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HOW STUDENTS CHANGED SERBIA: AN UNPRECEDENTED SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

The extraordinary parliamentary elections held in Serbia on 25 October did not represent an ordinary change of government, but rather a turning point with far-reaching consequences. The student protest movement, which began in November 2024 following the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station, which claimed 16 lives, evolved over the course of two years into a political force capable of bringing about an unprecedented political change in Serbia's history—and arguably beyond it. Such an achievement had eluded both the opposition and traditional political parties.

Serbia is a country that has long been trapped in a state of political apathy and depression. Unlike other countries in transition, it is simultaneously a post-war society and a country that generated wars throughout the region. Serbia's post-war elites have never fully abandoned the project of so-called Greater Serbia, later recast in the concept of the "Serbian World". Increasingly, they have sought to pursue it through diplomatic and political means, waiting for changes in the international order that they believed would eventually create a more favourable environment for its realisation.

This is why the overwhelming victory of the Students and Student list carries particular significance. In essence, it draws a line under the last forty years of lies, corruption and the concealment of responsibility for the wars of the 1990s. At the same time, the legacy of that period remains immense, and the real challenges will emerge only after the victory, including the difficult decisions that will have to be made.

The 2026 elections, therefore, represent much more than an electoral victory. The students broke the monopoly of a single political figure and swept aside an opposition that had failed to offer a credible alternative. They restored citizens' sense that their votes could genuinely make a difference. They demonstrated that authoritarian rule can be defeated without violence and, perhaps most importantly, transformed Serbia's political imagination. The outcome of the vote on 25 October marks the end of an entire political era.

HOW THE STUDENTS WON

The students did not start out as a political party, nor did they aspire to become one. They had no leader, which made it difficult for President Aleksandar Vučić's propaganda machine to discredit individual figures, as it had done for years with opposition leaders and anyone else who was not loyal to him or his regime. They had no conventional leadership, no party infrastructure, no television channels, no money, no access to state resources and no traditional political hierarchy. Their strength lay precisely in the fact that they did not resemble the political parties that had failed to establish themselves as credible agents of fundamental change.

They did, however, possess something else: legitimacy, inventiveness, energy, organisation, discipline, commitment and a willingness to make sacrifices. The defining feature of the movement was non-violence, not merely as a moral commitment but as an exceptionally effective political strategy. Despite the authorities' attempts to portray them as violent troublemakers, foreign mercenaries, enemies of the state or agents of a "coloured revolution", citizens trusted them. By consistently insisting on non-violence, the students prevented the authorities from easily criminalising their movement. Over time, their solidarity and mutual discipline became a source of considerable political strength.

One of the main factors behind their success was their nationwide campaign—a veritable march across the country. They reached every city, village and small town, doing something that no opposition party had ever managed to achieve. They spoke to people, listened to their concerns and gradually transformed a student protest into a broader social movement. In this way, they established a direct connection between politics and citizens.

One could conclude that a kind of a profound social transformation had taken place. Citizens, who for years had been weighed down by a sense of powerlessness, began to believe once again that they could act as political subjects in their own right. This may well be the most significant achievement of the student movement.

The movement also developed a strong organisational structure, based on new forms of decision-making and consensus-building through the now-famous *plenums* (open student assemblies). This further strengthened the movement and attracted substantial public support, while also contributing to a wider civic awakening. Citizens began organising local assemblies based on the same principles of participation and mutual solidarity. In this way, a distinctive student-civic network emerged, which over time gave rise to a large number of specialised teams.[1]

1 Inside Story, Nedeljnik, 29 October 2026.

Through their almost daily activities—including blockades, mass rallies and public addresses—the students developed a collective process of knowledge-sharing and public opinion formation. This would prove crucial to the outcome of the October elections.

WHY THEY DEFEATED BOTH VUČIĆ AND THE OPPOSITION

The students did not simply defeat the regime; they swept aside the opposition as well. The traditional opposition had failed to become the driving force of change because it remained trapped in outdated political patterns, party interests and internal divisions. The students offered something entirely different: instead of asking "Who will be the new leader?", they raised the question "What kind of state do we want?" Their campaign was not based on the personalisation of politics, but on trust, direct engagement with citizens and the conviction that the state should once again belong to its citizens.

