

## SERBIA: A democratic movement which is of unusual size but incapable of escaping its restrictive political framework

We have never been indifferent to struggles for more freedom within capitalist society<sup>1</sup>. Yet, we have never ceased to stress the danger that they can lead to the strengthening of the state, including when coming into conflict with it. *“Communists don’t call for the establishment of a democratic republic because their objective is the destruction of all states. Yet these democratic movements with their radical potential must not inspire either indifference or contempt on the part of communists, who certainly appreciate any improvement in objective conditions favourable to the development of the political independence of the working class.”*<sup>2</sup> It is in this spirit that we attempt to understand and criticise the recent mass protests in Serbia, which have involved the biggest demonstrations in the modern history of that country, notably on 15 March 2025<sup>3</sup>.

### Preamble

On 1 November 2024, the canopy of the railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia’s second-largest city, collapsed, claiming the lives of 15 people. A sixteenth victim died from his injuries four months later. In the days that followed, students took to the streets to demand an independent investigation and that those responsible be identified and brought to justice. The immediate focus of the movement was on the gangrene of corruption and nepotism which characterised the regime. A strike broke out across the education system, accompanied by a brief and hesitant alliance between students and workers. As in previous movements in Serbia, students have

always been at the centre of the protests and have provided most of the demands, most recently demanding new elections... Students, secondary school kids and even primary school pupils have been marching through towns, and even small villages, across Serbia. They are demanding a functional state with a justice system that upholds the constitution, new really free legislative elections, and a 20% increase in funding for education.

### Illiberalism in Power

With the exception of a brief interlude between 2004 and 2012, Serbia has consistently stood in opposition to political liberalism, adopting an autocratic and mafia-like model in which the boundary between the state and organised crime has remained alarmingly porous since the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. After all, Aleksandar Vučić is one of Slobodan Milošević’s political heirs, having inherited a state apparatus whose inner workings he knows intimately—an apparatus he served in 1998 as Minister of Information. At that time, Milošević was still President of “Yugoslavia”, which then consisted of only Serbia and Montenegro. Even then, he demonstrated a talent for muzzling the media or bringing them under the control of his political patron.

The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) was originally founded as a moderate, pro-European, right-wing party in 2008, by some former leaders of the far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS). It shed the ideological baggage of the war years—after Milošević’s fall in 2000, the SRS still garnered around 30% of the vote—and it reduced the role of nationalist identity politics to a form of mild social conservatism. In this way, the SNS evolved into a party with a veneer of respectability, much like the Italian neo-fascist movement Alleanza Nazionale (AN), which emerged following the dissolution of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) in 1995.

However, Vučić has never fully renounced his past, nor the ultra-nationalist ideology that continues to serve as a tool for his hold on power. He maintains links with organised

<sup>1</sup> See, in particular: “KAZAKHSTAN: The democratic movement stands on the shoulders of the insurrectional movement of the proletariat”, Bulletin no.21, 15 January 2022: <https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Leaflets/BLT2201ENvF.pdf>

And “What are all these democracy movements about?”, Letter no. 40, May 2015: <https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Letters/LTMC1540%20ENvF.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 40, *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> BBC, “Serbia’s largest-ever rally sees 325,000 protest against government”: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx2g8v32q30o>

crime networks and with former members of paramilitary militias who gained notoriety during the wars of the 1990s—including one led by his political mentor, Vojislav Šešelj. The Serbian president is close to the “illiberal democrat” Viktor Orbán, a staunch supporter of Serbia’s accession to the EU. As for Orbán, he sees in Serbia a potential new ally within the Union, one that could bolster the bloc of nations drawing closer and closer to a “modern” and “democratic” form of proto-fascism<sup>4</sup>.

## A working class indifferent to the movement

Despite all the agitation on the streets, there has been no discernible upturn in workers’ struggles. The strikes in education appear to be, like the protests, purely “political”, devoid of any demands relating to the material conditions of wage earners in the sector. Attempts by student organisations to call “general strikes” got very little response, although large numbers of workers joined demos as individuals. Attempts by workers to join the protests more collectively have been rare<sup>5</sup>. Certainly, the fall in unemployment and moderate increases in nominal and real wages over the decade since 2016 have not favoured the convergence of proletarians and students, and the absence of any social content in the student movement has hardly helped matters.

In 2022, the average gross wage was 880 euros per month (103,000 Serbian dinars), or 1532 euros at Purchasing Power Parity (PPP)<sup>6</sup>. This is 38% more than in 2013 (using euros at PPP). This means that gross wages are roughly the same as in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia Herzegovina. But they are significantly higher than in Kosovo (982 euros at PPP), and significantly lower than Croatia or Hungary (2073 and 1981 respectively). Real wage growth was positive between 2018 and 2021, following negative trends

between 2013 and 2015. Figures for other Balkan countries are not so different<sup>7</sup>.

