued – an essential procedural step required to initiate any investigative action. To date, the only procedural activity by this prosecution appears to be the submission of ineffective requests for information to the Police Internal Control Sector (SUK), with no confirmation as to whether any responses have been received.”<sup>66</sup>

About eight months after Dragijević’s death, the media published information from the autopsy report.<sup>67</sup> In the article, it is stated that the "Autopsy Report, followed by the Findings and Opinion of the forensic expert, shows that Dalibor Dragijević [...] was killed while in police custody,” with a note that “the number of injuries on Dragijević’s body clearly shows the kind of police torture he went through.” *Radar* published 8 out of the 10 pages of the autopsy report; pages 4 and 5 were not included. The published copy of the autopsy report shows that the document was received by the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Zaječar on April 22, 2024, and registered under the number KTR 185/24.

From the parts of the autopsy report that were made public, the following conclusions are clear: Visible injuries were found on parts of the body that were not covered by clothing:

On the left side of the forehead, a large bruise on the skin (about 5 x 4.5 cm); on the left side of the face, another large bruise (about 9 x 5 cm), with internal bleeding in the soft tissue beneath the skin; bleeding visible in the left eye's conjunctiva; on the left ear, behind the ear, and just below it at the jaw line, a bruise (about 8 x 5 cm); on the lower part of the left cheek, at “at least three spots shaped like large fingertips”, individual bruises (total area about 4.4 x 3.5 cm); several scrapes around the nose; on the right side of the forehead, bruising (about 4 x 2.5 cm); on the right side of the face, around the cheekbone and outer eye area, bruising (about 9 x 4 cm); on the chin, right side, a bruise (about 3 x 1.5 cm); on the right side of the neck, bruising (about 2.5 x 2 cm), also with internal bleeding in the soft tissue; around the left wrist, striped scrapes and bruises on the skin – injuries that, by position and nature, match those caused by use of force, such as handcuffs; on the back of the left hand, a bruise (about 5 x 5 cm); along the right forearm, wrist, and back of the hand, scrapes and bruises.

Injuries were found that could have caused external bleeding: small cuts on the inside of the left cheek and a small wound above the inner ankle of the right leg.

Injuries were also found on parts of the body usually covered by clothing: Bruising on the upper part of the left shoulder (about 6 x 7 cm) and the front upper part of the right shoulder (about 13 x 7 cm); a large area of bruising on the upper and back side of the left shoulder (about 28 x 30 cm), and on the left shoulder blade and below it (about 10 x 9 cm and 11 x 10 cm). On the upper back part of the right shoulder and along the upper arm—“almost to the elbow”—as well as the shoulder blade area, there was a large area of bruising (about 55 x 22 cm). On the left upper arm, in several places, there were scrapes and bruises (about 6 x 3 cm and 14 x 10 cm), and on the backs of both elbows there were scrapes and bruises (left: about 15 x 14 cm; right: about 13 x 10 cm).

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<sup>65</sup> "Still secret data on the death of Dalibor Dragijević, brother of the suspect for the murder of Danke Ilić," *Novi magazin*, 06.09.2024., available at: <https://novimagazin.rs/vesti/332876-i-dalje-tajni-podaci-o-smrti-dalibora-dragijevica-brata-osumnjicenog-za-ubistvo-danke-ilic>.

<sup>66</sup> "Police Badge as a Shield from Punishment: The Continuity of Brutality Marked the Past Year," *Danas*, 22.12.2024., available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/kontinuitet-policijska-brutalnost/>.

<sup>67</sup> See above: *Radar*, issue 40, 10.12.2024.; "Covering up the Brutal Police Murder".

Injuries with characteristics that strongly suggest the use of torture methods: Massive bruising on the right foot, including the sole, along with swelling, peeling and damage to the soft tissue under the skin of the sole; massive bruising on the soft tissue under the skin of the left sole, which was also found to be damaged and torn; injuries that appear to have been caused by a blunt object, such as a baton, including a bruise in the right buttock area shaped like a parallel stripe, affecting both the skin and underlying soft tissue. Around that area, there were also large bruises on the skin (about 28 x 18 cm).

Injuries that were not visible on the outside but were found during the internal examination of the body include: Multiple bruises in the scalp tissue; bleeding inside the skull (acute subdural hematoma); bleeding between the layers of the brain's lining (subarachnoid hemorrhage); broken bones in the chest area – the breastbone (sternum) and ribs on both sides. On the right side: fractures from the 1st to the 9th rib, with double fractures from the 2nd to the 4th ribs, mostly at the front of the chest (where the ribs connect to the sternum and the cartilage), and one fracture (9th rib) at the back near the shoulder blade. On the left side: fractures from the 3rd to the 9th ribs, with double fractures from the 3rd to the 5th ribs, including the 9th rib being broken in two places—mostly at the front (near the sternum, cartilage joint, and side of the chest), and one fracture (9th rib) at the back near the outer edge of the shoulder blade. There were also widespread injuries to soft tissue under the skin on the torso and limbs, mostly in the same areas where visible injuries were seen on the skin.

The conclusion about the cause of death, as stated in the autopsy report, reveals that it was determined that Dalibor Dragičević's death was "violent" and occurred "due to respiratory and circulatory disturbances caused by multiple bruises of soft tissues and fractures of bones," and that these injuries were inflicted "by repeated impacts of a blunt, actively swung mechanical tool."

An analysis of the case, based on publicly available information, allows the following conclusions to be drawn:

Dalibor Dragičević, after his arrest, did not remain in the police premises the entire time; at one point, law enforcement officers took him out of the official premises.

Considering the number, extent, and characteristics of the injuries described in the available part of the autopsy report, it is clear that some of these injuries must have been visible, as they were on body parts not covered by clothing—such as the face, neck, and hands. Due to the extent and number of injuries, Dragičević must have been in pain, and physical pain would have likely intensified with movement. The injuries on his feet, especially the soles, would have made walking extremely painful for Dragičević, if not almost impossible, as he could not put his weight on the injured feet.

It should be noted that it is the duty of police officers, when detaining citizens, to visually inspect and determine, among other things, whether there are any visible injuries on the person brought or escorted into the official premises. Additionally, besides directly asking the detained individual about any health issues or injuries, police officers are trained to observe and assess whether someone's general condition is affected—such as whether the person may be under the influence of substances, has mental health issues, or shows signs of compromised health in any other way.

Although official police records regarding the detention of the Dalibor Dragičević are not available in the public domain, based on the fact that he was placed in police custody after his arrest and no doctor was called – since there is no available information about this – it can be concluded that he did not have physical

injuries at that time, which were later determined during the autopsy. This applies to both his initial detention in the official police premises and the period after he was removed from the police premises.

All of the above points to a complete lack of protective measures to prevent the torture of individuals deprived of their liberty – detained by the police. This conclusion aligns with numerous findings of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) regarding its visits to Serbia. Specifically, the CPT has repeatedly, for over two decades, pointed out to the authorities of the Republic of Serbia that the issue of torture is prevalent in the conduct of police officers, and that protective measures, including medical examinations, either do not exist or, if they are carried out, are only formal and do not ensure the prevention and protection against torture that these measures are meant to provide when properly implemented.

The lack of preventive measures and more decisive action by the executive authorities of the Republic of Serbia, especially the senior representatives of the Ministry of the Interior, in line with the CPT recommendations, directly led to the loss of human life in this case. Moreover, the fact that, by the time this *Report* was published, the responsible individual(s) have not been identified, nor has an indictment for the torture being filed for the torture and ill-treatment of Dalibor Dragijević, which resulted in his death, is just one in a series of cases where impunity for such actions by members of the Ministry of the Interior, as well as other security services, sends a message from the highest levels of government that such conduct is deemed acceptable by the authorities.

***Stanimir Brajković passed away on February 4, 2024, in the Belgrade – Padinska Skela Penitentiary,*** where he was serving a prison sentence for failing to pay a fine for a misdemeanor (throwing firecrackers). The public was informed about his death a month later. The Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade announced that an autopsy was conducted, revealing that he died from violent causes. Three twenty-year-olds who shared a cell with Brajković are suspected of torturing him for nearly a month before his death. The day before his death, Brajković was examined by a doctor due to injuries he had sustained. However, the attending healthcare worker did not identify any injuries, and Brajković was returned to the same cell. The next day, according to the autopsy report, he died from the injuries, blood loss, and respiratory and circulatory failure caused by bilateral rib and breastbone fractures, and resulting complications. The suspects were arrested, and detention was ordered for them. The Ministry of Justice later announced that the Penitentiary Management immediately informed the police and the relevant public prosecutor's office upon learning of Brajković's death. Internal control procedures and disciplinary responsibility procedures were initiated against the responsible personnel at the Belgrade – Padinska Skela Penitentiary, and the warden of the facility was dismissed due to the incident. Subsequently, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade announced that during the extraordinary inspection and internal control at the Directorate for the Execution of Criminal Sanctions, it was found that 11 employees at the Belgrade – Padinska Skela Penitentiary had made severe professional mistakes, and they were all suspended until the disciplinary procedures were completed. By the end of June, five employees were arrested. In late July, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade announced that it had filed charges for negligent work against all arrested officers, and in early September, they filed charges for the aggravated murder of Brajković against three of the accused. The main hearing in the criminal proceedings against the officers of the Directorate for the Execution of Criminal Sanctions has been postponed twice, with the most recent delay in late January 2025. What is concerning is that two days before Brajković's death, the Protector of Citizens' team visited the Belgrade – Padinska Skela Penitentiary to monitor the implementation of recommendations from the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, based on visits to Serbia in 2021 and 2023. According to the report from the visit, the

Protector of Citizens' team did not notice any indications of ill-treatment toward this individual, although the visit, among other things, aimed to check the quality of medical examinations of detainees and compliance with the obligation to inform public prosecutors about injuries observed on detainees.

***Public debate on amendments to the Criminal Code. The Ministry of Justice held a public debate from October 1 to November 1, 2024, on the Draft Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code and the Draft Law on Amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code.*** The Draft Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code contained several controversial provisions, which sparked strong reactions from legal experts. Some of these provisions concerned the legal framework for prohibition of torture and other forms of ill-treatment, which would have been further weakened if the proposed changes were adopted. Specifically, the draft law proposed removing the criminal offense of extortion of confession (Article 136 of the Criminal Code), as well as expanding the list of offenses punishable by life imprisonment, while also introducing a ban on parole for those offenses. The explanation given for removing the criminal offense of extorting a confession was that its basic elements overlap with those of the offense of ill-treatment and torture under Article 137 of the Criminal Code, which allegedly leads to inconsistent legal practice in qualifying offenses and determining sentences. It was also stated that the removal is aligned with the concluding observations of the UN Committee against Torture, which recommend to formulate a single legal definition that would cover both offenses. However, this justification by the Ministry of Justice's working group is not entirely accurate. Although there is some overlap between the legal definitions, it is far from complete overlap. Therefore, removing the offense of extorting a confession would not achieve a satisfactory result in terms of fully criminalizing and punishing the offense of torture and other forms of ill-treatment. In fact, the UN Committee against Torture has never asked that the Serbian authorities remove the offense of extorting a confession from criminal law. Instead, it has called for full implementation of the torture from Article 1 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. For nearly two decades, the UN Committee against Torture has been making this recommendation in its concluding observations on Serbia's periodic reports on its compliance with the Convention. Faced with well-founded criticism of the proposed provisions in the Draft Law by legal experts, as well as with strong public dissatisfaction over the way the law was being drafted, the Ministry of Justice has decided to abandon the proposed legislative changes.

***Injury of Ilija Kostić at the Novi Sad Police Department.*** On November 21, 2024, 74-year-old Ilija Kostić was taken into custody at the Novi Sad Police Department as a suspect for assaulting a police officer. He was accused of spraying a police officer in the face with pepper spray during a blockade of a judiciary building in Novi Sad. Three days later, news spread on social media and in the media that Kostić had been tortured by police officers while in custody. According to his statement to the media, two officers each punched him in the head, and one of them also kneed him in the groin while insulting him. While in custody, Kostić was examined by doctors several times. During one of the examinations, swelling of the testicles was observed. The next day, on November 22, he was questioned by a prosecutor from the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad. There, he reported the torture and stated he could identify the officers responsible for his ill-treatment. Kostić was placed under house arrest. Two days later, due to the severity of the injuries, one of his testicles was surgically removed at the Vojvodina Clinical Center. The Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Sremska Mitrovica took over the case and launched an investigation against two unidentified individuals for the criminal offenses of torture and inflicting serious bodily injury. Despite media claims that the head of the Novi Sad Police Department was involved in Kostić's ill-treatment, the prosecutor stated that he holds no status in the case and therefore was not questioned. At the prosecutor's request, the Ministry of the

Interior's Internal Control Sector obtained surveillance footage from the police building where the torture took place, but it is unknown whether the footage shows any ill-treatment. So far, no further information about the progress of the investigation has been made public.

