

Mass protests growing in Serbia against the government and President Vu?i?

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After four and a half months of constant protests, the Serbian capital Belgrade recently witnessed the biggest demonstration since the breakup of Yugoslavia more than 30 years ago.

At least 300,000 people—some estimates are even higher—demonstrated against abuses of power and corruption.

Students and pupils from all over the country, which has a population of just over 7 million, traveled to Belgrade. Numerous workers and pensioners also joined the demonstration, despite the government doing everything it could to make it impossible to travel to Belgrade. The state-owned railways and bus lines suspended services to the capital due to alleged terror warnings.

These measures, however, only sparked even more solidarity. Carpooling groups formed on social networks, and taxis and even private bus companies drove participants to Belgrade for free.

The demonstration was the highpoint so far of the wave of protests against the government and President Aleksandar Vu?i? that has been going on for months. In all the larger cities of the Balkan state, students in particular have repeatedly taken to the streets. Almost all universities in the country have been occupied for months, with university staff showing their solidarity with students.

The wave of protests has long since spread across the entire country. The Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) recently reported 410 protest actions in 165 different locations in just one week. A study by the CRTA shows that 80 percent of the population support the students' demands and that two-thirds are involved in the protests in some way.

The protests were triggered by the death of 16 people, including two children, following the collapse of a station canopy in the northern Serbian city of Novi Sad in November last year. Just last week, the 16th fatality, a 19-year-old student, succumbed to his injuries. In response to the news of the young man's death, students and schoolchildren blocked two central bus and tram depots, causing significant disruptions to public transport.

The collapse of the canopy was preceded by a renovation of the train station, but the dilapidated canopy was not replaced. Protesters blame the corruption rampant in the ruling party and the state apparatus for the tragedy and are demanding that all documents relating to the Novi Sad disaster be made public.

Furthermore, they demand that the attacks on students and professors during the protests be investigated and those responsible prosecuted. In addition, the proceedings against

students who took part in the peaceful protests should be dropped and the education budget increased by 20 percent.

However, the protests go far beyond these limited demands. They are an expression of widespread opposition to the abuse of power and corruption of the ruling elites and to the intolerable social conditions for the majority of the population. While they are primarily directed against the president and government and the ruling right-wing nationalist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the country's so-called opposition parties have so far been unable to gain a foothold among the protesters.

This is despite Vu?i?'s increasingly brutal crackdown on the protests and his attempts to divide the population by stirring up toxic nationalism and racism, provoking conflicts with neighboring states and oppressing minorities.

Vu?i? is pitting SNS officials, who are often linked to fascist groups, against the students in an attempt to intimidate them. During the demonstration in Belgrade, a notorious fascist unit associated with executions and war crimes in the 1990s marched. High-ranking SNS members, such as Vladimir ?ukanovi?, who has repeatedly made headlines with his fascist outbursts, have threatened to fire into the crowd if protests continue.

In Belgrade, numerous protesters were arrested. Security forces used pepper spray and a sonic weapon against the peaceful mass demonstration. Although the authorities officially denied the use of a sonic weapon, video recordings and assessments by military analysts clearly confirm its use.

The use of sonic weapons is banned in Serbia, as it is in numerous other countries, because they can cause permanent damage to protesters. In addition to hearing loss and tinnitus, they can lead to headaches, dizziness, disorientation and even organ failure. On the evening of the protest, dozens of people presented themselves at the emergency rooms of the clinics with severe headaches and earaches.

The EU is backing Vu?i?

In Ukraine, Georgia and other successor states of the Soviet Union, pro-imperialist forces have repeatedly succeeded in splitting protests against abuse of power and corruption from the social struggles of the working class and in steering them into the

wake of the European Union and the US in the form of so-called “color revolutions.” This has not yet happened in Serbia because the reactionary character of the EU and the US has become so obvious they can no longer pose as “democratic” alternatives to the authoritarian regime in Serbia.

