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Protest flames engulf Serbia

Ten months after the tragedy in Novi Sad, students are demanding clarification, new elections and a democratic Serbia — Vučić's regime is responding with harsh measures

'We now need new momentum for enlargement, for Ukraine, for Moldova and for the countries of the Western Balkans,' said German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul during his visit to his counterpart in Croatia on 25 August. Geopolitically and geostrategically, the Western Balkan states belong to the European Union, and leaving the region to autocrats is not an option, was Wadephul's appeal.

Less than 400 kilometres away, in Belgrade, sits another autocrat — one who is trying to control not only the fate of his country, but that of the entire region: Aleksandar Vučić.

Hundreds of thousands of people, including a large number of students, have been protesting against the Vučić system for ten months — a protest that began after the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station roof, which killed 16 people.

In August, as images from Belgrade and other Serbian cities clearly show, the protests became more radical. They now have the obvious goal of forcing new elections. In November 2024, when the protests began, their slogan was: 'Your hands are stained with blood.' The main demand was for an investigation into the accident. It is suspected that there were construction errors during the renovation of the station, which was completed in July 2024, that could be attributed to corruption. Despite several arrests, including high-ranking officials and politicians, a full investigation has still not been carried out ten months later.

A radicalisation of disobedience

The student protests reached their peak at a demonstration in Belgrade on 15 March, when an estimated 325 000 people from all over Serbia came to Belgrade to demand an investigation into the accident. But even

in March, it was clear that there was more at stake. The protesters are concerned with democracy and a life of dignity and truth. They want a Serbia in which one party does not largely determine the fate of the country by usurping the civil service, the education system and, increasingly, the private sector.

This Vučić system has developed steadily over the last ten years, since the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power. Democracy, media freedom and pluralism are all restricted, while corruption and nepotism are omnipresent. There is still an active political opposition, but it has been so marginalised and defamed by the regime that even the student movement perceives the opposition as 'dirty' and only cooperates with it on a selective basis.

In May, the protest movement added the demand for new elections, in which a student list would also run, which could re-democratise the country. Schools and universities across Serbia went on strike, and a new citizens' movement emerged – the so-called *Zbors* ('assemblies') – which no longer wants to leave local affairs to the Serbian Progressive Party, but instead wants to take matters into its own hands.

The parallels with Russian discourse are all too obvious.

On 28 June, Vidovdan, one of the country's most important holidays and symbolic in many ways, saw another large protest in Belgrade, where it became clear that the movement is not afraid to use nationalist rhetoric to defend itself against the government's defamation. The government has long described the protest movement as a colour revolution controlled by (Western) foreign powers and as traitors to the Serbian nation.

At the protest, the students called for civil disobedience and renewed their demand for new elections. This is exactly what is happening these days — civil disobedience in Serbia has radicalised.

The images of the protests, with burning rubbish bins and destroyed offices of the ruling SNS party, are striking and show that the protests have become more radical – driven by despair over the failure to meet the demands of the protest movement. As President Vučić has repeatedly announced publicly, the regime is responding to this radicalisation with renewed harshness.

There have been numerous arrests, with the police apparently using brutal force. One student reported physical abuse and threats of rape

while in police custody. 'We are all Nikolina' (*Svi smo mi Nikolina*) has become the slogan of a wave of feminist protests across the country. In addition to the police, so-called *Batinasi*, groups of thugs or hooligans, are also out on the streets in many cases, attacking the demonstrators — sometimes with their bare fists, sometimes with fireworks. Rhetorically, the regime is combating the protest movement with accusations of Nazism. It claims that a fascist movement controlled from abroad – primarily by Germany and Croatia – has emerged, which must be fought against in the interests of the Serbian nation. The parallels with Russian discourse are all too obvious.

Geopolitical potpourri

It is not clear how the situation will develop further. On 25 August, the leader of the ruling party and former prime minister Vučević rejected the idea of early elections. In one of his many television addresses, President Vučić called on the protesters to engage in dialogue, but they refused, stating that 'you don't negotiate with the mafia'. The development towards further, even violent escalation seems virtually inevitable.

None of this sounds even remotely like an EU accession process worthy of the name. For years now, progress has been sluggish at best. Geopolitically, Serbia continues to swing between West and East in its familiar policy of balancing acts. Vučić and his government team do not seem to have any real interest in EU accession, as this would mean counteracting their own interests, including economic ones, in the country. The construction industry, as the disaster in Novi Sad shows, seems to be largely in the hands of the ruling party.

Geopolitically, too, there is no clear orientation towards Europe. When it comes to important decisions, the government usually seeks approval from Moscow. China has also become the most important single foreign investor in Serbia, and now there is the flirtation with Trump, so in terms of foreign policy, the situation can best be described as a geopolitical potpourri.

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In the Western Balkans, Serbia continues to try to assert its influence as the successor state to Yugoslavia. Belgrade is determined not to allow Kosovo's independence, Serbian parties are blocking important democratic processes in Montenegro's EU accession process, and as of recently, the country has been trying to bring North Macedonia into line.

come to an end.

Johann Wadephul's appeal is therefore important: we must not leave the region to the autocrats. However, this appeal alone is not enough. Taking it seriously means facing up to developments in Serbia. As should be clear by now, these developments are not positive. If things continue in this vein, the signs point to further autocratisation, and a Belarus scenario, which Serbian civil society has feared for years, is now within reach.

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Simply looking the other way is therefore no longer in our own interests. At the same time, however, it is difficult to define an alternative path of development for Serbia — the Vučić system has been allowed to develop freely for too long. If, contrary to expectations, new elections are held in the winter of 2025, a student list in Serbia could have a chance of winning, as several polls show.

The last parliamentary elections in December 2023 were marred by irregularities and electoral fraud, and the shortcomings identified by the OSCE have not yet been remedied, leaving considerable scope for manipulation.

However, a government made up of representatives from a student list – i.e. professors and respected figures – would be a complete novelty and hardly conceivable without the support of people who have experience in governing. Especially since the bureaucracy continues to consist of supporters of the Serbian Progressive Party.

It is equally conceivable that the Serbian Progressive Party will win the elections, further exacerbating the situation. The last parliamentary elections in December 2023 were marred by irregularities and electoral fraud, and the shortcomings identified by the OSCE have not yet been remedied, leaving considerable scope for manipulation. A transition phase in which free and fair elections are prepared would therefore be advisable. However, this requires decisive and diplomatic engagement — from Brussels and from the capitals. This is in the interests of the citizens of Serbia, of democracy, but also in the well-understood geopolitical interests of the EU.

EU integration of the countries of the Western Balkans, which Wadephul rightly justifies on the basis of geopolitical interests, is

inconceivable without a democratic and truly stable Serbia. European democracy is therefore being defended on the banks of the Sava and the Danube, while Russia and China wait on the other side.



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