***Police officers still not held accountable for beating of young protester I.K. Near the Mathematics Grammar School.*** At the end of October 2024, the Protector of Citizens issued a report confirming, in response to a complaint by the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, that a group of police officers tortured a young man who had been taken to custody by the police on December 18, 2023, during a citizen protest in front of the Republic Electoral Commission building, for allegedly behaving violently. The report stated that the Internal Control Sector obtained footage from police video cameras located near the Mathematics Grammar School. The videos show three unidentified men in civilian clothes escorting three other unidentified men toward the gymnasium. In the school courtyard, several uniformed Gendarmerie officers and several unidentified individuals in civilian clothes were seen. The footage also shows "plainclothes officers interacting with one unidentified man, and around 11:00 PM, a uniformed officer handcuffing him and leading him to a police vehicle." After the Internal Control Sector provided the video footage of the courtyard to the Protector of Citizens, it became clear that the "interaction" between the officers and the man was in fact an act of torture. "At 10:29 PM, the video shows a man, identified in the report as a plainclothes officer, approach the victim and punch him twice in the face. He then grabbed the man by the neck, pushed him, and, with the help of another plainclothes officer, forced him to the ground on his stomach, even though the man offered no resistance... After the man had been laying on the ground for five minutes, another plainclothes officer approached, leaned over him, and struck him four times in the head with an open hand. This ill-treatment was witnessed by other plainclothes officers from the Public Order Department, as well as Gendarmerie members who had just returned to the scene a minute earlier—but none of them intervened. The exact number of officers involved could not be determined due to the camera angle and people frequently moving in and out of frame".

The explanation in the report shows that the Ministry of the Interior (MUP) informed the Protector of Citizens that the Belgrade City Police Department had submitted a document to the Internal Control Sector. In that document, they claimed that due to the poor quality of the video recordings, low lighting, night-time recording settings, and the distance between the individuals and the camera, it was not possible to clearly identify which police officers had acted toward the complainant. The Protector of Citizens concluded that the Ministry's claim—that the officers could not be identified—was unconvincing. This was because, in addition to the video footage, there were also records available showing the duty rosters and assignments of police officers. Furthermore, it was possible to interview the complainant and other officers who were known to be present at the scene of the ill-treatment. The Protector of Citizens conclusion was that the investigation conducted by the Ministry of the Interior to identify the officers responsible for ill-treatment was incomplete and needed to be repeated. However, it remains unclear why this recommendation was not included among those the Protector of Citizens sent to the Ministry of the Interior. What casts further doubt on the conduct of the police and prosecution in this case is the fact that the police filed criminal charges against the victim, I.K. After questioning him, the public prosecutor from the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade proposed that he be placed in pre-trial detention. Encouragingly, the judge handling the pre-trial judge rejected the request, stating in the decision that there were no grounds for detaining I.K.

***Beating of anesthesiologist dr. Nikola Radić in Novi Sad by police officers and members of the personal security team of Predrag Ranković Peconi, owner of Happy TV.*** In mid-December 2024, the public was

informed that on November 3, in Kosovska Street in Novi Sad, four members of the Ministry of the Interior's Special Unit for the Protection of Specific Individuals and Objects, along with two unidentified individuals, beat Dr. Nikola Radić, an anesthesiologist from Novi Sad. The incident occurred in front of a restaurant where the owner of Happy TV, Predrag Ranković Peconi, was sitting, being guarded by the aforementioned individuals. After Dr. Radić complained about an improperly parked official vehicle blocking the sidewalk, plainclothes police officers, along with two other unidentified individuals, brutally attacked him. Dr. Radić fell to the ground after the first blows, but the attackers continued to beat him, causing severe bodily injuries. When a police patrol arrived at the scene, the plainclothes officers who had beaten Dr. Radić identified themselves and claimed that Radić had attacked them, and that they had subdued him to stop his further attack on them. The police patrol took Dr. Radić to the Klisa Police Station, accusing him of assaulting the officers. As he complained of severe pain, an ambulance was called, and Dr. Radić was examined. The emergency room doctor issued a referral for an X-ray. That evening, the duty prosecutor of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad was informed of the incident and ordered checks to see if there was any surveillance footage covering the location of the incident, to find citizens who reported the event, and to perform an on-site investigation. Dr. Radić was examined at the University Clinical Center of Vojvodina, where severe bodily injuries were confirmed, including contusions of the chest and abdomen, a fracture of the left forearm, and multiple bilateral rib fractures. Later that day, a video recording of the incident, captured by security cameras, was obtained. The next day, the minister of interior announced that the police officers who had beaten Dr. Radić were suspended, their credentials and weapons were confiscated, and they were criminally charged with causing serious bodily harm. They were brought before the prosecutor of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad on November 19, 2024. It is unclear why the officers were only brought before the prosecutor 16 days after the incident. After questioning all the suspects, the public prosecutor proposed pre-trial detention, but the court issued a decision placing them under house arrest. It is not known for how long this measure was imposed on the four Ministry of the Interior officers or what further steps have been taken in this case.

***Expulsion of attorney Kristina Todorović from Zvezdara Police Station, and denial of legal access to detainees, on March 15, 2025.*** It should be emphasized that, aside from the inappropriate conduct and disproportionate use of police authority toward Attorney Kristina Todorović, the problem here is also that the police officer brutally violated the right of detainees to meet with their lawyer without delay. I want to highlight that timely access to a lawyer, immediately upon arrest, is one of the most important protective mechanisms against ill-treatment. It is recognized as a standard in the treatment of detainees, as outlined in numerous international treaties ratified by Serbia, standards of the UN and Council of Europe, as well as in the recommendations issued by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture in its reports to Serbia. Also, the issue is that two participants of a public gathering (to whom Attorney Todorović was not allowed access by the police) were arrested, brought to the police station, and held at Zvezdara Police Station for several hours, only to be released without any documentation explaining the reason or grounds for their detention.

***Police search of Civil Initiatives and CRTA offices and documentation based on U.S. president's allegations of USAID funding misuse.*** On February 25, 2025, at around 9:20 AM, a large group of about 20 officers from the Criminal Police Directorate, armed with pistols, entered the Human Rights House, located at Kneza Miloša 4, in Belgrade. Subsequently, around ten officers, several of whom visibly carried pistols on their belts, entered the offices of the Civil Initiatives organization. Despite being informed that the display of weapons was unnecessary, particularly in the workplace of peaceful citizens, mostly women, the officers refused to remove their weapons from view, causing significant fear among the employees. When



employees and legal representatives of Civil Initiatives who arrived later, asked on what basis the police officers were acting, they stated that they did not have a written order but were acting on an "informal, verbal request from the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade" to obtain copies of documents related to a project supported by USAID. They referred to their authority under Article 286, paragraph 2 of the Criminal Procedure Code, claiming that it allowed them to speak with the legal representatives of Civil Initiatives and seek necessary documents without a written order issued by public prosecutor. Despite the raised concerns about the legality of their conduct, the police officers, around 6:30 PM – nine hours after they began their procedure - allowed the representatives of Civil Initiatives a partial review of the written document KTRKO 23/25 from the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, Special Department for Suppression of Corruption, issued by prosecutor Jelena Milutinović Zijkić, requesting from the police to collect all necessary information from Civil Initiatives based on Article 286, paragraph 2 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Since the access to the entire text of the document was not available, it remains unclear whether the document existed at the time the action began, and whether the representatives of Civil Initiatives were misled into believing that no written document was in place, or if the document was created afterward. The way this procedure was conducted – by giving instructions to make available and hand over all requested documents, in the presence of armed police officers - suggests that this was conducted as a search of premises. In essence, the police procedure did not differ from a standard search conducted under Article 156, paragraph 1 of the Criminal Procedure Code, making it misleading to present them as a measure assigned to the police by the public prosecutor. Employees of Civil Initiatives were forcibly instructed to make available and copy the requested documents, and they left the premises after all requested materials were collected. Furthermore, the fact that public prosecutor ordered the seizure of photocopies of documents indicates that there was no urgency in the action, which is normally required when the police are acting under Article 286 of the Code. If urgency had existed, the original documents would have been seized due to the risk of destruction or other reasons. Finally, equating the substance of police measure under Article 286 of the Criminal Procedure Code, whether or not carried out based on order issued by public prosecutor, with the evidentiary action of searching premises, essentially circumvents the requirements and procedures prescribed by the Criminal Procedure Code for conducting a search of an apartment or other premises as an evidentiary action by which evidence is obtained, and the inviolability of the apartment and other premises is interfered with. In the absence of consent from the legal representatives of Civil Initiatives, the procedure should have been carried out in accordance with Article 155 of the Code, which requires a court-issued search order – an order that was not issued in this case.

The conduct in question, which included all the elements of a search, could not have been carried out as a search without a search order, because none of the conditions set out in Article 158(1) of the Criminal Procedure Code were met. Specifically, there was no consent from the holder of the premises, no call out for help, no need for immediate arrest the perpetrator of a criminal offence, no need to execute a court decision on the placement of a defendant in detention, or to eliminate a direct and serious threat to persons or property.

For more information on the specific case and the violations committed, please refer to the complaint I submitted on March 5, 2025, in my capacity as legal representative of Civic Initiatives, to the preliminary proceedings judge of the Higher Court in Belgrade. The complaint concerns the actions taken on February 25, 2025, against the organization Civic Initiatives at its premises in Kneza Miloš Street No. 4 in Belgrade, by members of the Ministry of the Interior, Police Directorate, Criminal Police Directorate, and Department for Fight against Corruption. A copy of the complaint is attached. The legal representative of CRTA submitted a

complaint on March 12 with identical content, except for the name of the organization, a few time references, and the names of those involved in the search.

***False claim that students attacked a plainclothes gendarmerie officer during the protest outside RTS.***

Lazar Bačić, a plainclothes gendarmerie officer, was injured on March 10, 2024, on Aberdareva Street, after students called for a blockade of the RTS building. That's the first undisputed fact of the incident. The second is that his left eye was injured. That fact is confirmed by a photo shared that same evening by the president of the Republic, who posed with the injured Bačić. The third undisputed fact is the video footage, which clearly shows the moment a man in plain clothes is hit in the head, loses his balance, and falls to the ground. The fourth fact is that the person who hit Bačić, as seen on the footage, was a uniformed member of the gendarmerie. An additional detail is that Bačić is a member of the Belgrade gendarmerie unit. With all the facts on the table, the situation is clear: a uniformed gendarme struck a plainclothes gendarme. Footage from Aberdareva Street also shows Bačić, bleeding and walking away from the scene after the injury. Student stewards and citizens step in and offer help. These facts didn't stop officials and institutions from making completely different claims. The Ministry of the Interior stated that the injured officer said he was hit with brass knuckles, even though the footage clearly shows he was punched with a bare fist. Just half an hour after the attack on Bačić, the president of the Republic posted a photo with him on Instagram, stating that Bačić is a police officer who was attacked by "Bolshevik plenum members" and, according to the president, was struck with brass knuckles.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, videos were circulating on social media clearly showing who hit the plainclothes police officer. The Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade announced that it instructed the police to urgently identify the individuals who attacked members of the gendarmerie and struck them from behind the night before. However, there is still no information on the progress of the investigation.

***Attempted murder by a moving vehicle of a student who was peacefully standing on the sidewalk during the blockade of the intersection near the Vuk Monument in Belgrade on January 16, 2024.*** There have been numerous reports and media coverage on this. This act of driving through a crowd of protesters, which prosecutors have qualified as attempted murder, was incited by the president of the Republic with statements that it is not illegal to drive through a crowd of protesters blocking the streets if the protest is not officially registered. The minister of interior stated that the police cannot provide security for unregistered public gatherings, which he deemed illegal, overlooking the fact that the police's duty is to protect citizens, primarily their physical safety.

***Physical attack on students in the early hours of January 28, 2025, in front of the SNS office in Novi Sad.***

On January 28, 2025, around 3 a.m., members of the Serbian Progressive Party physically attacked students in front of the party's offices in Novi Sad. One girl was seriously injured, suffering a dislocated jaw and injuries all over her body, and was treated at the University Clinical Center of Vojvodina. Several other students sustained minor injuries. The attack, according to media reports, took place when a female student and a male student from the Medical Faculty stuck a sticker on a trash can in front of the Serbian Progressive Party office, which was a call for a protest scheduled for February 1 in Novi Sad. At that point, two unidentified individuals with short hair emerged from the Serbian Progressive Party office and attacked the students. The students involved in the blockade condemned the attacks and demanded that those responsible be identified as soon as possible

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<sup>68</sup> "Vučić posted a photo with an injured police officer, then called the students 'Bolshevik plenary members,'" Nedeljnik, March 11, 2025, available at: <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/vucic-objavio-fotografiju-sa-povredjenim-policaicem-pa-studente-nazvao-boljshevikim-plenumasima/>.

and that they be treated according to the law. "We urge all relevant institutions to step in as soon as possible and start doing their job. We're tired of blood,"<sup>69</sup> said the students.

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<sup>69</sup> "Attacked group of students in Novi Sad," RTV, January 28, 2025, available at: [https://www.rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/vojvodina/novi-sad/napadnuta-grupa-studenata-u-novom-sadu\\_1602102.html](https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/vojvodina/novi-sad/napadnuta-grupa-studenata-u-novom-sadu_1602102.html).

## PART SIX: THE ROLE AND CONDUCT OF EXTERNAL ACTORS

The relationship between Serbian authorities and external actors is rooted in interests, where external players prioritize their own geopolitical, economic, and security agendas, often prioritizing the “leader” over other actors in Serbia. For over a decade, the Serbian government and Vučić himself have been active partners in conflict management with the EU and the US, as well as in games with Russia and China.

The "naughty" or even "bad guy" image depicts Vučić and Serbia as a "platform for foreign influences," particularly from Russia and China. For the EU and the US, as well as for Russia and China, Vučić and Serbia are seen as debtors living on deferred payment, failing to deliver on agreements. Overall, an unreliable partner, facing consequences for unmet promises alongside with new demands and intensified scrutiny. Their debts are being paid off by taking control of natural resources, including land ownership and the establishment of monopolies on exploitation. Examples of this include mining projects by Chinese state-owned companies, which have secured ownership of land in Eastern Serbia through official land registry records, and the Rio Tinto project in Western Serbia.

