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HYBRID PROTESTS AGAINST A HYBRID REGIME “1 OF 5 MILLION” BEFORE AND AFTER

An analysis and perspectives of political developments in Serbia



Jovan Jovanović

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FOREWORD

In Serbia's most recent parliamentary elections, the Serbian Progress Party, the party of President Aleksandar Vucic, won 60 % of the vote, giving it 191 of a total of 250 seats. A three-quarters majority, with which the president will be able to determine the fate of the country almost without restriction in the future. The SNS also emerged as the big winner in the local elections throughout the country.

Twenty-one parties and lists were admitted to this election by the election commission. In addition to the two governing parties-SNS and SPS-and four ethnic minority parties that are rather irrelevant to power politics, only the national conservative SPAS party of New Belgrade's mayor Alexandar Sagic made it over the 3 % hurdle (4.2 %). The rest of the field of candidates came away empty-handed. If the old five-percent hurdle were still valid, the incumbent governing coalition could divide the seats in Parliament almost entirely among itself.

This does not bode well for the democratic development in the country: EU accession negotiations

have been dragging on for some time. According to the NGO "Freedom House", Serbia has developed into a "hybrid system" since the beginning of 2014, it has slipped 33(!) places in the ranking of "Reporters without Borders", which analyzes the freedom of the media and press annually.

Yet a year ago, it still looked - at least to outsiders - as if the wave of protests supported by committed citizens, civil society organizations, and opposition parties, which had temporarily swept across the entire country, could become quite dangerous for the incumbent government and the president.

For this "Alliance for Serbia", despite all its differences in individual issues, agreed on at least one point, namely on the criticism of an exercise of power that is concentrated in the executive branch or in this case - unconstitutionally - in the presidential office, which is hardly subject to parliamentary control and increasingly displays characteristics of a "controlled democracy".

The development, however, took a different

course. The executive branch was strengthened once again, and a parliamentary opposition is virtually non-existent. The boycott concept pursued by some parties of largely joint action due to inadequate conditions for free and fair elections failed before the elections, because the boycott front was visibly crumbling more and more for all to see, and the renegades formed ever new lists. Once again, the lack of strategic capability and dissension among the actors involved became clear.

It will take some time before the opposition parties, which are now operating outside of parliament, have sorted themselves out and probably also reorganized their personnel. Only when they enjoy the trust of the population will they be able to develop a power-political perspective and option.

In this brochure, the political scientist, politician and former diplomat Jovan Jovanovic takes a sobering look at political developments in Serbia to date and examines how to get out of this crisis, which is likely to worsen.

He analyzes the main stages of the Serbian protest movements, their motives, weaknesses and learning experiences.

The pictures of the award-winning photographer Sanja Knezevic give this analysis an impressive sensual emphasis. Text and image rarely come together in this congenial form.

Jovanovic attests the weak and fragmented opposition a lack of coherence and convincing content and a lack of attractiveness as a viable alternative for the population.

He notes with concern that, against this background, trust in state institutions and representative democracy as a whole has already been damaged, and populist proposals are increasingly being listened to.

He sees the prospect of EU membership for the country as the central anchor for political progress, if at all. He speaks of "strategic priority". In this context, a dialogue between government and opposition should be seriously resumed and

institutionalized under the auspices of the European Union.

It remains to be seen whether this will happen, or whether the political actors will show a genuine willingness to do so.

All of this may not sound very 'revolutionary'. It is not the time for that, however. The pragmatic orientation for action, which is pleasantly expressed in this brochure, therefore documents not least the author's experience and strategic patience.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mr. Roick', written in a cursive style.

Michael Roick

Head of Western Balkans Office

Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit

NO STRANGER TO LARGE ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTS

Serbia has a long tradition of anti-government and anti-systemic protests. The 1990s, marked by the authoritarian rule of Slobodan Milošević, wars, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, international sanctions and general impoverishment, witnessed a great number of opposition rallies as a reaction to these deteriorating circumstances and the regime's undemocratic practices. During this decade, three protests – all taking place in the Serbian capital, Belgrade – stand out: 1] 9 March, 1991, protesters demanded unbiased public television; 2] a week-long Vidovdan rally in June/July 1992 calling for Milošević's resignation, the dissolution of the parliament and the creation of a National Salvation Government; and 3] a three-month long 1996/97 protest against local election fraud. The 1990s protests culminated and came to fruition on 5 October, 2000, when hundreds of thousands of citizens gathered in front of the Parliament, stormed the building and, consequently, overthrew Yugoslav President Milošević.

