DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 04.04.2025 | Kirsten Schönefeld

March against the machine

Can Serbia still find a political solution, or is the country left with the choice between increased autocracy and direct democracy?

The intensity and duration of the student protests in Serbia have surprised many — at the latest since 15 March. More than 300 000 people gathered to remember the 15 people who have died from the collapse of a canopy at Novi Sad station. Most observers believe the protest was larger even than the mass demonstrations of 2000 that ultimately led to the fall of Slobodan Milošević. The movement has gained considerable traction across society, with the majority of university professors supporting the protests and strikes continuing at many secondary schools, too. While the protests have grown in strength, the protesters' demands have remained constant over the past four months. Chief among them is a thorough investigation into the accident, including the question of whether there was corruption at play in the station's renovation.

For months, the government's response to these demands has been to state that they have fulfilled their obligations and published all the relevant documents. The two sides thus remain irreconcilable, with tension and polarisation rising rather than subsiding. The number of violent attacks on protesters is increasing again; just this past weekend, the female head of the philosophy department in the south Serbian city of Niš was knifed on a public street. During the most recent protests in Belgrade, a device known as an LRAD, or sound cannon, was deployed, though it's unclear, at this point, by whom.

Twin crises

There is thus no sign of the situation defusing. In fact, closer analysis reveals that Serbia is in the grip of a deep political crisis — or rather of twin political crises. The autocratic system established by President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) over the past 10 years is on the brink. Recent surveys reveal that 59 per cent of the population back the protests, while just a third of respondents expressed

unequivocal support for Vučić. The government has responded to the crisis with a growing crackdown, targeting civil society in particular. At the same time, Vučić has announced the creation of a new movement as a counterweight to the student protests. Whether that will help him is open to question, with a sense of liberation now spreading across the country. The students are finally saying what many have long thought — they want a Serbia that is free from corruption and that values democracy, dignity and social justice.

The demands for an investigation into the accident have long since gained a political dimension. 'We are changing the system' is one of the slogans being displayed in Belgrade. This is about much more than wanting a change of government — i.e., replacing the coalition between the SPP and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) with a new parliamentary majority. The students are demanding not just a return to the rule of law, a free media and representative democracy. They are calling for a fundamentally different kind of democratic participation — a whole new political system. The protest movement has thus deliberately distanced itself from established parties, even those considered pro-European or progressive.

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In the eyes of many Serbians, all the country's parties have lost a great deal of legitimacy. That applies to opposition parties, even those that are pro-European, young or female-dominated, as well as to the ruling SPP. This has to do with the disarray caused by the country's autocratic transformation, but also with the Vučić regime itself. The constant media attacks against opposition actors over the past 10 years have further eroded their image. Many now regard party politics as just a power game in which people jockey for positions, money and deals. Parliament has long since ceased to be a place for debating issues and weighing different interests; instead, it is widely seen as just a kind of theatre. It's here that the extent of the second crisis – the crisis of representation – becomes apparent.

That the system of representation itself is in crisis is evident from what's been happening at a local level. Citizens in Belgrade, Niš, Novi Sad and many smaller cities have repeatedly attempted to organise boycotts of local council meetings, hosting alternative citizens' assemblies known as *zborovi*. These have openly discussed long-standing failings in areas such

as public transport, pollution and education. Politicians and civil society representatives – even those from the opposition – are often unwelcome at the assemblies, such is the protesters' frustration over the lack of reforms and their mistrust of established actors. There is a growing desire for new forms of political participation. Calls for direct democracy are going around — it's a message some of the opposition parties have now heeded.

The Serbian-born economist Branko Milanović recently highlighted the global context of these events, framing them as part of the collapse of the representative system across the world. The student protest movement, Milanović hypothesises, may be apolitical in the conventional sense, but it is doomed to continue playing the same game; after all, for their demands to be realised, Vučić's regime would have to abolish itself. The protests could thus push the country towards a dictatorship, or at least a further ratcheting up of state repression. The recent increase in violence on Serbian streets and the alleged use of a sound cannon at the 15 March protest in Belgrade suggest that perhaps Milanović is right.

So what next?

Is there still scope for party political solutions, or is Serbia's future a choice between increased autocracy and direct democracy? On 19 March, the Serbian parliament accepted the prime minister's resignation, which he himself had announced back in January. It now has 30 days to form a new government. If it fails, new elections will take place in the first half of June. That is not yet a given, but this much is certain: if held, opposition parties will refuse to take part. A political stalemate potentially looms.

The opposition recently presented its concept of a 'government of national confidence' — a transition government with a term of around nine months. It would have two main aims: to thoroughly investigate the accident at Novi Sad and to prepare the ground for free and fair elections. It would also seek to engage with the student movement and with the new institutions of direct democracy, the local citizens' assemblies. A transition government would thus represent a consensual and dialogue-based way forward — a way out of the crisis of authoritarianism and of the crisis of representation. It would be a logical step at a time of deep mistrust.

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President Vučić, however, has firmly rejected the idea of a transition government, perhaps mindful of events in North Macedonia, where such a transition government led to the ousting of then Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and his

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ruling VMRO-DPMNE. For now, it's hard to see how any agreement could be reached between government and opposition. It's equally unclear how the rift between the protest movement and opposition parties can be healed.

So far, the European Union has taken a notably hands-off approach. The Commission's support for the Serbian government may have cooled slightly, but it has not yet sent a clear message, other than that 'the country needs to deliver on EU reforms'. Its economic interest in large-scale projects such as lithium mining in the Jadar valley or Expo 2027 in Belgrade appears unchanged — even though these projects are only feasible if there is increased domestic stability and democratic reform. That fact is precisely why the EU should play a more proactive role by sending a clear message to the government and offering targeted support for the pro-democracy movement.

For its part, the movement would gain increased impetus and influence if the dialogue between students, citizens and government could be restarted and the divisions among progressives overcome. From such a position of strength, it might be capable of negotiating with the government regarding the conditions for free and fair elections and a democratic transition.



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