The "lithium trump card" played by Vučić and Serbian authorities is acceptable to many businesses and political elites in the US and EU, particularly in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland. They need lithium but are not willing to exploit their own rare earth reserves.

Geopolitics has not, for now, been an ally of the citizens' protests against the totalitarian government.

The EU delegation to Serbia has so far responded only by expressing concern over the injury of a female student struck by a car during the traffic blockade in Belgrade, emphasizing that the right to peaceful assembly must be protected.<sup>70</sup>

The European Parliament has largely expressed its support for Serbian students, concluding during its discussion on Serbia that "Serbian students are the voice of hope and conscience for the entire Balkans."<sup>71</sup> European media, although somewhat delayed, have begun covering the student protests, emphasizing the students' persistence and determination to carry their efforts through to the end.

Tonino Picula's first visit, as the European Parliament's rapporteur for Serbia, took place in a hostile atmosphere. Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, outgoing prime-minister Miloš Vučević, and Milenko Jovanov, head of the SNS parliamentary group in the Serbian National Assembly, refused to meet with him. Picula made realistic assessment about Serbia, stating that Serbia is a "highly polarized country" that is going through "serious political crises", and that the question arises as to whether it “really has the European orientation”. He specifically highlighted the "internal conditions in Serbia and problems

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<sup>70</sup> <https://www.nin.rs/drustvo/vesti/66406/eu-o-gazenju-studentkinje-veoma-smo-zabrinuti-pravo-na-okupljanje-mora-biti-sticeno>.

<sup>71</sup> <https://n1info.rs/vesti/poslanici-evropskog-parlamenta-o-situaciji-u-srbiji/>.

with the rule of law, media freedom, electoral framework, persistent spread of corruption in many areas, and public administration reform."<sup>72</sup>

In an interview following his visit to Serbia, Picula stated that "after the discussions I had, it is currently unclear in which direction the entire process is heading and what the political articulation of conflicting interests will be, both within and outside institutions."<sup>73</sup>

Even though EU officials have not made any statements, global media have started to follow the situation in Serbia more closely, which is also affecting the decisions of some business partners. The South East Europe (SEE) Mobility Fair, which was scheduled for April 24–25 in Belgrade, has been canceled because exhibiting companies from EU countries believe there is a security risk for their representatives, as top Serbian officials are labeling foreigners as enemies.<sup>74</sup>

March 15, 2025, marks the beginning of a new phase in the international political response to the crisis in Serbia. After months of ignoring student and citizen protests against the government, foreign politicians and officials - especially from the West – have started to speak out more. Based on reactions in print and electronic media, the message is clear: supporting Aleksandar Vučić's "stabilitocracy" is no longer seen as a guarantee of stability and security in Serbia or the region.<sup>75</sup>

There have been no official reactions in the region, except from the Government of the Republic of Srpska, which, along with Republic of Srpska president, Milorad Dodik, has been actively opposing the "color revolution," meaning the student and citizen protests in Serbia.<sup>76</sup>

After the March 15 protest, statements from EU officials became more frequent. For example, EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, said: "An unprecedented number of Serbian citizens peacefully demonstrated in Belgrade today, calling for the rule of law and strong, accountable democratic institutions. An agreement on the reforms necessary for Serbia's European path should follow." However, her unexpected expression of gratitude "to everyone who ensured the safety of participants" raised eyebrows. In reality, the protest was called off by the protesters themselves due to violent actions by government supporters and the inadequate response of the police. A particularly serious political consequence arose from a security incident that could only have been organized and carried out by the authorities.

EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, described her meeting with Vučić in Brussels on March 20 as "constructive." She avoided making any public assessment of the crisis facing both Serbia and its government. Instead, she stated that they discussed concrete steps on Serbia's path toward the EU and the implementation of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, while also mentioning the "importance of civil society and independent media in this process."<sup>77</sup> Like her earlier statements about Aleksandar Vučić's government, Kos's comment deepened the existing public distrust in Serbia toward the EU's political leadership and the "European future" under Vučić's rule.

This is essentially the same message that was conveyed by Kos and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, which includes thanks to "everyone who ensured the safety of all protest participants." However, at the time this statement was made, both the domestic and international public — thanks to media coverage — were aware of the threats to the safety of citizens who took part in the protest.

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<sup>72</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/articles/c8e7d3j2jnyo/lat>.

<sup>73</sup> <https://n1info.rs/vesti/picula-za-n1-politicki-kapaciteti-eu-da-se-ozbiljnije-angazuje-u-srbiji-nisu-neki/>.

<sup>74</sup> <https://n1info.rs/biznis/otkazan-medjunarodni-sajam-u-beogradu-najvisi-funkcioneri-srbije-etiketiraju-lica-iz-inostranstva-kao-neprijatelje/>.

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/u-posljednja-dva-tjedna-dva-puta-razgovarali-sef-natoa-i-vucic-zasto/2653266.aspx>.

<sup>76</sup> New image of Serbia in the region — Student's, not Vučić's Serbia, March 9, 2025. Omer Karabeg (<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/most-imidz-srbija-protesti-studenti-vucic/33340908.html>).

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/u-posljednja-dva-tjedna-dva-puta-razgovarali-sef-natoa-i-vucic-zasto/2653266.aspx>.

## PART SEVEN: RECOMMENDATIONS

**The situation in Serbia has all characteristics of a state of emergency, due to a deep political crisis and escalating security destabilization.** The following activities are therefore deemed a priority:

1. Encourage and support initiatives and activities that enable the establishment of rules and mechanisms for de-escalating tensions and security risks. The goal is to reach a democratic agreement on the mechanism for peaceful, political, and democratic resolution of the current political crisis. This mechanism – such as a roundtable on normalizing the situation, a roundtable for democratic dialogue, or a roundtable on the transfer of power – must involve the most relevant political and social actors. These include representatives of the protesting citizens (student, local civic and political movements, professional associations, trade unions, and other civil society organizations), who enjoy clear public support, as well as representatives of the ruling and opposition parliamentary parties, groups, and initiatives.
2. Establish an Independent Expert Commission to collect and examine the key facts necessary for a comprehensive assessment of the state of human security, human rights, and freedoms in Serbia, starting from November 1, 2024. The priority is to determine the actors, consequences, and responsibilities for violations of the constitutional and legal conditions governing the implementation of the state of emergency measures, as outlined by the Serbian Constitution and laws, as well as by international instruments, particularly the UN Charter and Council of Europe standards.
3. At the beginning of 2025, there has been a noticeable rise in radicalism and extremism in Serbia, escalating to an increased risk of terrorist activity, often marked by ethno-nationalism, racism, and religiously motivated rhetoric. Particular attention should be paid to instances of armed violence among citizens, especially those driven by political or criminal motives. It is recommended that the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office resume the activities that were discontinued in 2011. These activities relate to the operations of extremist groups (such as the *Srpska Desnica* (Serbian Right), "*Nacionalni Stroj* (National Alignment), and *Srpska Sparta* (Serbian Sparta), and their ties to political parties, especially public officials.
4. There is a need to enhance the conduct of existing institutions, including both internal and public (parliamentary and other) oversight of the security sector. The activation of existing mechanisms for parliamentary and other forms of oversight is recommended. It is suggested to establish a National Security Agency (NSA) that would oversee and collaborate in enhancing the operations of the Security Information Agency (BIA), Military Security Agency (VBA), public prosecutors, and other agencies in addressing threats to Serbia's national security.
5. Urgent measures should be taken, in accordance with the Constitution and laws of Serbia, to assess whether the conduct of institutions of special public importance (particularly the Constitutional Court, the Anti-Corruption Agency, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and

Personal Data Protection, and the Protector of Citizens) has been in compliance with their constitutionally and legally defined rights and responsibilities. In particular, it should be assessed whether their action – or lack of action – contribute to enhancing the protection of human security, human rights, and freedoms in Serbia.

6. Government bodies should act in accordance with their responsibility to protect the right to peaceful public assembly, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, ratified international treaties and domestic law. In particular, the guidelines developed by the UN, with assistance of its independent experts and special rapporteurs on the right to peaceful assembly, should be consistently respected. These guidelines establish how the state should act with regard to gatherings and protests.
7. The competent authorities must carry out a full investigation to find out what caused fear and panic among people at the peaceful protest on March 15, 2025, at Nikola Pašić Square and during the incident at 7:11 p.m. on Kralja Milana Street in Belgrade. Public officials – especially the president of the Republic, the Ministry of Interior and the prosecution—are called on not to interfere with a credible and transparent investigation, aimed at determining who planned and ordered the operation that directly endangered the safety, rights, and freedoms of protest participants. This operation included the use of illegal devices and the violence carried out by paramilitary-style groups. It is crucial to establish all the facts related to the security incidents, especially the use of devices or tools banned by law, which posed a threat to the lives and health of a large number of protesters. It is crucial to clarify the role of public officials involved in this high-risk incident, in order to prevent further security destabilization in Serbia,
8. To effectively prevent torture and ill-treatment, with support from the highest authorities, it is crucial to establish zero tolerance for such conduct; strengthen medical protocols while protecting victims' privacy; train healthcare workers to recognize and document the physical and psychological effects of ill-treatment; and ensure consistent prosecution of those responsible, through efficient and transparent accountability mechanisms.



# APPENDIX

## STUDENT BLOCKADES AND CIVIC PROTESTS

### TIMELINE (01.11.2024 - 16.03.2025)\*

#### INTRODUCTION (Student and Civic Resistance)

The student resistance is a direct response to the structural crisis and the current social, economic, and political situation in Serbia. Student protests have become a key driver of change in society, especially with increasing public support. According to public opinion research conducted by the NGO CRTA, around 80% of citizens support the students. Citizens believe that the protests can bring positive changes—46% think the country is heading in the right direction, compared to 38% who disagree. The rise in optimism about the country's future, as the research data suggests, clearly stems from the energy brought by the student protests rather than trust in state policies or the economic situation. Nearly 60% of citizens trust the students, and an equal percentage believes that it is not within the President's authority to address student's demands.<sup>78</sup>

Students refuse to be called a political movement, but, as historian Olga Manojlović-Pintar points out, "their movement, marches, and walks through numerous places also shape them."<sup>79</sup> For now, students are the only actors with moral legitimacy and the only ones whom society trusts. Olga Manojlović-Pintar emphasizes that these protests represent "a specific rebellion that will give rise to a new ideological movement, becoming the driving force of major social changes in Europe, and even globally."<sup>80</sup> The greatest success of the protests lies in the fact that they have deeply shaken society, which is slowly freeing itself from the fear of authority. However, the open question remains how this energy will be translated into political action and further liberation from repression.

Students persistently deny that their demands have been met. At a gathering in Kragujevac, they read a letter stating that "Justice will not come with the boots of soldiers, carrying full war gear on their backs. It will come with the boots of those whose shoulders carry a head that thinks freely."<sup>81</sup>

At the student gathering in Niš, the **student edict** was presented, containing provisions on freedom, the state, justice, youth, dignity, knowledge, solidarity, and the future.

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\* Prepared by: S. Lilić ( 31.03. 2025)

<sup>78</sup> <https://crt.rs/ubedljiva-podrska-gradjana-srbije-studentskim-zahtevima-i-protestima/>.

<sup>79</sup> <https://autonomija.info/olga-manojlovic-pintar-iz-studentskog-pokreta-radja-se-jedan-novi-ideoloski-pokret/>

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1466493/10-razloga-zbog-kojih-mitropolit-joanikije-nije-smeo-potpise-pismo-protiv-srpske-pravoslavne-crkve-patrijarha-srpskog.>

<sup>81</sup> <https://autonomija.info/procitano-studentsko-pismo-u-kragujevcu-kraj-je-zimskog-sna-a-java-obecava/>.

The umbrella organization of youth in Serbia (KOMS) reported that since the beginning of the student protests until February 20, 73 attacks on young people had been recorded, including arrests, hate speech, and intimidation of activists.<sup>82</sup>

The student protests have exposed the dysfunctionality of state institutions, the unprofessionalism and corruption within the system, but also the deep dissatisfaction of citizens, which culminated in the tragedy in Novi Sad. Although the student movement has inspired a people or civic movement, it has not yet been established as a political actor, despite the large gatherings in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Niš.

### (a) Protests and Blockades in November 2024

A series of mass protests began after the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station on **November 1, 2024**, in a tragedy that resulted in the deaths of 15 people and severe injury of two others. According to available data (mid-February 2025), the protests have spread to 276 cities and towns across Serbia and are still ongoing. The protests are led by students who are demanding accountability for the collapse of the canopy. The main symbols and messages of the student blockades and civic protests are "Your hands are bloody," "Corruption kills," and "We want justice" (e.g., the high school students' slogan: "We don't want a (school) break, we want justice").

The collapse of the canopy has caused widespread public concern in Serbia, with many questioning the structural integrity and oversight of public infrastructure maintenance. While authorities did launch an investigation into the causes of the incident, frustration grew due to the public deception that "the canopy reconstruction had not been carried out." However, it later emerged that it had been, alongside hesitation to initiate procedures for political and criminal accountability.

Early protests primarily took the form of quiet vigils (11:52-12:07) for victims of the canopy collapse. However, these protests began to morph into larger demonstrations, with protesters accusing the police and local authorities of negligence and corruption. Protesters began demanding a transparent investigation into the canopy collapse, and the release of documents related to the incident.

President Aleksandar Vučić, minister of construction Goran Vesić, *Infrastruktura Železnice* Public Railway Company, and the pro-government media outlets initially claimed the canopy was never reconstructed, even though video footages of the reconstruction were available online, showing Vesić officially opening the reconstructed Novi Sad railway station. Faced with accusations and public outrage, Vesić announced his resignation, but stated that "he does not feel responsible."

