

Protests erupt in Serbia over official handling of COVID-19 pandemic

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A week of protests has followed the announcement last Tuesday by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić that a curfew would be re-imposed in Serbia over the rapid resurgence of COVID-19.

The announcement came as European governments' back-to-work campaign drives a resurgence of COVID-19 infections across the continent. Germany and Spain have re-imposed multiple regional lockdowns, while over 6,000 new cases are being discovered daily in Russia.

Serbia, a former Yugoslav republic with just under 9 million people, imposed a strict lockdown in March but lifted it in May. Now nearly 300 new cases are being diagnosed daily, close to the records for daily infections set in mid-April and threatening to flood the hospital system.

Amid mounting social anger across Europe at the official handling of the pandemic, Vučić's announcement triggered protests last Tuesday night by thousands in the Serbian capital, Belgrade. Protests spread to other cities in Serbia including Nis, Kragujevac and Novi Sad.

In Belgrade, riot police violently attacked protesters, who shouted "Resign!" and "Arrest Vučić." Some of them forced their way into the Parliament and clashed with police inside. Twenty people were arrested, and Serbian police authorities claimed that at least 60 protesters and police were injured that night in the capital.

The protests are politically heterogeneous, with opposition social-democratic and far-right politicians taking part, as well as demonstrators expressing broader popular anger at the official handling of the pandemic. This follows the June 21 elections, which Vučić's right-wing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won in a landslide as the opposition parties' call for a boycott flopped. Protesters accused Vučić of ending the curfew just to hold elections and strengthen his hold on power. Vučić has since backtracked, saying a future lockdown might not involve a curfew.

More broadly, the protests expressed widespread outrage at the official downplaying of the pandemic and its death toll that has prevailed not only in Serbia but across Europe. "Our government only wants to protect its interests, people's lives are treated as collateral damage," one protester told AFP, while another said: "We have had enough of the manipulation of COVID-19 statistics. People are extremely angry."

This followed a report by the European Union (EU)-funded Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) that Serbian officials undercounted COVID-19 deaths, and that 632 people died in Serbia of the virus between March 19 and June 1, not 244. In

particular, the BIRN cited hospital data showing that 243 COVID-positive patients died in the city of Nis, rather than 77; and 94 died in Belgrade's Dragisa Misovic Clinical Center, not 39.

Large public events, like the tennis tournament hosted by famed Serbian player Novak Djokovic, have also helped spread the disease. Djokovic and his wife have since tested positive for COVID-19. Yesterday, Serbian epidemiologist Branislav Todorovic warned, "The health care system is overstretched and I think it is at the limit of its endurance. ... I have to say that all of us who deal with the health system are in a very difficult situation and we are running out of strength."

A student in Belgrade told the WSWS that the protests were an explosion of social and political discontent set off by the state handling of the pandemic: "Many issues are motivating people today, dating back to the last eight years of the Vučić government and all that happened before."

Amid the NATO-led breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s following the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO bombed Serbia and Belgrade in a 1999 war to split Kosovo from Serbia. NATO issued false war propaganda claiming Serbians were massacring hundreds of thousands of Kosovar Albanians, and turned a blind eye to Kosovar attacks on Serbs. After the war, the NATO powers organized a regime change operation that toppled Serbian President Slobodan Milošević in 2000.

On Thursday, however, the US Embassy in Belgrade issued a statement making clear it does not support the protests. "We condemn all forms of violence, including what appears to be coordinated attacks on police that appear to have provoked excessive reactions, as well as the apparent use of force by the police," it declared. It made a pro forma criticism of Vučić, stating that for "dialogue in Serbia, a free media environment and reforms in the area of the rule of law are needed."

The US government has shocked the world, however, with its failure to take measures to halt the COVID-19 pandemic in America and its threats to deploy the military against protests over the police murder of George Floyd. The embassy felt forced to add: "America is a nation undergoing its own challenges with protests and civil unrest right now."

Vučić for his part denounced protesters as "fascists," apparently referring to the role of forces close to far-right parliamentarian Srđan Nogo, who reportedly clashed with police in the Parliament. The ruling SNS also alleges that the protests were paid for by

social-democratic politician Dragan Vasilas.

Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic lamely attempted to defend the crackdown on protests by citing the brutal repression of protests and strikes in the largest EU states. “We have seen a much sharper reaction of the police and a more brutal reaction in many European and other world centers such as Paris, Berlin and London,” she said.

Workers internationally are moving into struggle against class war policies of the ruling elites. Confinement policies were adopted only after mass strikes and walkouts starting in Italy, the United States and Brazil spread across Europe and the Americas. Now, a new counteroffensive is emerging against the ruling elites’ back-to-work policies, designed to boost corporate profits, with strikes among US auto and health workers, anti-government protests that erupted in Bulgaria this weekend and the continuing protests in Serbia.

Only an international offensive of the working class, breaking the profit motive and the stranglehold of the banks and the capitalist class over global industry and medical resources can guarantee the rational use of social resources to meet human need and fight COVID-19.

This need comes at every point into conflict with the reactionary and criminal political framework created by the Stalinist regimes’ restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe in 1989–1991. NATO spearheaded the breakup of the Yugoslav federation established by the multi-ethnic anti-fascist Partisans’ victory against fascist occupation during World War II. It encouraged factions of the regime in the different Yugoslav republics to declare independence from Belgrade, plunging Yugoslavia into a decade-long bloody ethnic civil war and throwing it open to imperialist intrigue and intervention.

The different ethnic-nationalist factions of the ruling elite in the former Yugoslavia are all trying to work out corrupt deals with the NATO imperialist powers in the context of the US-led war drive against Russia and the EU austerity diktat across Europe. Vuçiq tries to balance between Serbia’s traditional alliance with Russia, his austerity agenda at home and attempts to work out a settlement with the US-backed Kosovar-Albanian regime. Tensions between Belgrade and Pristina have never been resolved since Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence in 2008.

Growing inter-imperialist rivalries for influence have further cut across attempts to organize a viable economic life in the Balkans. While Washington has pressed for Kosovo’s independence and to integrate it into NATO based on a land deal swapping Albanian-majority areas of Serbia for Serb-majority areas of Kosovo, Berlin has opposed land swaps as provocative and sought to integrate the region into the EU. This conflict unfolded amid vigorous behind-the-scenes criticisms by Washington of German-led initiatives to develop the EU as an independent military force from America.

US-brokered attempts to negotiate a deal between Vuçiq and his Kosovar counterpart Hashim Thaçi broke down last month when Thaçi, the former head of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), was charged with war crimes in The Hague. The KLA is a criminal drug-running outfit, designated as a terrorist group by Washington before the 1999 war. EU investigations in 2010 established that during the war Thaçi was complicit not only in the murder of

Serbs, but in the illegal harvesting and trade of their organs. Indeed, this was known by all the major governments.

The Vuçiq-Thaçi talks were to take place under the auspices of Richard Grenell, the former US ambassador to Germany whose overt hostility to Berlin led the German government to demand that Trump replace him. However, the war crimes indictment in The Hague cut across this initiative. Events surrounding an interview published by Germany’s influential *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)* daily newspaper suggest that the indictment was itself part of the growing conflicts between Washington and Berlin.

In his curt interview with the *FAZ*, Thaçi rejected a mutual Serbian-Kosovar amnesty for war crimes during the 1999 war and insisted that Washington should lead Balkan politics. “Americans,” he said, “can act faster, more accurately and more efficiently than Europeans. That is why American leadership is necessary for Serbia to overcome its conflicts in Kosovo. If there are lights for our countries at the end of the tunnel, they shine from Washington.”

This interview apparently provoked serious discussion and a response in German and European ruling circles to cut across US policy in the Balkans. The *FAZ* withheld publication of the interview while the tribunal in The Hague prepared war crimes charges against Thaçi. These charges were announced, torpedoing Thaçi’s summit with Vuçiq and Grenell, and the *FAZ* interview was published only after the Grenell summit was called off. Thaçi arrived on Monday to face charges in The Hague.

A rational response to the pandemic requires a coordinated, international mobilization of medical and industrial resources, which cannot be held hostage to rival imperialist cliques and their local bourgeois and mafia clients in the Balkans. For workers and youth fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, the turn must be to the emerging international movement in the working class, and a struggle based on a socialist program against capitalism and imperialist war.



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