The students also understood something that had long been neglected in Serbia: mobilising people to vote is not enough; their votes must also be protected. That is why election day was much more than the culmination of the campaign. The students were organised, present at polling stations, connected through a coordinated network, prepared to document irregularities and capable of responding swiftly. Around 15,000 election monitors were trained, enabling them to prevent or expose numerous attempts at electoral manipulation.

This was particularly significant in a society where deep mistrust of the electoral process had prevailed for years. Independent observers reported cases of voter intimidation and violations of ballot secrecy during the voting process, further demonstrating the importance of election monitoring.[2]

The students did not allow their victory to be lost in the gap between voting and the counting of ballots. It was precisely at this stage that they demonstrated exceptional discipline and organisational capacity. They understood that elections do not end when polling stations close, and that a political victory must be defended until the very last vote has been counted.

This is one of the most important lessons of these elections: political change depends not only on how many people are prepared to vote, but also on how well organised citizens are and h## 4. Vučić Concedes Defeat: The End of an Era, but Not of Vučić's Politics

The rally in Slavija Square, held three days before the elections, on 22 October, had already signalled the students' victory through its atmosphere and the sheer number of people who gathered. Yet few had anticipated that the margin of victory would be so overwhelming. On election day, a festive atmosphere prevailed from early morning. Long queues formed outside polling stations, accompanied by a massive turnout of young people and a large number of citizens who had traditionally remained undecided or politically uncommitted.

2 Al Jazeera, "Serbia voter turnout highest in decades as students oppose longtime leader", 25 October 2026.

Throughout the day, however, speculation continued, as it had in the preceding period, that a narrow victory could trigger violence. This concern was reinforced by the large police presence in the city centre, the deployment of armoured police vehicles and the groups of black-clad men moving through the streets.

To everyone's surprise, Vučić conceded defeat. This made a peaceful transition possible and prevented an immediate institutional crisis. However, the manner in which he acknowledged the result—with a harsh and threatening political speech—demonstrated that conceding an electoral outcome is not the same as accepting the new political reality. His subsequent statements and appearances on TV Pink and TV Informer are particularly revealing. He predicted the collapse of the victors, the disintegration of the Student List and his own political comeback. A new feature of his rhetoric is that he no longer attacks the students directly. Instead, he portrays them as "our children" who have been deceived and insists that they have no real decision-making power.

During a reception this year for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who had also recently suffered an electoral defeat, Vučić declared: "We have both recently lost elections, but we have not lost our dignity, our pride or our faith." [3]

3 Sputnik Serbia, 31 October 2026. "Vučić ugostio Orbana u Beogradu: Izgubili smo izbore, ali ne i dostojanstvo i ponos." (https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20261031/vucic-ugostio-orbana-u-beogradu-izgubili-smo-izbore-ali-ne-i-dostojanstvo-i-ponos-1205152328.html)

VUČIĆ'S CONCESSION OF DEFEAT: THE END OF AN ERA, BUT NOT THE END OF VUČIĆ'S POLITICS

The rally at Slavija, held three days before the elections, on 22 October, had already signalled a student victory through both its atmosphere and the sheer number of people who gathered. Nevertheless, few anticipated that the margin of victory would be so wide. On election day, a festive atmosphere prevailed from early morning. Long queues formed outside polling stations, with a massive turnout among young people and a large number of citizens who had traditionally been undecided or politically uncommitted.

Throughout the day, however, as on previous occasions, there was speculation that violence might erupt if the victory proved narrow. This concern was reinforced by the large police presence in the city centre, the deployment of armoured police vehicles and the groups of black-clad men moving through the streets.

To widespread surprise, Vučić conceded defeat, thereby enabling a peaceful transfer of power and preventing an immediate institutional crisis. However, the manner in which he conceded defeat — accompanied by an aggressive and threatening political speech — demonstrated that acknowledging an election result is not the same as accepting the political reality it creates.

Particularly revealing were his subsequent statements and appearances on TV Pink and TV Informer, where he predicted the collapse of the victorious movement, the disintegration of the Student List and

his own political return. A new feature of his rhetoric is that he no longer attacks the students directly. Instead, he portrays them as "our children" who have been deceived and insists that they have no real decision-making power.