Some initial protests escalated into acts of vandalism, with the Novi Sad city hall being a primary target. Red paint was thrown on the city hall entrance and attempts were made to breach the building. The police responded with tear gas and arrests, further inflaming tensions. Protesters suggested that these and other violent acts were the result of government plans seeking to derail the protests. On **November 20**, current minister of trade and former minister of construction, Tomislav Momirović, resigned from the ministerial position (in his resignation later, he pledges his "eternal loyalty to president Vučić"). The next day, minister of construction, Goran Vesić was arrested along with 11 unspecified persons but was let go after six days.

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<sup>82</sup> <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/koms-vise-od-70-napada-na-mlade-od-pocetka-studentskih-blokada/>.

On **November 21**, Vladimir Đukanović, a high-ranking member of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), commented on the protests on his Twitter account: "We must fight against anarcho-terrorists, fake communist intellectuals, the pseudo-elite that is ravaging Serbia with anti-Serbian attitudes. It is time to stop this social scum, in every place and at every step, and God forbid, if necessary, with force. This scum will no longer be able to terrorize this country. Long live Serbia and just fight bravely."

On **November 22, 2024**, the student blockades began at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade as a reaction to an attack on students who were quietly paying their respects to the victims of the tragedy in Novi Sad. Following the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, other faculties and high schools quickly joined. Citizens also joined the students, conducting daily traffic blockades in silence from 11:52 to 12:07, a so-called "thunderous silence" lasting 15 minutes for the 15 victims. On that day, students and professors from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts gathered near the faculty to pay tribute to the victims in Novi Sad. The gathering was announced to the authorities in accordance with the law. A group, allegedly including high-ranking officials of the ruling SNS party, attacked the participants at the gathering.

After the attack on **November 25**, students began occupying the faculty in protest. Soon after, the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad joined, followed by the Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Philology, Faculty of Natural Sciences, and Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade. The protesters continued their 15-minute protests by blocking traffic at 11:52.

During this period (and later), there were several "intentional car incidents" involving injured protesters. On **November 29**, an incident occurred during a traffic blockade in Požarevac, when a man in a car "carried" one protester on the hood of the vehicle. As seen in the footage available on social media, the man in the car tried to pass through the blockade while one citizen stood in front of him. The car moved forward, the man tried to stop it, turned around, and fell onto the hood, but the driver did not stop, even accelerating. In response to this incident, Vučić, in a cynical narrative, stated: "(...) someone jumped on the hood because the man wanted to pass, and now they say we should arrest the man who was driving the car. How can you arrest a man who didn't break the law? He was just going on his way. Are you guys out of your minds? Splash some cold water on your face, rub your eyes, and get rid of eye boogers. You stood in someone's way, told them – I won't let you pass, the man passed, and now you're jumping on his car." Vučić also stated: "Violence is carried out by those who do not announce their gatherings, who violate the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of movement, and I have to say this to everyone, including people from SNS, from SPS, and anyone else, whenever they do this."

In late November, an audio recording was leaked to the press, allegedly with the voice of Damir Zobenica, vice president of the Vojvodina Assembly and a member of the Serbian Progressive Party, advising other party members to insult and attack the protesters blocking the roads. Zobenica resigned soon after the leak, and former vice president of the provincial government Goran Ješić filed a criminal complaint against him.

## **(b) Protests and Blockades in December 2024**

By early December, the blockade of faculties in Belgrade spread to the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Philosophy, and Faculty of Fine Arts. Students from several high schools began organizing 24-hour blockades at some school campuses. By mid-December, more than 50 faculties, including

the three biggest universities of Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, and multiple secondary schools had suspended classes and joined student protests.

On **December 6**, during a 15-minute blockade in downtown Belgrade, a car drove through the crowd, injuring four members of the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra who were protesting. The orchestra condemned the attack, and the driver was arrested.

The protests were also joined by the Bar Association of Serbia, which organized a one-day strike on **December 11** due to the "systematic and long-term interference by the executive branch in the work of the judiciary and violation of the principle of separation of powers in a democratic society."

On **December 11**, students protested at the headquarters of the public media service RTS for their broadcasting of president Vučić's claims that protests are being funded by Western countries seeking to destabilize Serbia. The same day, Vučić made concessions including promising that all documents related to the disaster would be publicized, announced that all currently held protesters were released, and pledged to pardon any protesters if they were convicted.

On **December 12**, students of the Faculty of Technical Sciences and the Agronomic Faculty in Čačak organized a protest, which began with 15 minutes of silence. On **December 13**, farmers in central Serbia blocked the Ibar Highway with tractors. That same day, in Novi Sad, a group of four hooligans tried to ram their Porsche vehicle into the protesters and afterwards physically attacked them. The attackers were later arrested; it turned out that one of the attackers was an active duty police officer. On **December 15**, in a TV interview, prime-minister Miloš Vučević said that "you can't bring down a country because of 15 people who died, nor 155, nor 1,555." Due to overwhelmingly negative reactions, Vučević later apologized. On **December 17**, high school students in Mladenovac commemorated the victims of the canopy with 15 minutes of silence.

On **December 18**, in response to President Aleksandar Vučić's calls for talks, students replied, "Who asked you anything?" They stated that their demands were directed to the relevant institutions, from which they expected responses, not from the president of Serbia. They emphasized that there was no reason to respond to these calls, as they were waiting for answers from the institutions responsible for fulfilling their requests, which did not include the president. They concluded that the regime had no response to their demands.

On **December 19**, commenting on the involvement of high school students in the protests, Vladimir Đukanović, a high-ranking SNS official, stated that "children are property of the state until they reach the age of majority." This statement sparked a strong reaction from the Commissioner for Protection of Equality, who described it as "utterly unfounded, dangerous, and condemnable." Đukanović defended his statement by claiming it was "metaphorical" and "taken out of context."

On **December 20**, the silent protest was extended by one minute to commemorate a victim from Zagreb school stabbing in Croatia.

In response to police brutality and alleged paid hooligans who attacked civilians and protesters, opposition leaders, students, farmers, and independent protesters organized a large-scale protest on **December 22**, at Slavija Square in Belgrade. The estimated attendance ranged between 100,000 and 102,000 people, which marks the biggest protest in Belgrade and Serbia by attendance in recorded history.

On **December 24**, Vučić threatened the students in an interview by stating that: "If I wished so, I could send out the Cobras special-forces on the students and they would throw them around in 6-7 seconds..." This statement was widely ridiculed, and caused the students to make memes, making fun of Vučić and his

phrase "throwing around." It is worth noting that Cobras are not in charge of crowd dispersals but rather a special group for protection of public officials.

On **December 25**, students and protesters brought 1,000 letters to the office of the public prosecutor Zagorka Dolovac, urging her to "start doing her job." That same day, employees of the Serbian Intelligence Agency (BIA) paid an unofficial visit to the mother of one of the student organizers, at her workplace. She interpreted this move as a "threat and pressure." Other organizers allegedly received phone calls inviting them to come to BIA offices "for a friendly chat," but no official summons were handed. In the evening, over 2,000 people protested in Užice, in front of the city hall. The local authorities, led by SNS, turned off the street lights in front of the hall, but the protesters brought a portable power generator.

On **December 27**, protesters blocked the road in Ivanjica. An incident occurred when a driver drove his car in full speed through the gathered crowd. Once his vehicle stopped, the gathered protesters attacked him; however, he was immediately protected by undercover police standing nearby and allowed him to leave the area without legal repercussions. That same day, 200 employees of RTS signed a petition in support of the protests.

On **December 29**, Vučić publicly accused eight Croatian students from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (FER), who were visiting their fellow students in Belgrade, of organizing the protests on behalf of the Croatian Intelligence Agency (SOA). The names of the Croatian students were published without their consent in the pro-government media and, upon leaving Serbia, they were given alcoholic beverages with a note to "send their regards to SOA" by the he Serbian border police. Croatian prime-minister Andrej Plenković described Vučić's claim about the Zagreb students as "ridiculous."

On **December 31**, Vučić announced the formation of a "loyalist faction" within the SNS, whose "17,000 members swore a blood oath in secrecy," who are "pro-Russian oriented" and are "a bit too extreme for (his) taste." He also revealed that his brother is among the members. This statement caused a lot of debate: according to some analysts, it is directed not towards the protesters, but towards the more reluctant members of SNS, whereas others expressed doubt that Vučić can gather 17,000 loyal activists. A group of citizens signed a petition demanding an official police investigation into the existence of "loyalists."

### (c) Protests and Blockades in January 2025

On **January 3**, a student protest was held in Aleksandrovac, the largest one in the town's history. The students were joined by other citizens, including some of their professors. On the same day, after a round of negotiations with education workers' unions, prime-minister Vučević stated that all education workers who decide to go on strike will be fired and replaced. This statement sparked widespread negative reactions among education workers, who characterized the statement as "arrogant" and "insulting." On January 6, high school students in Požarevac organized a protest, which began with 15 minutes of silence.

The government tabloid *Večernje novosti* published pictures of Croatian passports showing the names and personal data of two student protesters, claiming they are "Croatian spies" sent to "destabilize Serbia." However, it turned out that the students in question come from Croatian Serb refugee families and hold dual citizenship of both Serbia and Croatia. The students announced they will sue the tabloid, due to breach of the Serbian data protection laws, and the public widely condemned the article.

On **January 10**, protesters in Belgrade gathered in front of the Palace of Justice, and afterwards blocked the ring road in downtown Belgrade. Protests were also held in Novi Sad, Niš, Zrenjanin, and Kikinda.

On **January 11**, protesters gathered in front of the offices of BIA in Novi Sad, inviting the BIA employees "for a friendly chat." The building was heavily guarded by police. A large protest was simultaneously organized in Kragujevac by local high-school students, later joined by medical workers. Students of the Faculty of Engineering in Kragujevac condemned the act of vandalism by an individual who tore down posters hung in front of the faculty on the night of January 10. *"We assume this was an individual from a prepared group tasked with tearing and removing flyers calling for the protest... We hope that such incidents will not be repeated and that they will not escalate into any attempts at physical attacks on students,"* they stated.

On **January 12**, around 20,000 students and citizens gathered in front of the Constitutional Court of Serbia in Belgrade, demanding the prosecution of those responsible for the canopy collapse and expressing support to the school workers' union, which announced a general strike. The protest began with 15 minutes of silence. At the same time, students in Niš organized a protest in front of the Rectorate of the University of Niš. They put up a banner saying "Work stoppage due to protest" on the second floor of the Rectorate building. Students from the Faculty of Civil Engineering in Belgrade announced that they had canceled events scheduled for the Serbian New Year celebration on the evening of January 13. They also reported that some individuals had come to the faculty and threatened students, which led to the cancellation of previously planned events for the Serbian New Year.

On **January 13**, late in the evening, unknown persons physically attacked the students who were blocking the Belgrade Faculty of Law, including one female student. In total, six students were injured. The police intervened, and one of the attackers was arrested. Six students who were blocking the Faculty of Law throughout the night were injured in three incidents caused by unknown individuals, as reported on the Instagram profile "Students in Blockade": "One female student was pushed down the stairs and fell on her head, and then, along with five other law students, was transported by ambulance to the emergency center for first aid." After the incident, the attackers reportedly arrived in vehicles to remove evidence from the courtyard in front of the Faculty of Law. The students have demanded that the individuals who attacked their colleagues be identified and prosecuted. One of the female students, A. J., from the Faculty of Law stated that the attackers entered the faculty building with someone else. She mentioned that, due to the New Year celebration, students were allowing their friends to enter the building, and everything was normal until a young man, who was later arrested by the police, started tearing down posters.

On **January 14**, the largest education workers' union (NSPRS) announced a one-day general strike, dissatisfied with the government policy toward teachers and professors. The union representatives officially expressed their support for students and announced they will join the protests. On the same day, the workers union of *Elektroprivreda Srbije*, Serbia's state-owned power company, announced a general strike, as well. In downtown Belgrade, thousands of students marched in a rally, expressing their support for the assaulted law students and the general strike.

On **January 16**, during a 15-minute "silence" blockade in downtown Belgrade, a dark blue Ford Focus vehicle drove through the protesting students, carrying one female student on the car roof for several meters without stopping. The injured student was taken to hospital, and the driver was arrested and charged with attempted murder. This incident caused a widespread outrage: later during the day, thousands rallied in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Zrenjanin, Kragujevac, and Kraljevo, whereas in Niš, some of the faculty professors joined the student blockade. In response to the protests in Kraljevo, the mayor of Kraljevo, Predrag Terzić, member

of the SNS, posted on social media, spreading hate and accusing the students of being “ustaša” (a term used to refer to Croatian fascist collaborators during World War II). Other SNS officials in Kraljevo and Čačak made similar accusations.

On **January 16**, in Čačak, hooligans stormed the family home of a teacher Đorđe Matijević, who was also a union representative, threatening him into voting against the general strike. Earlier during the day, Matijević had a meeting with the mayor, Milun Todorović, where he was asked to vote against the strike. This caused an outrage throughout Čačak and next day, thousands gathered in support of the teacher.