Slow wage growth in 2022 is hardly surprising because Serbia was hit hard by inflation, 15% in this case<sup>8</sup>, like most of Europe.

The World Bank report provides some useful figures. Unemployment fell from 22.5% in 2013 to 9.4% in 2022 (with similar levels for men and women). According to another source, it stood at 9.4% in 2023 and 8.6% in 2024. Youth unemployment (i.e., among those aged 15 to 24) also dropped from 49.9% in 2013 to 24.4% in 2022. The proportion of NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) also fell during the same period, from 20% to 13%. Despite these improvements in employment opportunities, over half of young people (with an average age of 28) say they would leave Serbia if given the chance. The reasons cited go beyond higher wages or economic hardship and include corruption, crime, and a general lack of security.

## What is important about the movement is not what it says, but what it doesn’t say

The foreign policy of Serbia is something of a balancing act<sup>9</sup>. Vučić’s government wants to maintain friendly relations with the EU, the US, Russia and China! This *could* create various traps for a democracy movement to fall into. Democracy movements have a tendency to be “pro-Western”, just because they are demanding things like the Rule of Law, which the US and European states have traditionally claimed to support. We saw this with the “Meydan Movement” in Ukraine<sup>10</sup> and more recently in Georgia. This tendency could also be seen in Hong Kong, and even in Burma. Yet in Serbia there seems to be almost no trace of a “pro-EU” attitude among the young students. Nor are they

<sup>4</sup> See: MC/KpK, *The crisis of political liberalism*, work document no. 10, December 2018: [http://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/WorkDocuments/DT10\\_Crise%20Dem\\_EN\\_%20Complete%20vF.pdf](http://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/WorkDocuments/DT10_Crise%20Dem_EN_%20Complete%20vF.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> For example, the protest by (a few dozen) preschool workers in Belgrade on 11 May: <https://vreme.com/en/drustvo/protest-predskolskh-radnika-ko-se-laca-mati-u-vrtic-da-se-vrati/>

<sup>6</sup> “Western Balkans Labor Market Brief 2022, Special Topic – Labor Taxation in the Western Balkans”, World Bank Group, August 2024, see the Statistical Annex for individual countries:

<https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/document/s-reports/documentdetail/099082824082013360>

<sup>7</sup> Inflation-adjusted annual wage growth (%):

2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
1.9	1.7	2.4	2.6	0.9	3.9	8.4	7.8	5.2

<sup>8</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy\\_of\\_Serbia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Serbia)

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps we can compare it to the “multi-vector” approach of the regime in Kazakhstan. See Bulletin no. 21, *ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> MC/KpK, *UKRAINE: A victorious democratic insurrection in Ukraine, led by nationalists. Workers torn between the two conflicting factions*, Bulletin no. 6, March 2014: <http://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Leaflets/BLT1403ENvF.pdf>

“anti-Western”, as might be expected from the protests last year against the giant Anglo-Australian mining company Rio Tinto’s attempt to begin lithium extraction in the Jadar valley<sup>11</sup> and the fact that the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 is still anchored in the memory of the population. They are just “neutral” and wary. The protesters are not anti-Chinese either. Yet the catastrophe of the Novi Sad train station involved a contract with a consortium of Chinese construction companies<sup>12</sup>. And they are not anti-Russian despite the fact that the Russian state rail company was also implicated<sup>13</sup> in the accident. The absence of any collective animosity toward the populations of foreign powers is in itself something positive. Nevertheless, on the other hand, the student movement seemed completely fixated on Serbia's domestic situation, showing itself indifferent to current and future wars. The obvious reason? To avoid splitting the movement... In fact, a gigantic admission of political weakness.

Apart from some demands for better funding of Higher Education, the movement has focused entirely on corruption within the government. What’s more, the definition of “corruption” appears to be very narrow, confining itself to the criticism of “cronyism” in government contracts. On the other hand, the student movement has remained silent about, for example, the massive overlap between the state and organised crime. These “illicit” relations between the state and the underworld have somewhat lessened since the days of the Milošević regime in the 1990s, when the war and sanctions against Serbia gave enormous influence, and legal impunity, to those who knew how to use criminal connections across Europe. But the criminal underworld – still strongly based on the world of football hooligans, just like it was in the 1990s, and economically focused on drug trafficking (particularly cocaine) and other forms of smuggling – is never far from political power in Serbia and serves in particular to raise money and

to intimidate political opponents, including protesters<sup>14</sup>. But the student movement seems not too concerned about this question either.