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THE AWAKENING OF CIVIC SOVEREIGNTY: LESSONS FROM THE STREETS AND INSTITUTIONS

Given Vučić's behaviour and the messages he continues to send on a daily basis, it is reasonable to ask whether he has merely lost the elections or has also lost power. Judging by the prevailing public mood and atmosphere, it is difficult to imagine that citizens would quietly accept any attempt to preserve the old regime. Civic activism did not stop when the polling stations closed. On the contrary, it acquired a new, creative and practical form, demonstrating a profound and lasting transformation in social consciousness.

The electoral change of government was merely the formal trigger. The deeper transformation is taking place through the symbolic and persistent reclamation of public spaces that had been appropriated from citizens. The clearest example is the initiative to clean up "Ćaciland" in Pionirski Park, in the centre of Belgrade—a space that for more than a year had symbolised regime mobilisation and political occupation. Citizens, led by the environmental organisation Eko Straža, gathered in large numbers, cleaned and restored the park themselves, and then organised a celebration that continued late into the night. Their message was clear: public spaces belong to everyone. Even the youngest participants joined the initiative, reinforcing Bojan Simišić's argument that nurturing civic culture and involving people in collective action are essential in the aftermath of political change. Democracy requires more than simply replacing those at the top; it also requires cultivating a lasting sense of responsibility towards the community.[5]

This new wave of civic energy is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a continuation of the solidarity forged during some of the most difficult struggles. One example is the movement Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina, in which local residents and activists physically stood in defence of mountain rivers against the construction of pipelines for small hydropower plants. Their struggle demonstrated that local communities can successfully challenge powerful business interests and a corrupt system.

The scale of activism in the post-election period clearly indicates that this newly awakened civic energy is unlikely to disappear. Citizens have finally become aware that they are subjects, rather than merely objects, of political life, and that real power lies in their hands. This paradigm

4 https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20261031/vucic-ugostio-orbana-u-beogradu-izgubili-smo-izbore-ali-ne-i-dostojanstvo-i-ponos-1205152328.html

5 "Od Ćacilenda ponovo Pionirski park: Vratili smo mu stari naziv."(https://n1info.rs/vesti/od-cacilenda-ponovo-pionirski-park-vratili-smo-mu-stari-naziv

shift is becoming increasingly visible within state institutions themselves, particularly in the judiciary and public administration. Employees within the state apparatus, who for years had been silenced, are now increasingly coming forward with information, exposing abuses and directly obstructing attempts by individuals associated with the former regime to destroy compromising documentation, misappropriate public funds and engage in other forms of misconduct.

Civic courage has moved from the streets into the offices of state institutions, laying the foundations for a new and more accountable state.

THE REAL BATTLE IS ONLY JUST BEGINNING

Given Vučić's legacy, but also the much deeper legacy of authoritarianism, corruption and clientelism in Serbia, the electoral victory may have been easier to achieve than what lies ahead. The students now face the transition from mobilisation to governing the country, from protests to institutions, and from moral authority to political responsibility.

The students have presented a programme that can be distilled into several key points: the rule of law; an independent judiciary and institutions that serve the public interest rather than the dictates of those in power; accountability and the fight against corruption; the democratisation of institutions and an end to the partisan capture of the state; free media and freedom of expression; the protection of civil rights and liberties; social justice and a responsible state; and a new democratic political culture based on non-violence, solidarity and dialogue, without revenge or political hatred.

However, the Student Movement has not yet put forward a comprehensive political programme. Its main defining demands have been accountability, the fight against corruption, the establishment of the rule of law and the liberation of institutions—particularly the judiciary—from political control. These demands were articulated at the very beginning of the protests and were precisely what made broad-based social mobilisation possible.

The students have not clearly defined their position on the wars of the 1990s, Serbia's responsibility, war crimes, the genocide in Srebrenica or historical revisionism. Nor, when it comes to European integration, have they articulated a clear and unequivocal strategic commitment to the European Union (EU), European values and Serbia's place within the European political community. They have not remained entirely silent on the EU; on the contrary, they have sent various messages about continuing European integration, but have also raised the possibility of a referendum on EU membership. At the same time, their journeys on foot to Strasbourg and by bicycle to Brussels demonstrated that they did not view the European space negatively.

This programmatic openness was, on the one hand, a weakness, but on the other, it enabled them to bring together very diverse social and ideological groups. Now, however, following their electoral victory, issues that could be sidelined during the protests can no longer be left unaddressed. The students succeeded in defining the kind of government they reject; they must now define the kind of Serbia they want—historically, in terms of values, institutionally and geopolitically.