On **January 17**, opposition members of the Novi Sad City Assembly took over control of the Novi Sad City Hall, but were soon forced out by the police in riot gear. Later during the day, an older man carrying a pocket knife tried to attack the students protesting in front of the Medical Faculty in Novi Sad, but the students took the knife away from him. On the same day, protesters gathered in Vranje, where the names of 15 victims of the canopy collapse were read out loudly. The workers of RTS publicly expressed their support for the student protests. On the evening, students and citizens organized a massive protest in front of RTS building in Belgrade, dissatisfied with the way RTS covered the protests. In one of its report, RTS compared the protesters symbol of "red bloody hand" (with the message "corruption kills") with the symbol of Hamas. Tens of thousands gathered and the protest began with 15 minutes of silence. Afterwards, the students paraded with a giant cobra doll, parodying Vučić's earlier statements about Cobras special-forces, and with a giant sandwich intended for the CEO of RTS, parodying the cliché of SNS supporters being paid with sandwiches (the so-called "sandwich people"). The workers of RTS gathered on the balcony and showed the banners saying "RTS employees support the students" and "You cannot run us over," referencing the attacks on the protesters. The protesters played the audio recording of their demands:

1. Publishing the **complete documentation** concerning the reconstruction of the railway station,
2. **Dropping charges** against the arrested and detained students, activists, and citizens from previous protests regarding the tragedy in Novi Sad,
3. **Filing criminal charges** against all attackers on students, professors, and citizens,
4. **Increasing the budget** for universities by 20%.

On **January 18**, the Bar Association of Serbia announced a seven-day general strike, commencing on January 20. During that period, the lawyers will not attend any court proceedings. Asked about the strike in a TV interview, Vučić compared lawyers to a "mob." The Bar Association condemned Vučić's statement and announced a protest. On the same day, teachers and professors protested in Novi Sad, demanding the resignation of the university rector (D. Madić), and accusing him of supporting the attacks on students. Education workers also protested in Pirot, while students, teachers, and citizens protested in Kragujevac, as well. Students announced that a blockade of all three bridges in Novi Sad (Liberty Bridge, Varadin Bridge, and Žeželj Bridge) take place on February 1, to mark the three months since the canopy collapse while also being the Day of the City.

On **January 19**, around 10,000 teachers, professors, students, and citizens protested in Čačak in support of the attacked teacher Matijević. Students carried a cardboard replica of a bulldozer, as a reference to the bulldozer revolution. In front of the SNS offices, the protesters stopped and shouted "fascists, fascists," "resignations," and threw eggs at the windows. In Kraljevo, mayor Predrag Terzić was booed in public



because of his posts against the student protesters. In Belgrade, 20,000 education workers, protested and joined by students. The protest symbolically lasted 45 minutes (equivalent to a school lesson). Due to the existence of several different education workers' unions, the decision on the strike was ultimately left to individual schools. Around 35% of schools, both primary and secondary throughout Serbia, decided to go on strike starting January 20. In Subotica, students and citizens protested in the city center, expressing their support for lawyers and education workers. This protest also began with 15 minutes of silence.

On **January 20**, parents gathered in front of several primary schools in Novi Sad to express support for the teachers. In the Belgrade municipality of Surčin, dozens of hooded people, allegedly tied to SNS, tried to forcefully enter a school which was on strike, and verbally threatened the principal and teachers. Some parents came to assist the teachers, filmed the attackers, and the attackers eventually left. In Zrenjanin, school inspectors were ordered by the Ministry of Education to enter the schools which declared strike, but the inspectors refused. In some schools in Belgrade and Novi Sad, parents gathered and chased out the school inspectors. Students also protested in Novi Pazar. The silence was extended to 16 minutes, in protest against the lenient sentence for the death of student E. Bakan in a traffic accident. Employees of *Elektroprivreda Srbije* also declared a strike and announced that they will be joining the protests.

On **January 21**, hooded people put up banners on the overpasses of the Belgrade highway, showing a picture of a flipped middle finger with the inscription "This is the response of the Serbian people to your color revolution." Many prominent SNS members, including the mayor of Kraljevo, also shared the picture of the flipped middle finger on their social media profiles. The middle finger was also drawn overnight in several schoolyards in Belgrade, but students drew flowers over them. It is worth noting that term "color revolution," although common in countries of the former Soviet Union, was never widely used in Serbia. The activists took down the banners, however, in one case, a hooded person who put up the banner attacked the activist. The attacker was filmed, and his identity was published later. On the same day, high-school students and citizens protested in Obrenovac. In the evening hours of January 21, undercover police stormed the Belgrade hotel where students from abroad were staying for an international conference, organized by the ERSTE foundation. Five female students from Croatia were singled out by police, transported to the police station, accused of helping the protests and deported. This act was condemned by Croatia, as well as by anti-government protesters in Serbia.

By **January 22**, dozens of small, medium, and large businesses throughout Serbia announced they will join a general strike on January 24. Some online retail websites were temporarily offline between 11:52 and 12:07, during the "silence". Employees of technology companies headquartered in New Belgrade joined the students in road blockades and protests. In Čačak, medical workers joined the protest. That same day, two MPs from the SNS officially resigned, without providing an explanation.

On **January 23**, during the protest in Kraljevo, protesters threw eggs at the local SNS offices and the mayor, Predrag Terzić, who was present in front of the offices. Protesters shouted "murderers, murderers." On the same day, in an open letter, 17 judges publicly expressed their support for students' demands. Over a hundred different companies publicly stated they will support the general strike and will not operate on January 24.

On **January 24**, general strike was held, with large protests in Apatin, Belgrade, Gornji Milanovac, Jagodina, Lazarevac, Leskovac, Kragujevac, Niš, Novi Sad, Novi Pazar, Petrovac na Mlavi, Stara Pazova, and Vlasotince. In Lazarevac, students were joined by miners from the "Kolubara" mines. In Belgrade, high-school students, lawyers, and tech companies organized their protests together with students. Two columns of

protesters crossed the Branko's Bridge from both sides and symbolically connected two sides of the river. Medical workers and workers in social care institutions either left their workplaces while the protesters were passing by or made statements of support. In Novi Sad, opposition parties blocked the highway with motor vehicles for a brief period of time.

The protest in Jagodina was specific since it was organized on the same day as the large SNS gathering, albeit a few hours earlier. Despite that, there were no reported incidents within the city. In the Belgrade municipality of Voždovac, local residents attempted to physically stop a bus carrying SNS supporters to Jagodina. The SNS supporters arrived later in the afternoon with organized buses. Speaking at the SNS gathering, president Vučić stated that he wants peace and stability, that "children need to go to schools," and that he will "not sanction Russia, nor any other friendly nation." He also announced the formation of a new political movement.

During the protests in New Belgrade, a black car ran over two students, seriously injuring them. Afterwards, the protesters surrounded the vehicle and demolished it. The driver, a young female was arrested by the undercover police. Students announced that they would organize a day-long blockade of the Autokomanda intersection in downtown Belgrade on January 27. The Ministry of Education called on schools to reduce the January salaries for those education workers who are on strike.

In the morning hours of **January 25**, over 650 bikers from different biker clubs gathered in Belgrade. They donated food to the students blocking the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, then rode to the city center in support of the injured student from the New Belgrade protest (Jurija Gagarina Street). The student was hit by the car, and a viral video showed how the car carried her on its hood for several meters before she fell and hit her head on the curb. The New Belgrade police arrested M.S. the driver (born in 1999), who hit the 26-year-old female student during the protest, and charged her with attempted murder.

Farmers from towns and villages around Novi Sad formed columns and moved towards the city with their tractors. Their proclaimed goal was to park the tractors in front of protesting students, thereby shielding them from possible attacks. Near Rumenka, the farmers were blocked by a unit of gendarmerie with riot gear, prohibiting them from moving further. Students from Novi Sad came to assist the farmers, and the unit was eventually forced to pull back. Around 30 tractors reached the campus in Novi Sad. Citizens also protested in Mladenovac, Pirot, Prijepolje, Smederevo, Svrlijig, Vršac, and Zrenjanin.

In the morning of **January 26**, farmers from Banatsko Novo Selo moved towards Belgrade with their tractors. Their aim was to supply food for students blocking the Belgrade Agronomic Faculty and to leave at least 10 tractors there as a shield against possible attacks. On the same day, bikers organized a protest in Kragujevac, commemorating the victims with 15 minutes of silence. Citizens also protested in Niš, Subotica, Varvarin, and Zaječar.

On **January 27**, students, bikers, and farmers on tractors blocked the Autokomanda intersection in downtown Belgrade. The blockade began with 15 minutes of silence and was scheduled to last for 24 hours. Tens of thousands attended the blockade; students played volleyball and board games, and made barbecue. Early the next day, the students cleaned up the intersection. At the same time, citizens protested in Prokuplje and Kuršumlija. Civil engineers announced they will protest on January 29, supporting the students and asking the Ministry of Construction to amend the Law on Planning and Construction and appoint experts to key positions in the relevant institutions.

A serious incident occurred on **January 28** around 3 a.m. Students who were putting up posters in Novi Sad were attacked by masked individuals carrying baseball bats in front of the local SNS offices. After repeated calls and 30 minutes of waiting for the emergency medical team to arrive, students were transported to the hospital. One female student was seriously injured and left with a broken jaw. This caused protests on social media, and students announced a new protest in Novi Sad. Around 10 a.m., students gathered and drew graffiti "murderers" on the windows of SNS offices in Novi Sad. At a press conference held at 11 a.m., prime-minister Miloš Vučević and mayor of Novi Sad Milan Đurić, both members of SNS, resigned citing the attack as the reason. Vučević also informed the public that the attackers indeed came from the SNS offices. Four attackers were arrested, all of them with previous criminal record. Their names were soon published and their photographs from the police station were leaked on social media. Some social media users found several old photos of Vučević and his son together with some of the attackers; despite rumors of this being a possible reason for resignation, the personal connection with the attackers was not officially confirmed. At least two of the four attackers had previously collaborated with the city of Novi Sad on promoting recycling and environmental protection, for which they had received funding from the city budget.

Later in the day, farmers blocked the regional road near Bresnica, in central Serbia, with tractors. They announced they will stay there for 24 hours. Another group of farmers blocked the Ibar Highway near Kraljevo with tractors, for the next 24 hours. In the evening hours, in Novi Sad, Belgrade, Čačak, Kragujevac, Niš, and Pirot, thousands gathered in a march of solidarity march with the attacked students. In Niš, students drew graffiti "murderers" on local SNS offices and announced a blockade of the central ring road.

Following Vučević's resignation, president Vučić stated that he would pardon students and university teachers charged in connection with the protests and announced a major cabinet reshuffle, adding that he was considering on whether to call parliamentary elections or appoint a new government. Among those pardoned was the dean of the Faculty of Philology in Niš, who was never informed of any legal proceeding against her.

On **January 29**, thousands of citizens protested in Gornji Milanovac and hundreds gathered in Lapovo. In Ivanjica, high-school students and their teachers organized a protest, starting with 15 minutes of silence. The school principal brought food for students who want to come back to classes, however, the students gave the food to stray dogs, filmed it and shared the video. Belgrade students announced that they will walk by foot from Belgrade to Novi Sad to join the blockade on February 1. High-school students from the Belgrade municipality of Zemun announced a 24-hour blockade of the Zemun gymnasium. On the same day, the magazine *Nova ekonomija* published an article revealing that the head of president Vučić's office, Ivica Kojić, played a role in the project of reconstruction and adaptation of the railway to Hungary, including the Novi Sad railway station. According to emails released by the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad, Kojić promised the contractor that he would speed up activities on this project.

On **January 30**, hundreds of students from Belgrade faculties set off on a two-day walk from Belgrade to Novi Sad in order to support their Novi Sad colleagues in blocking all three bridges in the city, thereby marking three months since the collapse of the canopy. The Ministry of Internal Affairs advised it will secure the walk route. Along the route, the students were greeted by citizens and by employees of Telekom Serbia, the state-owned telecommunications company. Citizens of Stara Pazova, a town along their route, welcomed the students with fireworks and over 150 kilograms of free food. Before the students reached Indija, the town's mayor, SNS member Marko Gašić, locked the entrance to the hall where the students were supposed to sleep over. Residents then offered their private accommodations, and one club owner offered his night

club for the students. The students decided to stay together and spent the night in the open, sleeping on Styrofoam. In the morning, they proceeded to Novi Sad.

Citizens protested in Grdelica, Kostolac and in Pećinci, despite rumors circulating that they might lose their jobs. On the same day, the European Commission officially demanded information from the prosecutors' offices in Belgrade and Novi Sad in regards to the attacks on students throughout 2024 and 2025.

On **January 31**, another attack with a motor vehicle happened in Belgrade. Medical workers were blocking the street in front of their workplace at the central psychiatric hospital, commemorating the victims with 15 minutes of silence, when a black car drove right through them in full speed, injuring two female doctors. The perpetrators, two young men, attempted to flee but were stopped by other medical workers. In the evening hours, marching students reached Novi Sad, where they were welcomed by thousands of local residents. Together, they held a vigil at the Novi Sad railway station, with 15 minutes of silence. Over a hundred taxi drivers from Belgrade announced they would depart on February 2 at 1 p.m. from Nikola Tesla Airport, in order to transport students back from Novi Sad free of charge. In Belgrade, employees of the public transport company GSP Belgrade announced a protest for February 5, demanding that the mayor Aleksandar Šapić, "be held criminally liable for the damage caused to GSP, together with his assistant Miroslav Čučković."

#### (d) Protests and Blockades in February 2025

On **February 1**, on the Day of the City and the three-month anniversary of the canopy collapse, large number of people gathered at the entrance to Novi Sad - columns of cars waited for hours at the toll gates to join the protests and blockades. A long line of several hundred bikers was seen at the entrance to Novi Sad, and many farmers also joined the protest with their tractors. Around 3 p.m., students blocked all three bridges in Novi Sad. Tens of thousands of citizens gathered, and the protest started with 15 minutes of silence. Two of the bridges were blocked for three hours, while Liberty Bridge was blocked for 24 hours. After the results of the plenum in which the citizens on the bridge voted, it was extended for three more hours in order to clean up the area.

