

Serbian government escalates violence against protesters

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Ongoing demonstrations and protests in many cities against the right-wing Serbian government led by President Aleksandar Vučić are being met with increasing police brutality.

The protests have now been going on for nine months. In addition to demonstrations attended by up to 500,000 people, universities across the country are being occupied by students with almost daily protests taking place in various cities.

The protests were initially triggered by the deaths of 16 people, including two children, when a train station canopy collapsed in the northern Serbian city of Novi Sad in November last year. The collapse of the canopy followed a reconstruction of the train station, but the dilapidated canopy was never replaced. Protesters blame the tragedy on the corruption rampant within the ruling party and the state apparatus.

The protests quickly became an expression of a rejection of the government's anti-social policies and its resort to police-state methods. After initially responding to the movement with bans and intimidation, the government is now deliberately resorting to violence. Vučić and his right-wing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) are using not only regular police units but also paramilitary, fascist gangs.

In mid-August, masked supporters of the government attacked demonstrators in the towns of Vrbas and Backa under the watchful eye of the police. Seventy were injured. In response, further protests took place across the country the following day, in which the government also gave the right-wing mob free rein.

The most violent clashes occurred in Novi Sad and the capital, Belgrade. There, masked gangs of thugs attacked demonstrators with flares, fireworks, bottles and clubs. Once again, numerous injuries were reported with ensuing street battles and the burning down of an

SNS party office.

According to media reports, the attacks by the police and the masked attackers were coordinated. One report described a clash at an intersection in downtown Belgrade: A line of police officers in full military gear confronted demonstrators. When a group of right-wing, armed thugs advanced towards the demonstrators, the police retreated.

Although the mob is usually masked, some of the attackers were identified from footage posted on social media. They belong to notorious fascist groups or the hooligan scene, among them a former hooligan leader who was tried in 2009 for the murder of a French football fan.

Independent media representatives are also increasingly being targeted by the government. The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS) reports more than 160 attacks this year alone.

During a rally on August 14, right-wing extremist government supporters attacked a group of journalists. A day later, journalist Vuk Cvijić was targeted and injured by a police officer. Nova TV presenter Sanja Ignjatović Eker received threats that her children would be killed after she gave a live report on the protests in Novi Sad. She told *Die Zeit* newspaper that the driving force behind these threats was the president himself, who incessantly incites hatred against independent media.

The SNS emerged in 2008 as a breakaway from the fascist Serbian Radical Party (SRS). Vučić himself served as Serbian minister of information under former President Slobodan Milošević. The SNS remains infused with Serbian nationalists and maintains close ties with fascist groups.

The special unit responsible for the protection of state officials, the JZO, has been expanded from 300 to

around 1,300 personnel in recent years. This unit operates without any legal restrictions and is effectively subordinate to the president.

On August 14, a law student was taken by the JZO to a garage of the government building, where she was insulted and threatened by Marko Križak, the head of the JZO. At the same time, arbitrary arrests of students and protesters are increasing. Although such arrests lack any legal basis, they are intended to create a climate of intimidation and fear.

Vučić has continued to announce a “harsh response from the state” and even threatened to kill demonstrators. He compared the demonstrators to fascists and Nazis and declared that it was only a matter of time before someone died.

In grotesque government statements, Vučić claimed that the demonstrators were “terrorists” being paid by the West—Germany or Great Britain—to overthrow him. He described the demonstrations as an “uprising of the rich” that was only prevented thanks to the “fantastic efforts” of the Serbian security forces.

Although the protest movement has now grown far beyond its original student milieu, it has so far barely developed beyond its initial demands for democracy, the rule of law, and the fight against corruption. It rarely raises social or even anti-capitalist demands.

Although the accession negotiations with the EU, which have been ongoing since 2014, have stalled, no EU flags are to be seen at the demonstrations—unlike at the so-called “color revolutions” in Ukraine, Georgia and other countries. While many participants place their hopes in the EU, this sympathy is not reciprocated from Brussels.

In fact, the EU is counting on Vučić, who is performing a careful balancing act between the EU, Russia and China. On the one hand, Belgrade agreed to new gas supply contracts with Moscow in May 2022 and hosts Russian broadcasters banned in the EU. On the other hand, despite state media propaganda to the contrary, it supports the EU’s war drive against Russia and is an important partner for Brussels in sealing off refugees attempting to reach Central Europe via the Balkan route.

Serbia is also closely intertwined with the EU economically. Over 60 percent of Serbian exports go to the EU, and over 60 percent of foreign direct investment in Serbia comes from the EU. The former

German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, personally traveled to Belgrade in July 2024 to attend the signing of a “Memorandum on Critical Raw Materials” granting the EU access to Serbian lithium deposits.

The EU also fears that further destabilization of Serbia could spread to other Balkan states that are already fully or partially in the EU and whose governments are just as corrupt and authoritarian as Serbia’s.

Isolated expressions of solidarity with the demonstrators from Brussels or EU member states therefore amount to nothing more than empty phrases. In a statement, EU Ambassador to Serbia Andreas von Beckerath cynically called on “all sides to de-escalate tensions.”

The result is increasing alienation and scepticism toward the EU among the wider Serbian population, especially among younger people. In a spring poll conducted by the International Republican Institute, only 40 percent said they would vote for their country’s accession to the EU.

The depth of the rejection of Vučić and the entire political establishment is demonstrated by polls that indicate the student movement is the strongest political force in Serbia and would win parliamentary elections with an electoral list led by it. But despite all its courage and fighting spirit against the right-wing regime, the movement lacks a viable political perspective.

Formally left-wing parties and groups are deliberately trying to keep the protests apolitical or channel them to the bankrupt opposition parties. On May 1, the students demonstrated alongside five trade union associations. However, these represent nationalist positions and are linked to the ruling party themselves. Like the established opposition parties, they fear nothing more than a broad movement directed not only against Vučić but against the entire capitalist system.



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