This will become clear when the Student List forms a government and presents its programme to Parliament. The new government faces an

enormous task of institutional reconstruction: reforming the judiciary, police and prosecution service; restoring professionalism to the civil service; reforming the electoral administration; changing the way the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) and the public broadcaster operate; and, ultimately, establishing professional institutions rather than party-controlled ones.

The second major area concerns the economy: public finances, state-owned enterprises, public investment, systemic sources of corruption and the social consequences of the transition.

One particularly important question will be what to do with the network of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which over the years has built deeply entrenched political, administrative, economic and security connections. The goal must not be to create a new party-controlled state, but to dismantle the existing system and build a state firmly grounded in the Constitution and the rule of law.

The central question facing the Student List is therefore how to carry out the transition without destabilising the state and without resorting to revanchism. This is particularly important because Vučić and his political network still have people embedded in institutions, an administrative apparatus, economic interests, media influence, local power structures, security connections and considerable experience in political survival.

The transition must therefore be decisive but controlled. Changing a state with a long tradition of authoritarian leadership, party-based clientelism and corruption is no simple task. A change of government does not, in itself, amount to a change of system.

Immediately after its electoral victory, the Student List took its first concrete step from protest towards assuming political responsibility. It called for the will of the electorate to be implemented without delay and for the transition of power to begin. Its demands include: the swift announcement of the final election results and the constitution of the new parliament; oversight of state institutions and public enterprises, including their finances, banks, contracts and public procurement, together with protection for whistleblowers; far-reaching reforms of the judiciary and the reopening of a number of controversial cases; the resignation or dismissal of those responsible within the police, the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) and the Military Security Agency (VBA), as well as an end to pressure and surveillance targeting students, journalists and dissenting voices; the liberation of public media from political control, changes at RTS and REM, and restrictions on the political influence exercised by Telekom, a state-owned company with considerable media power; and a firm commitment to the rule of law, professional institutions, accountability and transparency, but without retaliation.

The most important political message is that the students are not seeking merely a change of government, but a change in the way the state functions. As Filip Ubović put it, the objective is not political obedience, but “legality, professionalism and accountability.” In other words, this is the first attempt to translate the moral authority and social mobilisation of the student movement into a concrete programme of institutional transition.What the new government does in its first hundred days will be decisive.

Coming to terms with the past will be one of the most difficult, but also one of the most important, challenges in Serbia’s recovery. It

matters not only for the country's internal modernisation, but also for its relations with its neighbours.

This issue, however, should not be addressed in a way that once again fuels national polarisation. Once the institutions have been stabilised, it must become part of a long-term process of democratisation and the country's European transformation.

The rule of law, by its very nature, also requires confronting the wars of the 1990s, the political and security structures of that period, Serbia's attitude towards the genocide in Srebrenica and towards Kosovo, cooperation with international justice, the rehabilitation of war criminals, and the country's culture of remembrance.

This generation is not responsible for the actions of its predecessors. It must, however, understand the historical context and the reasons why Serbia found itself in the dead end from which, after so many years, it is now struggling to emerge. The legacy of war is not the only source of today's problems, but it is one of the key roots of the political, institutional and value-based legacy with which Serbia continues to grapple, often with difficulty and inconsistency.

Coming to terms with the past is therefore not a matter of revenge or the imposition of collective guilt. It is a question of accountability, truth and building a society capable of accepting its own past without mythologising it. In this sense, confronting the past is one of the prerequisites for Serbia to become a normal European state. The students have succeeded in defining the kind of government they reject; now it is up to them to define the kind of Serbia they want.

FOREIGN POLICY: ONLY AFTER DOMESTIC TRANSFORMATION

Immediately after the formation of the new government, consolidating Serbia will be the priority. However, defining the country's foreign policy and geopolitical orientation will be equally important for the new government. These choices will determine not only the country's consolidation but also its political and value-based identity. Given that Serbia is a small country, the new government must abandon the foreign policy pursued by its predecessor in order to prevent the country from becoming an object of geopolitical competition.