In Čačak, teachers, professors, and their students blocked two bridges over the West Morava for an hour in support of the students in Novi Sad. Farmers have arranged for their tractors to be parked in front of the bridges, in order to protect the protesters. Citizens also protested in Kladovo, Krupanj, Kuršumlija, Prijepolje, Prokuplje, and Žitorađa. Judges of the basic and higher courts in Niš publicly supported the students' demands. In its prime-time news program, RTS briefly reported about the Novi Sad protest. This was condemned as "scandalous" and "biased" reporting by the SNS.

In Novi Sad, 671 taxi vehicles from Belgrade organized a lift back to Belgrade for students, completely free of charge. On the same day, protests were organized in Bajina Bašta, Jagodina, Kosjerić, Šabac, Užice, Vlasotince, and Vršac. In Šabac, students and teachers blocked the bridge over the Sava River for 225 minutes, 15 minutes for each of the 15 victims. In Užice, residents blocked the motorway by standing on the bridge over the Đetinja River despite freezing weather.

On **February 3**, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad announced that the Special Department for the Suppression of Corruption had launched an investigation into corruption in connection with the reconstruction of the canopy of the Novi Sad railway station. In Belgrade, a 15-minute silence was

held at the intersection in front of the mental hospital. In addition to employees and citizens, bikers also blocked the intersection in front of the building to protect employees and people, given that two doctors were injured at the same location a few days ago when a car hit them deliberately at full speed. Students from several Belgrade high schools also protested in front of their respective schools. Artists protested in front of the Ministry of Culture, while professors of the Aviation Academy and parents whose children attend the academy blocked the intersection in front of the government building.

On **February 4**, students, teachers, farmers, and bikers organized a large protest in Kragujevac. The protesters carried boxes with ideas on city improvement to the city hall. Protesters also gathered in Aranđelovac, for the third time in one week, in support of kindergarten teachers on strike. On the same day, the Police Union of Serbia (PSS) sent a letter to the minister of the interior, Ivica Dačić, demanding an increase in salaries and the introduction of additional benefits for employees in the Ministry of the Interior. Nearly 500 policemen signed a petition supporting the students' demands.

On **February 5**, five simultaneous protests were held in Belgrade. Pensioners protested at Republic Square in support of the students. Medical workers protested in front of the Zemun Hospital, students gathered in front of the Ministry of Education, another group of students blocked the central street in Banovo Brdo, and employees of the public transport company GSP protested in front of the company headquarters in Dorćol. Students announced a large protest that will be held on February 15 in Kragujevac, on the anniversary of the Sretenje Constitution. Medical and social workers union "Nezavisnost", with about 2,500 members in Niš, officially supported the students and their demands. Professors and teachers protested in Leskovac. Citizens also protested in Sombor, where medical workers and local librarians joined the students.

On the same day, *Forbes Serbia* published a statement given by former minister of construction Goran Vesić to the prosecutor on November 22, 2024. Vesić stated that he did not consider himself responsible nor could he contribute to the accident in any way. He denied that the main hall of the station was commissioned on his orders. Vesić mentioned that the first part of the station was put into operation, i.e. the platforms and tracks, and part of the station used by passengers was into operation in March 2022, before the opening of the main hall. And then a ceremony was organized. "At that time, there was no use permit," the statement reads. It was later established that the station was classified as a 'construction site' on the day of the tragedy. The statement also describes the procedure for the internal acceptance and handover of wing B in June-July 2024, from the Chinese consortium as a contractor to the Serbian Railways Infrastructure as an investor. Vesić said that he found out about the memo, which stated that after internal reception, passengers will be able to use main hall B, only after the canopy fell. Describing the process of internal reception in more detail, the former minister said that his ministry was not mentioned anywhere in the mutual communication regarding the handover, and that his assistant Anita Dimoski was familiar with the correspondence because she was named as the recipient of the emails. Concluding the description of the events surrounding handover, he stated that the handover took place on July 4, 2024, and the use of the main hall was enabled that from that day. (Slovenian newspapers *Večer* and *Delo* published speculations that Goran Vesić and Belgrade mayor Aleksandar Šapić had both left Serbia and were currently staying in privately owned mansions in Trieste).

On **February 6**, the Government of Serbia adopted a decision to allocate 12.01 billion dinars for higher education. According to the official announcement by the government, the budget for education is thereby increased by 20%, fulfilling the fourth demand of the student plenums. On the same day, in the Novi Sad neighborhood of Telep, a car with Croatian license plates attempted to drive through the protesters blocking

the road for 15 minutes. There were no casualties, and the driver fled before the police arrived. Parents whose children attend primary schools in Novi Sad organized a protest after some parents who openly supported the school teachers' strike received phone calls from police. In Topola, farmers blocked the motorway with tractors. Students also protested in Crna Trava.

The Serbian Medical Society (SLD), the umbrella organization for doctors and dentists, announced that their Assembly officially supports all demands issued by the students of the blocked Medical Faculties. Serbian daily *Danas* published an article revealing that Marko Tošin, one of the attackers who came out of the SNS offices in Novi Sad on January 28 and broke a female student's jaw with a baseball bat, was released from custody merely a day after the arrest. The article sparked outrage on social media.

According to *Forbes Serbia*, the families of the victims in the Novi Sad accident were interested in joining the criminal prosecution by pressing charges against the persons responsible for the death of their loved ones. This followed testimony before the prosecutor that was attached as part of the indictment, which *Forbes Serbia* had access to. Former dean and professor at the Belgrade Faculty of Civil Engineering, Vladan Kuzmanović, stated that Aleksandar Vučić and Miloš Vučević essentially led the reconstruction of the railway station in Novi Sad. The European Parliament's rapporteur for Serbia, Tonino Picula, assessed that Serbia was in an "undeclared state of emergency," and that the president Vučić has not found a way to respond to the dissatisfaction of those people who protest.

On **February 7**, lawyers organized a protest in front of RTS, demanding that their voices be heard and called upon policemen and members of the Serbian armed forces to join a general strike. The informal community of primary school teachers in New Belgrade (PULS) announced a large protest gathering and walk through New Belgrade on February 8. Theater actors from the theaters in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Sombor, and Zrenjanin started a seven-day strike. In Belgrade, protesters blocked the Pupin Bridge, connecting Zemun and Borča. Citizens also protested in Niš. During the protest, an unknown female person approached the dean of the Niš Faculty of Philosophy, threatened her, and physically attacked her. In Prijepolje, high school teachers protested, despite receiving verbal threats. In Subotica, students, professors, and citizens organized a protest, which began with 15 minutes of silence. Afterwards the gathered crowd moved towards the city hall, where they left a message for the mayor, Stevan Bakić, a member of SNS, who previously compared the protesters with (Croatian fascists) "ustaša" and accused them of "destroying Serbia."

In Bogatić, SNS-led local authorities organized a public hearing on the municipal spatial plan, which also includes lithium exploration, behind closed doors, contrary to the Serbian Law on Local Self-Government. Hundreds of farmers and protesters entered the municipal building, where the public hearing was scheduled to take place, and physically carried the local chairman of the SNS outside. SNS banners, visible in the town square were destroyed. Farmers and protesters organized a plenum during which they expressed support for the students' demands. Kragujevac students from blocked faculties announced that they would run a 137-kilometer relay marathon to the Church of St. Sava in Belgrade to hand over invitations to their colleagues for the protest scheduled on Sretenje, February 15, in Kragujevac.

On **February 8**, teachers and students from 18 New Belgrade primary schools in, joined by parents whose children attend those schools, blocked the central roundabout in New Belgrade. In Niš, students, teachers, and citizens organized a 15 km-long protest walk. On the same day, during his speech at an SNS gathering in a sports hall in Kikinda, president Vučić announced that he was writing a book about his "glorious victory against the color revolution in Serbia," and that the book will be finished by Vidovdan (June 28). Another SNS gathering was organized at the cultural center of Lazarevac, where the speaker of National

Assembly, Ana Brnabić and finance minister, Siniša Mali, both SNS members, were scheduled to speak. Protesters gathered in front of the center, waited for Brnabić and Mali to come out and booed them. During the gathering, Brnabić called the protesters "cowards," but once outside, she smiled and waved at them.

On **February 9**, students of the Faculty of Agriculture, together with farmers on tractors, blocked the Gazela Bridge in Belgrade to commemorate 100 days since the canopy collapse. In Niš, students blocked the highway pay toll. Protesters also blocked the local intersections in Ruma and Zrenjanin. In the afternoon, students running a relay marathon from Kragujevac to Belgrade reached Mladenovac, where over a hundred locals gathered along their route to applaud and cheer them on. When the students reached the Belgrade municipality of Voždovac, residents formed a convoy of cars and escorted the students to the Church of St. Sava in downtown Belgrade, where thousands of people gathered to welcome them. The students thanked the crowd, and invited them to come to the large protest scheduled for February 15 in Kragujevac. On the same day, former prime-minister Vučević (whose resignation has not yet formally taken effect), when asked about the protesters in an interview, said: "Enough with their nonsense. Who gave them the right to determine who is what and who did what? Who are they to talk about it? They have no empathy for anything."

On **February 10**, a group of students who ran from Novi Sad to Belgrade arrived at the square in front of the Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy, where a red carpet was laid out for them. They cut a red ribbon while holding their student cards, and were then awarded medals, with the audience chanting: "Novi Sad, Novi Sad." They were greeted with fireworks as they crossed the Branko's Bridge. The Novi Sad "marathoners" symbolically handed over the Constitution of Serbia as a baton to their colleagues – students from Belgrade faculties. The participants in the relay marathon from Novi Sad faculties plan to march together with students blocking Belgrade faculties all the way to Kragujevac.

On **February 11**, in temperatures of -6 C, 180 students from Niš set off on foot to Kragujevac, where the large protest was scheduled for February 15. Around 6 PM, they arrived in Aleksinac, where they spent the night at the local Sports Hall. Along the way, they received applause, chants of support, and a warm welcome was given to them by the villagers in Tešica, who also prepared lunch for them. On the way to Aleksinac, the villagers invited the students to rest for the night, offered them food and refreshments. The students were welcomed in Aleksinac - a banner saying "Welcome, dear students" was displayed at the entrance to the promenade, and the students were greeted with fireworks and lots of food and beverages. Students who walked from Novi Sad and Belgrade arrived in Sopot in the evening hours. They planned to sleep in the local sports hall with heating, however, Živorad Milosavljević, the mayor from SNS, denied permission. The sports hall remained locked, but the citizens organized alternative accommodation for the students, in some cases even in plastic greenhouses. On the same day, members of the European Parliament (EP) discussed the situation in Serbia and told the Serbian authorities that everyone must have the right to freedom of assembly and demanded that all incidents against students and citizens protesting in Serbia are investigated. The debate was held at the request of Social Democrats, and the majority of MPs supported the protests, stating: "Serbian students are the voice of hope and awareness of the entire Balkans."

On **February 12**, in Rača, farmers blocked all access roads to the municipality with tractors, protesting the increase in local property taxes and in support of students. On the same day, the Public Prosecutor's Office announced that part of the investigation into the fall of the canopy was transferred to the Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime. Meanwhile, Milorad Grčić, former acting director of Elektroprivreda Srbije (EPS), president of Obrenovac municipality of Belgrade, and a member of SNS, was arrested under suspicion of



causing damage to EPS for more than one million euro. The government announced a large pro-SNS gathering to be held in Sremska Mitrovica, and started reaching out to party members and supporters. According to some media outlets, due to declining popularity, the organizers resorted to pressuring employees of public enterprises to attend the gathering, including threats of job termination.

On **February 13**, students from Kraljevo, together with their peers from Novi Pazar, set off on foot toward Kragujevac, where a large gathering was to be held on February 15. The flags of Kraljevo and Novi Pazar gathered in front of the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering in Kraljevo, and the students set off on a walking route over 50 kilometers. Along the way, they met up in Mrčajevci with colleagues from Užice, Čačak, and Gornji Milanovac, and together they continued toward Kragujevac. On the same day, the informal community of Belgrade primary schools, "PULS," organized a protest in front of the Ministry of Education. They announced that they will not negotiate with the ministry, and informed the public that 65% of schools have suspended classes. Employees of Radio Belgrade also organized a protest. The Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra announced that it would hold a charity concert, with all proceeds from ticket sales to be donated to persons injured in the collapse of the canopy in Novi Sad.

After the news of the arrest of mayor of Obrenovac, Milorad Grčić, spread, Ana Brnabić, speaker of the Serbian National Assembly and head of the Belgrade branch of SNS, visited the municipal SNS headquarters in Obrenovac. In front of the party offices, she was greeted by about a hundred SNS members, angry over Grčić's arrest. People shouted and prevented Brnabić from speaking, marking the first publicly visible sign of discontent within the party. According to the weekly magazine *Radar*, in late December, leaders of all Serbian security services held separate meetings with then-prime minister Vučević, where they were expected to confirm their readiness to "protect the constitutional order of the country by any means necessary." Although security officers responded positively to this request, some felt the need to demonstrate additional loyalty in the coming days, while others were simply thanked for their previous work, and in near total silence, retired.

