

# Mass protests continue in Serbia

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Mass protests against the right-wing government and President Aleksandar Vučić have been taking place in Serbia for months. While initially the protests were mainly organised by students, all age and professional groups are now participating. Students and workers have been demonstrating almost daily in over 300 cities since November.

On December 22, around 100,000 protesters gathered at Slavija Square in the capital, Belgrade. It was the largest demonstration in Serbia in 20 years.

Since December, students from 65 of the country's 80 faculties have been on strike. Schools are also on strike, and at major demonstrations, farmers have blocked main roads with dozens of tractors.

The protests are enjoying widespread support among the population. According to surveys, more than 61 percent support the demonstrations against the government and the president. During demonstrations in freezing temperatures, local residents provide participants with warm drinks and meals. Belgrade taxi drivers travelled to a rally in Novi Sad, Serbia's second-largest city, and provided students with free rides back.

Rallies and protests by Serbs are also taking place outside Serbia, in Vienna, Berlin and other European cities. On March 1, tens of thousands protested in the southern Serbian city of Niš.

The protests were triggered by the deaths of 15 people, including two children, due to the collapse of a railway station canopy in the northern Serbian city of Novi Sad in November. The collapse was preceded by a renovation of the station, but the dilapidated canopy was not replaced. The general contractor responsible for the renovation was a Chinese company, which has stressed that the roof was not part of the renovation project.

It is reasonable to assume that corruption lies behind the lack of transparency in the construction projects. Shortly after the incident, Construction Minister Goran

Vesić resigned. He was arrested weeks later, along with other top officials. Corruption among politicians and authorities is commonplace in Serbia and affects almost every area. Without good connections or sufficient bribes, it is often impossible to get official permits, medical treatment or jobs.

The protests quickly spread beyond the immediate cause and express massive opposition to the right-wing government and the hated President Vučić.

Vučić has been in office since 2017 and has implemented a drastic shift to the right. He comes from the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS), of which he was a member from 1993 to 2008 and for which he occasionally held ministerial posts. In the 1990s, the SRS recruited nationalists for the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and formed paramilitary units that were notorious for carrying out atrocities.

Since the civil war in Yugoslavia and NATO's war against Serbia, the situation facing the population has been precarious. Poverty and unemployment have continued to rise in recent years under Vučić.

The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is \$11,352, placing the country in 10th place among the poorest countries in Europe. Only countries such as Albania, Armenia, Moldova, Kosovo and Ukraine are poorer. One in five Serbs is affected by poverty.

In order to fulfil the criteria for the country's EU accession aspirations, the last governments have continued to trim the few remaining provisions of the social safety net. At the same time, the wealth of the country's narrow upper class is growing. Armament spending has also been stepped up in recent years.

Against this background, the protests have a social character and are directed against the entire political system. Since Vučić came to power, there have been repeated spontaneous protests, most recently in 2023 after a school shooting rampage in Belgrade that killed nine students and a security guard.

In addition to the publication of all documents about the tragedy in Novi Sad, the protesters are demanding the prosecution of violent attackers of the students, as well as the release of all detained demonstrators. Furthermore, they are calling for an increase in the education budget by 20 percent.

Vu?i? responded to the ongoing protests by sacrificing his prime minister, Miloš Vu?evi?, who he forced to resign at the end of January. Vu?evi? led an extreme right-wing government made up of the Progressive Party (SNS) and the Socialist Party (SPS), the nationalist party of former head of state Slobodan Miloševi?. Vu?i? ruled out new elections, so the manoeuvre did not stop the protests.

Nor has the brutal crackdown on protesters intimidated them so far. Not only are the official security forces cracking down harshly on the demonstrators, but members of the SNS, who have close ties to fascist groups, are also attacking students. Sometimes they have driven cars into groups of peaceful demonstrators.

Vu?i? is receiving support from the European Union. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who never hesitates to support any protest that is in any way directed against Russia, did not comment on the protests in Serbia. Gert Jan Koopman, the EU's director-general for neighbourhood and enlargement negotiations, had merely noted "steady progress" towards the EU during a visit to Belgrade and also ignored the protests.

The reason for this is the interests of the leading European powers in the Balkans, where Serbia is a major player. Belgrade is supposed to ensure stability there and continue to be harnessed for the EU's war policy against Russia. Vu?i? has not only condemned Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine but has also recently been moving ever closer to the EU in military terms. As early as 2023, Belgrade abandoned plans to purchase a new batch of Russian fighter jets in favour of a €2.7 billion contract to supply 12 French fighter jets.

Serbian military officials also declared that they would no longer purchase Russian weapons produced under licence in third countries. Instead, Serbia has since supplied Ukraine with ammunition worth around €800 million via third countries, thereby supporting the policy of waging war against Russia.

Serbia also plays a central role in the EU's policy of

sealing Europe's borders off from refugees. The country is located on the so-called Balkan route and regularly uses force against migrants trying to reach Europe via the route.

Last year, Belgrade signed an agreement with the EU allowing the stationing of the EU border protection agency Frontex along Serbia's borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

Furthermore, Serbia has mineral resources that are of great interest to the European automotive industry. In June last year, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz accompanied the signing of a "Memorandum on Critical Raw Materials" in Belgrade, which provides for the resumption of lithium mining in western Serbia.



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