It is true that the students have not clearly defined their position on the EU. This is partly because the EU remained largely neutral towards the student protests for a long time, a stance widely interpreted as tacit support for Vučić, and not without reason. Nevertheless, before the elections, the students spoke of the need for cooperation with the EU, while suggesting that the question of membership itself should ultimately be decided by referendum. Following the victory, Ilija Srdanović, one of the leading figures of the Student List, "Students Are Winning", articulated a clearer position on European integration: Serbia's EU path should continue; domestic reforms should be aligned with EU standards, with Chapters 23 and 24 given priority; citizens should be informed about the benefits of membership; and international agreements should be respected.[6]

European institutions reacted positively to the Student List's victory and the record voter turnout, stressing that the will of the electorate

6 https://europeanpartners.org/politika/eu-integracije-kim-i-lustracija-u-planu-studentske-liste/

must now be respected and that the way should be opened towards the "rule of law, reforms and stronger democratic institutions". The Presidents of the European Parliament (EP), Roberta Metsola, the European Commission (EC), Ursula von der Leyen, and the European Council (EC), António Costa, congratulated the Student List and expressed the EU's readiness to support Serbia in reforming the judiciary, ensuring media freedom, fighting corruption and strengthening institutions. The EP's rapporteur for Serbia, Tonino Picula, emphasised that the time had come to build institutions serving all citizens, describing this as the path Serbia should take towards the EU.[7]

However, Pierre Mirel, former Director of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Enlargement, observed that the EU had "accommodated Vučić for far too long" and that it would therefore be inappropriate to expect rapid change. It had taken Vučić's regime several years to establish an illiberal system, and dismantling it would also take time, as demonstrated by Péter Magyar's victory in Hungary. The EU, he argued, must take these difficulties into account.[8]

The EU will probably seek to establish relations with the new government quickly. It has already signalled that the "doors of the EU" remain open. The crucial question, however, is whether it will genuinely support Serbia's democratic transformation or once again prioritise stability, as it did in the previous period, when it largely overlooked the country's democratic backsliding.

The United States also reacted positively, although rather cautiously. Following Vučić's concession of defeat, the State Department stated that it was aware of the preliminary election results and looked forward to "continuing and further advancing our partnership with newly elected members of Serbia's National Assembly and the people of Serbia".[9]

Even more significant was the statement issued on 27 October by five American senators, Republicans and Democrats alike. They described the Student List as a "peaceful, grassroots democratic movement" and welcomed the government's acceptance of the election results. They particularly praised the role played by domestic and international election observers. They also outlined their expectations of the new government:Normalisation of relations with Kosovo; the rapid formation of a new government and cooperation with the newly elected parliament.[10]

Russia reacted cautiously, but made its defence of its interests very clear. It did not challenge the election results, nor did it directly attack the Student List. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said that Moscow was "taking note" of the election results and acknowledged the Student List's victory. At the same time, he praised Vučić, highlighting his contribution to the development of Russian-Serbian relations and expressing the hope that Vučić would continue to contribute to those

7 https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2026/10/26/evropske-reakcije-na-izbore-u-srbiji-vrijeme-je-za-vladavinu-prava

8 "EU je dugo povladjivala Vučiću", Danas, 3. novembar 2026

9 https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/state-department-serbian-elections-we-look-forward-continuing-our-partnership-26-10

10 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/senatori-srbija-podrska-izbori-studentska-lista-/33885465.html

relations, even as an opposition politician.[11] It should be recalled that Putin had openly supported Vučić before the elections, describing him as a balanced politician and expressing the hope that he would become prime minister.[12]This is a significant statement, as Moscow clearly continues to count on Vučić and regards him as an important political actor in the future.[13]

To the new government, Moscow sent a message that it expects Serbia to understand that cooperation with Russia is in its own interest, adding: "But, as you know, it takes two to tango."[14]

Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, was even more explicit. She described Serbia as a "traditionally friendly" country to Russia, with highly developed political, economic, cultural, historical and humanitarian ties. Moscow, she said, expects the new government to continue "mutually beneficial and equal cooperation" with Russia.[15]

The Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, a frequent and influential visitor to Belgrade, offered a cautious interpretation of the students' victory in an interview with Sputnik, while invoking the traditionally strong pro-Russian sentiments among Serbian citizens. His argument suggests that relations with Russia will not change easily. He said that the Student List's victory was not a catastrophe, but rather created a situation of "absolute turbulence", and cautioned against drawing hasty conclusions. According to Dugin, Serbia's political landscape is structured in such a way that it would not benefit Moscow to prepare in advance for an inevitable deterioration in relations. Such a move would run counter to the deep interests of the Serbian people, and any government in Belgrade acting against the will of its own population would immediately lose credibility. At the same time, he added, there were still no grounds for expecting any sudden positive developments.[16]

The Kremlin's pragmatic positioning is aimed at preserving Russian influence in Serbia regardless of the change of government, while also retaining Vučić as a political interlocutor. For the new government, this will be one of its major foreign-policy tests: how to steer Serbia towards the EU while managing its relationship with Russia, which is largely rooted in energy dependence, the Kosovo issue and longstanding political ties.