If the demands placed on the state don’t amount to much, neither do the demands placed on its own supporters:

- Be peaceful!
- Everyone to the assemblies!<sup>15</sup>

Assemblies can be important centres of organisation in autonomous proletarian struggles, as long as the form of organisation does not become a fetish, a solution in itself. Unfortunately, the Serbian student movement has done precisely this. The ideology which inspires it makes the assemblies into the true expression of direct democracy, a kind of panacea which can sort out every problem. In fact, the “plenums” of this movement are just talking shops. All they do is to waste the time and energy of those who turn up and, above all, do not increase their determination and consciousness. To sum it up, the present student movement in Serbia works more or less consciously to “keep politics out of politics”. Almost all subjects of any importance are off limits for discussion in the assemblies and demonstrations. It is not just the obvious “divisive” topics – the civil war in the 1990s, Kosovo etc. – but also any practical suggestion as to how to damage the regime or to do anything useful to the cause of the workers. A kind of Serbian *Nuit debout*<sup>16</sup>.

The other important point about the student movement is the practice of an absolute pacifism. We have never made the slightest concession to the glorification of violence<sup>17</sup> but here we can see a pacifist ideology which is downright dangerous. “Peaceful protest” is supposed to be maintained at

<sup>11</sup> “Thousands of Serbians protest in Belgrade against lithium mine”, *The Guardian*, 10 August 2024; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/10/thousands-of-serbians-protest-in-belgrade-against-lithium-mine>

<sup>12</sup> “The Novi Sad Railway Station Collapse: The Cost of Sino-Serbian Infrastructure Deals”, *Choice*, 6 February 2025; <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-novi-sad-railway-station-collapse-the-cost-of-sino-serbian-infrastructure-deals/>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> “The President, the Soccer Hooligans and an Underworld ‘House of Horrors’”, *New York Times*, 3 May 2023; <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/03/magazine/aleksandra-vucic-veljko-belivuk-serbia.html>

<sup>15</sup> Exemplified by the statement issued by some students entitled “Letter to the People of Serbia”, 9 May 2025; <https://blokada.org/sr-lat/vesti/pismo-narodu-srbije/>

<sup>16</sup> See: MC/KpK, *Up all night, or taking it lying down?*, bulletin no. 10, April 2016; [https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Leaflets/BLT16024ENV\\_E.pdf](https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Leaflets/BLT16024ENV_E.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> See: MC/KpK, “Workers’ violence does not always mean workers’ autonomy”, Letter No. 36, May 2013; [https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Letters/LTMC1336ENV\\_E.pdf](https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Letters/LTMC1336ENV_E.pdf)

any cost. And the state, exploiting the movement's political weakness, has played along. Apart from a few incidents of extreme violence against protests, the state has generally adopted a policy of not suppressing the protests. Instead, the state has organised its own, not very convincing, counter-protests consisting of people in and around the ruling party claiming to be “students who want to learn”. Vučić and his acolytes hope that the movement will just fizzle out of its own accord. On the side of the protesters, some would like to repeat something like the overthrow of Milošević on 5 October 2000. On this occasion peaceful protests continued until a faction of the ruling class – with the help of their violent thugs – decided that Milošević had to go.

One of the most positive aspects of *many* democracy movements of the last two decades is that they have succeeded in temporarily overcoming historic divisions based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, “race”, gender etc. We saw this in the “Arab Spring”, in Iran, on the radical fringes of the movement in Burma today. In Serbia, the nearest thing we have seen to this is when the students marched into Novi Pazar on 14 April 2025 to demonstrate their fraternal spirit towards the Muslims of that town<sup>18</sup>. The Muslims of Novi Pazar have never been mistreated and humiliated like the Muslims in Bosnia have been. The real division to overcome today would be that between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, or in the Preševo valley where they are an important minority. The same goes for the question of the secessionist aims of Republika Srpska on the basis of “Greater Serbian” nationalism, or the risk seeing a new war break out in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is another question which is ignored. But there's nothing to suggest that this will happen any time soon. Yet it would be wrong to explain this division in terms of supposed Balkan peculiarities. Indeed, previous protest movements in Serbia – particularly during the Milošević era – openly mocked Greater Serb nationalism. These days, the opposition between Serbs and Albanians is much more an expression of the imperialist conflicts that are shaking this small corner of Eastern Europe as much as anywhere else. Given this fact, only proletarian internationalism that attacks nationalist gangrene

at its root – capitalism and its states – can enable fraternisation between proletarians regardless of their origins and, more broadly, of the world's different populations.

Paris, 6 June 2025

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<sup>18</sup> “Serbie: ‘La liberté règne dans le bazar’”, *Novi Pazar à l’heure de la réconciliation*”, *Courrier des Balkans*, 14 April 2025: <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/La-liberte-regne-dans-le-bazar-Nov-Pazar-a-l-heure-de-la-reconciliation>