On **February 14**, the Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade proposed suspended sentences for the persons who physically attacked students of the Belgrade Faculty of Law. On the same day, during an official visit to Republic of Srpska, president Vučić compared the protesters in Serbia with "scum and filth which occasionally rises to the surface." The Serbian subsidiary of Assicurazioni Generali decided to withdraw from the work of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce and the Association of Insurers of Serbia, after both organizations refused to respond to tabloid attacks directed at the president of the company's executive board, Dragan Filipović. The pro-government tabloids *Informer* and *Republika* published a photo of Filipović attending the student protests in a private capacity, accusing him of "wanting to destroy the country." The company itself also came under fire in articles falsely claiming that it was losing its market share in Serbia.

On **February 15**, the anniversary of the proclamation of the Sretenje Constitution in 1835, a large protest was held in Kragujevac. The gathering, named "Sretnimo se na Sretenje" (Let's meet on Sretenje), lasted for 15 hours, during which time Lepenički Boulevard was blocked. Many students present at the protest walked on foot, some travelling as far as 150 kilometers to attend. Large numbers of vehicles also made their way to the city, with total of 165,000 protesters attending the gathering. Protesters also gathered at Republic Square in Belgrade in support of the gathering in Kragujevac. President Vučić held a counter-rally that same day in Sremska Mitrovica, at which he described the protests as "the dirtiest color revolution in human history" and claimed that foreign powers had invested three billion Euros to overthrow his government. The executive board of the United Trade Unions "Nezavisnost" reported that public sector

employees were pressured to attend the pro-government rally, at which some 20,000 people were present. The next day, around 300 taxi drivers drove to Kragujevac, where they were warmly welcomed and offered to take students back home. An additional protest was scheduled for March 1 in Niš.

On **February 18**, the farmers who protested in Rača stormed the municipality building and occupied it, demanding lower taxes and resignation of local officials. The farmers expressed their support for the student protesters.

On **February 19**, the organization CRTA (Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability) released a survey of a representative sample of Serbian citizens' opinions on the protests in Serbia. According to the report, around 80% of respondents supported the majority of the students' demands, and 64% supported or mostly supported the protests themselves. In addition, 33% of respondents claimed to have taken part in at least one protest in Serbia during the previous three months. When asked who they would trust more, 46% of respondents stated they would trust the students, 21% would trust president Vučić, 12% would trust both equally, while the remaining 21% trusting neither or having no answer. On the same day, in Kraljevo, opposition councilors blocked the work of the city assembly. Protests in front of the assembly building lasted for several hours, and eggs were thrown at the mayor, Predrag Terzić. One opposition councilor was detained by the police, and the mayor was evacuated in a police vehicle.

On **February 20**, a protest was held at Vukov Spomenik in Belgrade, where 15 minutes of silence was observed. The protest, organized by citizens from the municipalities of Stari Grad, Savski Venac, Palilula, Zvezdara, and Vračar, as well as by the organization "Ustala je Ustanička" (meaning "Uprising" in the street named "Uprising Street" in Belgrade), gathered nearly 14,000 protesters.

On **February 21**, students, educators, parents, and citizens in Prijepolje held a gathering in memory of the 15 lives lost in Novi Sad. The protest was attended by students from the State University of Novi Pazar, who requested that the 15 minutes of silence be extended to 16 minutes in remembrance of E. Bakan, a student from Novi Pazar who tragically lost his life in 2019 in Belgrade, stuck by an enraged driver. The protesters considered the sentence given to the driver as too lenient. Additional protests were held that day in Čačak, Ivanjica, and Ljig. During the 12-hour blockade in Čačak, a plenum of students and citizens voted to boycott RTS and announced they would walk on foot to attend the gathering in Niš on March 1. Students from the Technical Department of Mihajlo Pupin in Zrenjanin, who had left the city the day before to walk to Vršac, were warmly welcomed in the villages of Velika Greda, and later in Plandište, where they spent the night.

On **February 24**, Žarko Mićin was elected by the city assembly as the new mayor of Novi Sad, with 45 councilors voting in favor of him. The opposition boycotted the session, citing the heavy presence of police and gendarmerie around the assembly building, which led to clashes with citizens protesting the election process. Protesters attempted to enter the building and threw eggs, red paint, yogurt, flour, and toilet paper at the police and the building, prompting multiple police interventions to prevent them from approaching the premises. The police reported that five officers were injured during the protest and denied allegations that opposition councilors were prevented from attending the session. Mićin, in his address, emphasized his commitment to being a mayor for all citizens of Novi Sad and prioritized the inspection of all city-owned buildings to prevent future tragedies.

On **February 28**, seven bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church signed an open letter supporting the students' right to protest and condemning the derogatory speech aimed against them. The letter stated: "As bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, we feel obligated to publicly express our disagreement and distance

ourselves from any speech that dehumanizes others, especially speech that belittles young people, students, as a factor in building society and contributing to its future, or that humiliates them for thinking and seeking the truth."

### (e) Protests and Blockades in March 2025

On **March 1**, another large protest was held in Niš. Tens of thousands of protesters gathered, marking four months since the canopy collapse with 15 minutes of silence. In reference to the Edict of Milan issued by Roman Emperor Constantine I, who was born in Niš, the students drafted and presented the "Student Edict," a kind of constitutional declaration, which contains provisions on freedom, state, justice, youth, dignity, knowledge, solidarity, and the future. After the protest, columns of taxi drivers from various cities took students back home, free of charge. Citizens also protested in Indija, where one man threatened the protesters with a knife.

On the same day, in its evening news program, RTS aired the news coverage of the Niš protest before airing the official statement by president Vučić. Pro-government tabloids characterized such reporting as a "coup d'État" and accused RTS of being "controlled by students."

On **March 2**, students and high scholars from Gornji Milanovac blocked the Ibar Highway. The blockade lasted four hours, from 11 AM to 4 PM. In Belgrade, citizens blocked the Blue Bridge, connecting the neighborhoods of Konjarnik and Medaković, to express support for students' demands. In Krupanj, residents protested the arrival of prime minister in resignation, Miloš Vučević, who was attending an SNS gathering in the town. The informal association of education workers "Unified Education of Serbia", announced that teachers will embark on a rally called "A Step to Freedom" (March 3–6), during which they will walk around 160 kilometers from Belgrade to Čačak, where a large protest of education workers will take place.

On the same day, speaking at the SNS gathering in Bor, president Vučić said: "Can you imagine, yesterday RTS reported from Niš, and it was done by some imbecile reporter from their Niš office." Vučić later publicly apologized for calling the reporter an "imbecile," but he added that he "thinks just as poorly about the professionalism and objectivity of these journalists, that they are a disgrace to their profession, that they are not journalists, but political activists." RTS condemned the statement. However, 46 journalists and media workers from Niš announced that they reject Vučić's so-called apology and said that they will not follow or report on his activities until an appropriate apology is made (satirical programs referred to this as his pre-election "apology").

On **March 3**, the "Sloga" police union expressed support for the "Student Edict" adopted on March 1 in Niš, describing this as a manifesto of the struggle for institutions which should serve the citizens, and not serve the interests of individuals. The Novi Sad Police Association "Dr. Rudolf Archibald Rajs" wrote an open letter to the minister of internal Affairs Dačić, expressing their concern about the "worrying practice in which the police, instead of applying the law and protecting public order and peace, become victims of political calculations." Several employees of public utility companies in Novi Sad spoke up to media about allegedly losing their jobs after openly supported the protests.

On **March 4**, prime-minister in resignation, Miloš Vučević, said that professors and teachers who protested will not receive the first part of their February salary and emphasized that this decision was final.

That same day, a brawl erupted in the National Assembly. The conflict involved MPs, and black smoke, flares, pepper spray, eggs, and a false bomb threat marked the first working day of National Assembly in 2025.

The salaries of education workers were drastically reduced (by 50-100%). In some extreme cases, high school teachers were paid less than 20 Euros (2,191 Dinars). The Independent Trade Union of Education Workers of Serbia (NSPRS) issued an official statement: "If the wages of school employees are reduced, and that reduction is not a result of legally conducted and law-prescribed disciplinary proceeding against each individual employee whose wages are reduced, the persons responsible for such actions will be subject to lawsuits and criminal charges filed by the NSPRS." The Union invited citizens to join the "Solidarity for Education" network and donate to help education workers.

Due to attacks by pro-government tabloids on the president of executive board of the Italian company *Assicurazioni Generali Serbia*, Dragan Filipović, and the expulsion of civil society activists in January, the organizers of a large International Railway Industry Fair (South East Europe Mobility 2025), which was supposed to be held in Belgrade, canceled the event. Employees of the National Library of Serbia announced a general strike starting on March 6.

Members of the National Assembly continued the debate on amendments and proposed laws on Thursday, March 6, but again without the majority of opposition representatives. On the third day of the session, MPs adopted changes and amendments to the Law on Higher Education, one of the four demands of students in blockade. "We have fulfilled the fourth students' demand, and I hope they will return to classes," said Ana Brnabić, speaker of the National Assembly. Riots, smoke, flares, pepper spray, eggs, and a false bomb threat marked the first working day of MPs in 2025.

On **March 5**, the National Assembly of Serbia resumed its session after a turbulent start to the spring sitting, with increased security and without the majority of opposition MPs. The opposition MPs stated that they cannot return to the parliament hall after the building was searched, their offices were inspected due to a false bomb threat. The EU stated that it is unacceptable to witness violence within the parliament, because the parliament should be a place for democratic debate. Before the resumption of the session, speaker of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić, stated that "institutions will not back down in the face of the opposition's savagery and terrorism." However, prime-minister Miloš Vučević's resignation was not placed at the beginning, but after numerous items on the agenda. Opposition MPs stated at the beginning of the session that "the government that is resigning cannot propose laws", and that only student demands and prime-minister's resignation should be discussed.

On **March 6**, in front of the Belgrade City Hall, an incident happened between protesters and a private security company hired by the city. The company in question was allegedly tied to "phantom voters" from Republika Srpska, who came to vote for SNS at the December 2023 elections. In September 2024, this company signed a contract with the City of Belgrade (in a consortium with two other companies) worth 180 million RSD (approximately 1.5 million EUR) for the provision of security services. On the same day, citizens from ten Belgrade municipalities, after protesting in their respective municipalities in the previous weeks, decided to hold a joint gathering in front of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office. The crowd paid tribute to the victims of the Novi Sad railway station tragedy with a 15-minute silence, and before and after they made noise by blowing whistles and vuvuzelas, and beating drumming. Employees of the "Studenica" general hospital and health center in Kraljevo announced a warning strike for March 7, demanding the fulfillment of four student demands. Among them is the publication of all documents about the 2015 crash of Mi-17 helicopter, in which seven people died, including a sick infant transported for treatment.

On **March 7**, workers of the Kolubara mines protested in front of their office building in Lazarevac, near Belgrade. In Kosjerić, students blocked the local bridge. Thousands of citizens protested in the "second" General Strike (the first one was on January 24th), called by high school students, and protested in Kragujevac, Kruševac, Niš, and Novi Sad, supporting the underpaid education workers and calling for a general strike. Many shops, bars, and restaurants remained closed in support of the protests. In Belgrade, a huge column of people walked on the streets around the downtown area passing by government buildings. Marching students said their protest was a 'prelude' to a massive rally planned for March 15 in Belgrade.

On the same day, a group of 30 young people gathered and set up tents in front of the president's office in Belgrade, claiming to be students who want to end the protests and continue studying (the so-called "Students 2.0). However, several sources identified these individuals as members or associates of the SNS, with some even allegedly "imported" from the Republic of Srpska, such as "Rada Čokolada" (a woman called "Rada the Chocolate").

On **March 8**, farmers in Bogatić blocked a street with tractors and clashed with the Gendarmerie unit, which tried to remove them. Soon after, they were allowed to stay and even to enter the local Agricultural Fair with their tractors. During his visit to Kovačica (a small town with predominantly Slovak minority about 50 kilometers from Belgrade), president Vučić was booed by dozens of local citizens, to which he responded: "They love me, man, the people, you see how much they love me, it's a miracle! In here, 500 people are waiting for me at 20 meter distance, and 50 of them like to whistle and blow (in vuvuzelas), well, what am I supposed to do?"

In Smederevo, a large citizen's protest was organized simultaneously with an SNS meeting at the local sports center. At the SNS gathering, the police set up a cordon around the sports center to prevent citizens from reaching the SNS meeting. The crowd then tore Vučić's poster from a nearby billboard. In Belgrade, thousands of students and citizens gathered at Republic Square for a protest called "Shoulder to Shoulder – Students and Workers" to celebrate International Women's Day.

On **March 9**, president Vučić stated that he expected the opposition to "organize great violence" at the massive protest scheduled for March 15 in Belgrade, and that "everyone who participates will be arrested." He further added that it will "take 15 minutes, an hour, or two, because the state will be able to act like a state, and there is nothing to discuss about."

In response, Aleksandar Jovanović Ćuta, the Ecological Uprising MP, stated: "The introduction of a state of emergency is one of the options, depending on what will happen on the streets on March 15. Vučić wants incidents to happen."

On **March 10**, the Independent Union of Education Workers of Serbia (NSPRS) filed criminal charges with the special anti-corruption departments of the higher prosecutor's offices in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, and Kraljevo against the outgoing minister of education and 12 advisors for material-financial affairs of school administrations due to salary cuts in education. Hundreds of students from Čačak, Niš, and Subotica began their march on foot towards Belgrade, aiming to arrive before the large protest scheduled for March 15.