If the new government makes a substantive commitment to European integration, Russia will lose its privileged position. Moscow may seek to use Serbia's energy dependence, the media, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), nationalist networks, Kosovo and Republika Srpska to maintain its influence. Given the depth of Russia's networks in Serbia, particularly within the security services, no sudden geopolitical realignment should be expected. What matters more is that Serbia begins to pursue a transparent and predictable foreign policy.

11 https://theprint.in/world/kremlin-hails-defeated-serbian-ally-vucic-as-student-election-win-adds-to-its-geopolitical-woes/3081927/

12 https://www.interfax.ru/russia/1125004

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 https://www.rbc.ru/politics/26/10/2026/6adf7f9a22b0c29b5a130ab9

16 https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/dugin-studentska-lista-pobeda-na-izborima

China reacted swiftly and in a distinctly pragmatic manner. Unlike Russia, Beijing made no attempt to defend Vučić or comment on his defeat. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said that China respects the free choice of the Serbian people, attaches great importance to relations between China and Serbia, adheres to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and is ready to cooperate with the new Serbian government. He also expressed China's desire to continue its "traditional friendship", political trust and practical cooperation on the basis of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit.[17]

China did not endorse Vučić's interpretation that the student protests had been supported by European countries and the American "deep state". Beijing appears to have opted for a carefully calibrated message: Vučić may have lost, but China has not lost Serbia. In essence, it seeks to safeguard what it has acquired and developed during Vučić's rule: the RTB Bor mining (Chinese-owned Zijin Mining Group) and smelting complex, major infrastructure projects, economic cooperation, political ties and its presence in Serbia, irrespective of who holds power.

17 https://br.china-embassy.gov.cn/por/szxw/202610/t20261026_12047091.htm

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON REGIONAL RELATIONS

Citizens of neighbouring countries followed developments in Serbia with great attention, and many openly expressed their support for the student movement. The Student List's victory was greeted with enthusiasm, as many saw it as an opportunity for Serbia to abandon its policy of confrontation and become a constructive partner in the region. This reaction has created a new atmosphere and opened up space for easing regional tensions, particularly in relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

The Student List has thus gained considerable political capital and an opportunity to translate this positive social energy across the region into a new policy of good-neighbourly relations. The priorities should undoubtedly be Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, as well as other unresolved regional issues in which Serbia plays a key role. Normalising relations with Sarajevo and Pristina would contribute to regional stability, stronger economic and cultural ties, and the acceleration of European integration.

For the first time in several decades, Serbia could therefore assume a constructive regional role and become one of the driving forces of cooperation rather than a source of political tensions and new divisions. This would create opportunities for more intensive political, economic and cultural cooperation, as well as for gradually overcoming the legacy of the 1990s.

It is particularly important that Sarajevo should be the sole political address for Belgrade's relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Belgrade can and should maintain special ties with Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but these ties must not develop into a parallel policy towards the country or become an instrument for undermining its constitutional order. The rights of Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be protected through democratic institutions, with full respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A new policy towards neighbouring countries, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, will be one of the most important tests of Serbia's genuine democratic transformation. It will show whether the country has undergone merely a change of government or whether it is also making a fundamental break with the political patterns that have generated instability throughout the region for decades.

LESSONS OF THE STUDENT MOVEMENT

The student protests, which evolved into a broad social movement, have offered a number of important lessons, not only for Serbia but also for the region and beyond:

Authoritarian systems are not invincible. Even when they control institutions, the media and substantial economic resources, sustained and organised social resistance can shift the balance of power.

Non-violence can be more politically effective than confrontation. Discipline, solidarity and perseverance can mobilise much broader segments of society.

Young people are not necessarily politically apathetic. Their apparent apathy often stems from the absence of channels through which they can influence social and political processes.

Digital organisation can partly compensate for the lack of traditional party infrastructure, enabling the rapid networking, mobilisation and coordination of large numbers of people.

