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'Stop to bloody shirts'

Zoran Lutovac from the Serbian opposition alliance on the anti-government protests in Belgrade

Read this interview in German.

For the fifth Saturday in a row now there were protests in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, against the government and President Aleksandar Vučić. More and more people are demonstrating each week. What do they want?

The protests on the streets of Belgrade are first and foremost against the violence in Serbian society. The citizens are demanding that the assailants who beat up the leader of the opposition Serbian Left party, Borko Stefanović be found and convicted. They are also demanding that Serbian media be freed from state control and that RTS, Serbia's public broadcaster, also covers the Serbian opposition. Most recently there's been calls for Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović to be sacked.

What triggered the protests?

The immediate cause of the protests was a violent attack with metal rods on Borko Stefanović, one of the leaders of the 'Alliance for Serbia', a broad alliance of opposition parties. This act of violence has to be understood as a consequence of many years of verbal violence carried out by the powerful 'Serbian Progressive Party' and its leader, Aleksandar Vučić, who is also President of Serbia.

They regard the opposition not as a political opponent but rather as their enemy, as Serbia's enemy. For these ruling autocrats we, the opposition, are not to be competed with in a fair and honest fight but rather to be destroyed. This oppressive atmosphere of fear and verbal violence is reflected all across society. This is why people in Belgrade took to the streets with the clear message of 'Stop the violence!' and 'Stop to bloody shirts!'

What kind of political support do the demonstrations have?

The ‘Alliance for Serbia’ whose co-founder, the “Democratic Party” (DS), is also my party, initiated the protests in December 2018. These demonstrations have now grown into a civil protest movement that is supported by both our opposition alliance and other socio-political organisations. The ‘Alliance for Serbia’ is the only opposition force that can resist Aleksandar Vučić's autocratic regime. It’s the only political force that is able to articulate the discontent of people in Serbia and create conditions for a normal, orderly political life. In this alliance parties with very different ideologies and programmes have come together around a platform to normalise state and society. This platform wishes to create a society of political and civil liberties, a society of fundamental justice and a reduction of the extreme inequality in Serbia.

In 1999, the fall of Slobodan Milošević also began with protests by the civil resistance movement OTPOR. Can we compare the current demonstrations with this?

Slobodan Milosevic was ousted by protests that defended the citizens’ electoral will. The discontent at that time was all-encompassing. At the end of the 90s, Zoran Đinđić, who led the protests and then became prime minister, said that there was not enough potential in individual parties for change in society, but that this potential could be found among the citizens. The situation today is quite similar. This is also why we founded the ‘Alliance for Serbia’.

The reasons for the protests then and today are different, but the underlying discontent is the same: it’s a discontent with the general and political conditions in society. Every Saturday, the protests are gathering more and more people who are unhappy with the general state of society.

How is the government under President Vučić reacting to the protests?

The government’s reactions are totally wrong and irritating. Every public appearance by Vučić or other government representatives results in an ever-increasing number of citizens joining the demonstrations at the next protests. First, the government politicians and the media they control talked down the number of protesters. Then President Vučić said: ‘March as much as you like! I will not fulfil a single one of your demands, even if five million of you should come.’ At the time though, the only demand was ‘Stop the violence!’

Then the interior minister himself counted the protestors and claimed that there were ten times fewer people than were actually on the streets. The citizens’ irritation is also due to the fact that this

government does not want to accept any criticism at all and stubbornly sugar-coats the bleak reality of people in Serbia.

The interview was conducted byMax Brändle.



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