The EU has openly backed Vučić in Serbia, whom it needs to repel the influence of Russia and China, integrate Serbia into the EU and exploit the country’s vast lithium deposits. For his part, Vučić is determined to continue on a path towards the EU, even if he repeatedly plays up the traditionally close relations between Serbia and Russia and the country’s economic ties with China to reinforce his status. China has invested billions in Serbia and is its second largest trading partner after Germany.

In October, shortly before the outbreak of mass protests, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited Belgrade to thank “dear Aleksandar” for his “implementation of reforms, particularly with regard to the foundations of the rule of law and democracy.” “You have shown that you walk the talk,” she said, commending Vučić.

Three months earlier, in July 2024, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz was also in Belgrade to attend the signing of a “Memorandum on Critical Raw Materials” that grants the EU access to Serbia’s lithium deposits. The Jadar mine, operated by the Anglo-Australian mining company Rio Tinto, can meet 90 percent of Europe’s current lithium needs.

Massive protests against the environmentally destructive mining had previously forced the Serbian government to halt it for two years, until the project resumed under pressure from the EU. Many of those who took part in those protests went on to play a leading role in today’s demonstrations. It is no wonder, then, that there is little enthusiasm for the EU. According to surveys, only 40 percent of the Serbian population supports EU accession.

“As so often in the world, the EU has chosen to prioritize business interests, which do not necessarily go hand in hand with political liberalization, over freedom and democracy in Serbia,” commented political scientist Branislav Radeljic.

Vučić also plays a central role for the EU in the repulsion of refugees coming via the so-called Balkan route.

Vučić also has a good relationship with French President Emmanuel Macron. During Macron’s visit to Belgrade in 2024, Vučić purchased 12 Rafale fighter jets from the French manufacturer Dassault, worth €2.7 billion. Although the sum is unaffordable for Serbia, the political advantages that Vučić expects to gain were obviously worth the price to him.

Donald Trump’s administration—or more precisely, his family—is also pursuing its business interests in Belgrade with Vučić’s active support. On March 24, thousands protested in Belgrade against the construction of a luxury project by the US investment firm Affinity Partners, which is owned by Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner. The property is to be built on the site of the former Yugoslav army headquarters, which was destroyed by a US air force attack exactly 26 years ago as part of the NATO war against Yugoslavia. The Serbian government has leased the property in the heart of Belgrade to Kushner’s company for 99 years.

The protests lack a viable perspective

Although the Serbian protest movement has so far not allowed itself to be hijacked by the EU or NATO, it lacks a viable perspective. The Green Left Front (ZLF), a party that emerged from the movement against the Jadar mine and other environmental protests, supports the protests but does not go beyond pious hopes for a reform of the parliamentary system and cooperation between all opposition parties.

“The Green-Left Front believes that the only solution for a way out of the crisis is the formation of a transitional government, which would be endowed with a time-limited mandate to ensure free elections and free media and urgently stop the theft of public funds through large infrastructure projects,” said Radomir Lazović, co-chair of the ZLF, to the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Such a transitional government, the ZLF says, should revise voter lists to ensure fair elections and create conditions for objective media reporting. ZLF has initiated meetings with all of the opposition parties and insists that extra-parliamentary organizations and civil society be involved in this proposal, otherwise it would be manipulated by the authorities.

Such a proposal amounts to trying to cure a cancer patient by administering placebos. The cancerous growth of corruption and dictatorial rule, which has also infested the US and the European Union, cannot be fought with homeopathic remedies. It is the result of the rot of capitalist society. The dominance of billionaire oligarchs over economic life is just as incompatible with democracy as the global struggle for raw materials, markets and profit is with peace.

The struggle against corruption, exploitation, dictatorship and environmental destruction is a class question. It requires the mobilization of the working class, which produces all of society’s wealth, against those who plunder and exploit it. It requires the nationalisation of the big corporations and the expropriation of the oligarchs, as well as the overcoming of national borders that divide the working class. It requires the building of a society in which the social needs of all, and not the profit interests of a few, are the central priority.



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