Direct contact with citizens can be more powerful than a television campaign. The students' communication, based on personal engagement and trust, succeeded in reaching sections of society that had remained outside the political process for years.

Sustained social pressure can shift the balance of power, even under conditions of institutional inequality and media control.

Nevertheless, the most important lesson of this experience is that dismantling an authoritarian system is far easier than building a democratic order in its aftermath. Electoral victory creates an opening

for change, but does not guarantee its sustainability. This requires functioning institutions, an independent judiciary, free media, a politically accountable leadership and an unequivocal commitment to democratic values.

In terms of its methods, the scale of mobilisation and its ability to bring together different social groups, the experience of the student movement in Serbia represents a particularly important example of non-violent resistance to authoritarianism. It may serve as a model for other societies facing similar challenges. Serbia will therefore become a political experiment of sorts in the period ahead, one that will be closely followed not only by countries in the region but also by the wider international community.

Antony Behringer's observation that "Serbia is the mother of all youth protests" will acquire its full meaning only if the students' victory becomes the beginning of deeper social and institutional change. Serbia has opened the door to such a possibility. What remains to be seen is whether it has the political strength and social maturity to walk through it.

CONCLUSIONS

The students have opened up the possibility for Serbia, for the first time in a long while, to decide for itself what kind of state it wants to become. Their greatest victory will not lie merely in removing Vučić from power. It will be complete only if they succeed in building a system in which no "future Vučić" can emerge. This is a far greater and more demanding task than winning the elections on 25 October.

The students have won the elections; it is now up to Serbia to build its institutions. Only then will it become clear whether 25 October marked merely a change of government or the beginning of a genuine democratic transformation of the country. The path from social revolt, through electoral victory, to the construction of a democratic state involves the most difficult stage of the process: transforming the energy of a liberated society into a sustainable institutional and political order.

The new government will have to redefine Serbia's foreign-policy priorities and its relations with the major powers. The previous policy of balancing between four major international actors (Brussels, Washington, Beijing and Moscow) has proved unsustainable and ultimately detrimental to Serbia's national interests. Instead of constantly manoeuvring between competing centres of power, Serbia needs a clear strategic orientation, grounded in its own interests, European values and international commitments. Otherwise, it risks once again becoming an arena for competition and confrontation among the great powers.

A particular priority for the new government must be a systematic fight against organised crime, corruption and money laundering. In recent years, Serbia has become an important regional hub for organised crime and the financial flows associated with it. Dismantling these networks cannot be reduced to individual arrests; it requires far-reaching reform of the security services, the police, the judiciary and financial oversight mechanisms. Close cooperation with international institutions and agencies, particularly Europol, the DEA, the FBI and other relevant organisations, will also be essential. Given the cross-border nature of criminal networks, exposing and dismantling them in Serbia would have significant consequences for the wider regional networks of organised crime. This is simultaneously a matter of the rule of law, national security and the stability of the Western Balkans.

Normalising relations with neighbouring countries will be one of the most important tests of Serbia's democratic transformation. The positive reactions of citizens in neighbouring countries to the student movement represent political and social capital that the new government can use to reshape regional relations.

The new government will have to abandon a policy of confrontation, permanent tensions and the instrumentalisation of the Serbian question in neighbouring countries. Instead, it should build friendly and constructive partnerships based on mutual respect, sovereignty and the territorial integrity of states, as well as open cooperation. Particular importance should be attached to easing tensions with Bosnia and Herzegovina, establishing direct and constructive relations with Sarajevo as the country's principal political centre, and opening a new perspective for the normalisation of relations with Kosovo.

Serbia must stop using the position of Serbs in neighbouring countries as an instrument of its own domestic and foreign policy. Such a policy has not protected their interests; on the contrary, it has often exposed them to additional pressure and political manipulation. The long-term interests of Serbs in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and other neighbouring countries are best protected through democratic institutions, respect for their rights and good-neighbourly relations between their respective states and Serbia. Serbia should become a factor of regional cooperation and stability, rather than a source of new divisions and insecurity.

One of the key prerequisites for building a modern and democratic Serbia will also be coming to terms with the past. Without a critical examination of the legacy of the 1990s, the wars, war crimes, nationalism and the policies that led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia, it will not be possible to build a state founded on the rule of law, democratic values and respect for international standards and commitments. Democratic transformation also requires a break with the political and ideological patterns that have reproduced authoritarianism and social divisions for decades.