On **March 10 and 11**, large groups of students and citizens blocked the headquarters of state-owned media broadcasters RTS and Radio-Television Vojvodina. Protesters also gathered outside RTV Kragujevac to show support. Clashes between protesters and the Gendarmerie occurred during a protest in Belgrade outside the RTS building, resulting in one plainclothes police officer being injured. President Vučić met with the injured officer that night and posted on his Instagram, claiming that he had been injured by "Bolshevik

plenum members", though video footage of the incident clearly shows this officer being struck by an ununiformed officer. Minister of interior Ivica Dačić (in Vučić's presence) claimed that students attacked the police, officers can be seen beginning the violence by striking students with batons in video footage taken at the scene. The protesters blocked the RTS building for 22 hours.

An improvised tent camp set up by pro-government "Students 2.0", who opposed the students in the blockade, was erected in Pionirski Park right in front of the presidential building. Over the past two days, these "students" were replaced by muscular persons wearing masks and hoods, who attacked passersby on at least one occasion. The identity of some of those individuals has been established. Furthermore, a group of military veterans from the disbanded (and notorious) Special Operations Unit (JSO) set up tents while wearing military uniforms and red berets. The unit, which was disbanded in 2003, had carried out assassinations of Slobodan Milošević's political opponents and was accused of involvement in war crimes during the Kosovo war. Among the veterans present were Goran Radosavljević "Guri" (former commander of the JSO) and Živojin Ivanović, the last commander of JSO known also as "Žika Crnogorac". A JSO veteran was seen attacking a passerby with a stick in video footage taken at the park.

On **March 12**, after a long and heated debate, professors from the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade voted to initiate a general strike, which will begin on March 17 and will last until the students' demands are met. On the same day, near the tent camp in Pionirski Park, Marko Pešić, the director of the public utility company "Komunalac" from Kula, who is also a member of the local SNS board, physically attacked a passerby. In solidarity with the students' demands and their protests across Serbia, university and high school students from Valjevo set off on a protest walk to Belgrade in the morning of March 12 to join the "15th of the month for 15 people" protest on March 15; they reached Lazarevac in the evening, where they were welcomed by locals and provided with accommodation. Students who set off from Kragujevac on foot for Belgrade arrived in Rača on the evening of March 12, where they were greeted by farmers with tractors and traditional folklore performance.

On **March 13**, president Vučić asked the pro-government "Students 2.0" who want to study, to temporarily withdraw from the Pionirski Park camp ahead of the protest in front of the National Assembly on March 15. On the same day, a group of around a hundred people, most of whom were members of the Socialist Movement, blocked the entrance to the office of the independent news TV N-1. Vučić's coalition partner, Aleksandar Vulin, publicly confirmed in a parliamentary session that his political party, the "Socialist Movement," organized the blockade of this TV station. This action was met with condemnation because the political party was blocking an independent (private) media outlet. Students travelling to Belgrade on foot from across the country continued their marches.

On **March 14**, in the early morning, around 150 tractors, most of them without a license plate, surrounded the Pionirski Park, where the pro-government "Students 2.0" were located. At the same time, the building of the National Assembly was closed until March 17 due to "security reasons". In the morning of the same day, all trains were canceled due to an alleged "bomb threat." The European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), led by Laura Kövesi, announced that it had opened an investigation regarding the possible misuse of EU IPA funds in regard to the reconstruction of the Novi Sad train station. In the evening, most of the students and citizens finished their marches and arrived in Belgrade. According to the Ministry of the Interior (MUP), the arrival of students was attended by 31,000 people. Jeremy Lorens, spokesperson of the

UN Office for Human Rights, urged the authorities to allow the protest to take place without unwarranted interference.

The protest held on **March 15** is considered the largest public gathering in the history of Serbia. The protest, called “The 15<sup>th</sup> of the Month for 15 Victims in Novi Sad,” was held on March 15 (March 15 for the 15 victims in Novi Sad) in Belgrade, in front of the National Assembly and at Slavija Square, where fifteen minutes of silence was observed. The protest was attended by thousands of students from the University of Belgrade and other universities, citizens from across the country, veterans of the 63rd Parachute Brigade, and a large group of bikers. At 7:00 PM, fifteen minutes of silence began in honor of the victims of the collapsed canopy at the Novi Sad train station. However, at 7:11 PM, according to footage from the scene, what appears to have been “sonic weaponry” (LRAD) was used against the large crowd of people who were silently and peacefully standing in place to pay their respects. The use of this specific weapon could be classified as a direct application of a special form of “terror” (and torture), as it was deployed without warning against demonstrators who were standing still in silence. The police and army denied its use (despite video evidence). President Vučić called for criminal prosecution of those “lying” and “spreading disinformation” that such a device had been used against the protesters. The Public Prosecutor’s Office did not launch an investigation into the alleged use of a sonic weapon, but instead issued a statement claiming there were no indications of its use, citing reports from the ministries of defense and health.

Student organizers declared the protest over after claiming that bottles and stones were thrown at protesters from the pro-government “Students 2.0” camp across the National Assembly, leading to brief tensions between protesters and Gendarmerie, but without any escalation of violence.

In its live coverage of the protest, the pro-government television station *Informer TV* organized a celebration. The editor-in-chief of Informer, Dragan J. Vučićević and SNS official, Vladimir Đukanović were present in the studio. “There’s a special song, can we play it now, on the occasion of sonic cannon. It goes like this: “Wind, blow through the liver”, Đukanović asked. “This one’s for the sonic cannon”, said Vučićević.

As reported in a statement by non-governmental organizations providing *pro bono* legal aid (including Građanske inicijative, YUCOM, CRTA, A11, FemPlatz, and the Belgrade Center for Human Rights), during the night of March 15, following the protests, two young men were denied their right to legal aid at the Zvezdara police station. A legal aid attorney (K. Todorović) arrived at the police station to provide them with legal protection. However, police officers refused her access to the detainees. When she insisted further, one of the officers verbally attacked and insulted her. After that, another officer (who had no identification) forcibly removed her from the station, resulting in an injury to her arm. A request for the immediate initiation of disciplinary and criminal proceedings against the responsible police officers was filed.

The number of protesters present in Belgrade at the protest was exceptionally big: “the largest gathering in Serbia's history.” The official government figure provided by MUP was 107,000; an analysis by the Archive of Public Gatherings found there were between 275,000 and 325,000 present “with the possibility that the number is even higher.” The former minister of interior, Božo Prelević, estimated that there were at least half a million protesters.

On **March 16**, numerous reports emerged on social media about unusual health symptoms among protesters, including dizziness, arrhythmia, hearing loss in one or both ears, and disturbances in pacemakers. Many citizens also suffered orthopedic injuries caused by commotion following the alleged use of sonic weapon. Serbian volleyball player Vanja Grbić initially claimed that his colleague Marko Samardžić had



suffered seven heart attacks due to the weapon's effect on his pacemaker but later changed his statement, saying that Samardžić had simply fallen ill during the protest. All of these concerns led students to organize a protest on March 17 in front of the emergency center, demanding the publication of the exact number of people treated after March 15 incident.

On **March 17**, the Judicial Authority Union announced that all employees in judicial authorities, courts, public prosecutor's offices, and penal institutions will go on a full-day strike on March 18. On the same day, citizens of Obrenovac gathered in front of the municipal building on the main square to express their dissatisfaction after a video was released on social media showing members of Obrenovac local government camping with pro-government "students who want to study" in Pionirski Park in Belgrade. The protesters threw eggs at the entrance doors of the municipal building and its employees. The mayor assistant, Dragan Blažić Vivak, was hit in the head with several eggs. Six protesters were arrested after the incident.

On **March 18**, in a TV interview, president Vučić said: "Faculty professors who do nothing, except participate in blockades, will get potatoes. Tomorrow, I think, this part will be paid out for them. They won't get anything."

On **March 19**, several dozen citizens of Sremska Mitrovica gathered in front of the local city administration building, dissatisfied with the fact that a large number of city officials, including mayor Branislav Nedimović, falsely presented themselves as "students" at the camp in Pionirski Park in Belgrade. Members of the European Parliament Vladimir Prebilič and Gordan Bosanac from the Greens group addressed a letter to the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen expressing deep concern regarding her scheduled meeting with President Vučić next week.

That same day, a daily *Danas* released an interview with an anonymous gendarme who was present at the "15th of the month for 15 people" protest in Belgrade. The officer stated that he had guarded a vehicle equipped with an LRAD and, while that particular unit "in the end was not used," the officer confirmed that additional sonic cannons were stationed around the city, saying that officers were "told that a device was placed in or next to the presidency," and that the tractors parked around Pionirski Park had been placed there "to deflect the impact of the cannon if the cannon were to be used," with the instruction to avoid hitting the "Students 2.0". In addition, photographs were released that day by Marinika Tepić showing the aforementioned jeep vehicle hooked with an LRAD parked beside the National Assembly. Prior to that point, public officials had stated that no such weapons were deployed at the protest. On March 18, president Vučić made a comment: "I am telling you now – if our forces used a sonic cannon, Vortex, or whatever it's called.....well, then I'm not the president anymore. Pathetic liars."

On **March 21**, a planned SNS meeting in Niš was canceled after protestors threw eggs at party officials, prompting police to block off the historic building of the Officers' Club, where the meeting was to be held. Ana Brnabić, Miloš Vučević, and Darko Glišić were supposed to be present together with the mayor of Niš. That same day, around 10,000 people attended a commemorative walk in Novi Sad to pay their respects to Vukašin Crnčević, a 19-year-old who died earlier that day from serious injuries sustained four months earlier in the collapse of the railway station canopy. In Bogatić, protesters threw eggs at the municipal building and at the restaurant owned by the local SNS official. That same day, the mother of one of the victim of the canopy collapse informed the public that she had received threats and photo shopped pictures of her dead son because of her support for the protesters. She reported the case to the police, but her claims were dismissed.

On **March 22**, the first "Zbor" (people's assembly) was announced in Kragujevac as a new form of direct civic gathering. Citizens also organized similar "Zbor" gatherings, following principles of direct vote, in Bogatić, Trstenik, Arilje, Pančevo, Čačak, Vlasotince, Vršac, Zrenjanin, Šid, Novi Sad, Smederevo, Bač, Pirot, Niš, Kragujevac, and several Belgrade municipalities. On the same day, the employees of "Pantransport", a public transportation company from Pančevo, announced that they will hold a one-day strike on March 28 and stop all transportation on city and intercity lines. The decision was made in support of the students, but also because of the dissatisfaction of driver who no longer want to transport SNS activists to rallies.

In Čačak, a group of student protesters from the local Technical Faculty were attacked by a group of masked men. Hundreds of people protested, and some of the protesters stormed the city administration building, but left soon afterwards. The same day, president Vučić told the gathered citizens at the National Theater in Leskovac: "Those police officers who don't want to protect order and the law will be replaced. So will the prosecutors who don't want to protect order and the law." However, according to a statement signed by 220 judges and prosecutors in Serbia, "by declaring that those prosecutors who do not protect order and the law will be replaced, the president of the Republic has written a new chapter in the twelve-year-long enslavement and humiliation of the judiciary system.

On **March 23**, in the Belgrade municipalities of Vračar and Zvezdara, citizens gathered around SNS booths and held a silent vigil for 17 minutes, honoring the victims of the Kočani nightclub fire in North Macedonia, after which they started chanting anti-SNS slogans. The police protected SNS members until they were forced to leave in the evening.

On **March 24**, thousands of protesters gathered in Belgrade to oppose plans to redevelop the former Yugoslav army headquarters, heavily damaged during the 1999 NATO bombing, into a luxury complex funded by Jared Kushner's company (son-in-law of US president Trump). The Serbian government approved a multi-million-dollar contract with Kushner's company last year, granting a 99-year lease on the land. Protesters demanded the restoration of the site's heritage status and the cancellation of the development project. Opposition to the development project extended beyond protesters. Serbian architects, engineers, and opposition parties voiced their disapproval, arguing that the site should remain a cultural monument rather than be developed for profit.

On **March 26**, students and professors blocked Branko's Bridge in Belgrade for three hours, protesting the pay cuts for the education workers.

On **March 27**, pro-government tabloid *Kurir* published an unsigned article, stating: "Stop harassing citizens. It might so happen that the citizens react differently to some future bridge blockades, than they have so far. Those who believed in (pro-opposition sociologist) professor Jovo Bakić may end up swimming in the river."

On **March 28**, students gathered in front of the pro-government TV station *Informer*, protesting the station's biased reporting and doxxing (publishing private on the internet, typically with malicious intent) of protesters in its live studio program.

On **March 29**, students blocking the faculties of the University of Novi Sad announced the route of the "Bike to Strasbourg" cycling race, with the idea of submitting a document on the violation of rights in Serbia to the European Court of Human Rights.

On **March 30**, the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, Natalija Jovanović, who upported students, was attacked by a woman with a knife and injured her arm, after which she was hospitalized. In the Belgrade

district of Žarkovo, a passenger car drove through the crowd during the 16 minute-long silent vigil and injured one person; the driver was arrested. On the same day, protesters in Užice blocked the local motorway; the blockade started with 16 minutes of silence. In Subotica, protesters gathered at the local Hippodrome, where they collected signatures in local communities so they could organize the first *zbor* gatherings. From there, protesters set off along the Sombor road; the column was led by tractors and bikers.

On **March 31**, students, professors, and citizens gathered in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš to express their support for the assaulted dean in Niš. President Vučić publicly called the dean “a criminal” and said the dean’s injuries were “like a cut you get when cutting a cucumber or onion.” Members of the Council of the University of Belgrade strongly condemned the statement of public office holders calling for the arrest of the rector of that university, warning that this was an attack on the entire academic community. They stated that “slanders, incitements, insults, and threats addressed to the rector Vladan Đokić and deans of higher education institutions represent an attack on University of Belgrade and the scientific community as a whole.” According to available data, 1,697 protests were held in 378 cities across Serbia during the month of March.