After the overthrow of the Milošević regime, no large civil protest took place in Serbia for more

than 15 years – in terms of numbers, protesters' determination and goals, which were primarily general interest. In that period, a number of smaller protests and strikes, focussing on particular issues, most frequently on the rights of certain groups, were organised. This analysis will focus on the longest lasting civil protest after the democratic changes of October 2000: the protest "1 of 5 million" which started at the end of 2018 and lasted until March 2020. This protest did not just come out of nowhere: the grounds for it were laid by important protests that preceded it – demonstrations against the construction of the Belgrade Waterfront, a €3 billion development project funded by the UAE-based Eagle Hills group in the most exclusive area of the Serbian capital at the Sava riverfront and, particularly, the "Against Dictatorship" protest, opposing election fraud in the 2017 Presidential election.

Protesters demonstrating against the Belgrade Waterfront project, under the leadership of the initiative "Don't Drown Belgrade", complained about a favouritism, lack of transparency and



Protest against the Belgrade Waterfront



investor urbanism that would seriously damage the city's structure, particularly thorough the adoption of a special law allowing the expropriation of land in the given area, although existing laws already regulated the expropriation process. The majority of the protesters were young and highly educated citizens.

However, the first major grassroots protest against the Aleksandar Vučić regime, in power since mid-2012, took place in April 2017, in the immediate aftermath of the Presidential election, which he won in the first round. The outbreak of the protest came as a surprise to many, since it seemed that the social energy for change and non-institutional forms of civic resistance was exhausted, particularly after the resounding victory of Prime Minister Vučić in the Presidential race. Nevertheless, despite the election loss, it seems that the dynamic Presidential campaign of the major opposition candidate, Ombudsman Saša Janković, raised hopes for change and planted seeds for lasting resistance to government malpractice. Hence, many citizens who considered the election results false due to voter intimidation, the unfree media and use of official resources for campaign purposes took

► to the streets, led by students. The protesters did not merely complain about unfair election conditions and election fraud, but also about various regime wrongdoings, citing a number of affairs, particularly the Belgrade Waterfront project.

Protest participants were predominantly members of the so-called new political generation: young and educated citizens from Belgrade's central municipalities, mostly students. Only 10% of the participants had taken part in the protests that lead to the overthrow of Milošević in 2000, and 3% in the 1996/97 protests. Among the main characteristics of the participants was their very low level of trust in established organisations and institutions, and a deeply engrained belief that Serbia is a very undemocratic country.¹

In reaction to the protest, President-elect Vučić tried to connect the demonstrations to opposition leaders, drawing a parallel with the Macedonian scenario, suggesting that the opposition, being unable to win elections, intended

1 Da li lajkuješ protest, SeConS, 2017.



Final campaign rally of the opposition Presidential candidate Saša Janković



Protest "Against Dictatorship"



Protest "Against Dictatorship"



to seize power violently against the will of the people. Simultaneously, he sought to diminish the importance of the protest and discourage their participants by stating "as long as they are peaceful, they can walk for the next ten years". Due to a fluid organisational structure and poor media coverage, the protest fizzled out by the end of April.

WHAT LED TO THE "1 OF 5 MILLION" PROTEST

Following his election in 2017, President Vučić tightened his grip on power, increased his control over and pressure on the media, and continued undermining an already weak opposition, displaying expanding authoritarian tendencies. Serbia's significant downside in terms of media freedoms, freedom of expression, the rule of law and corruption found its reflection in the periodic reports of the most prominent international organisations dealing with these issues. Hence, according to Reporters Without Borders and International Research & Exchanges Board, Serbia's press freedom rankings have decreased sharply since 2012, and its Media Sustainability Index has



dropped because of rising media polarisation, an increase in fake news and editorial pressure on the media. Furthermore, Freedom House reports about the continuing deterioration in the conduct of elections, the government's attempts to undermine independent media through legal harassment and smear campaigns, and the unconstitutional accumulation of executive powers by Aleksandar Vučić, led to Serbia finally descending from Free to Partly Free status in 2019, becoming a hybrid regime. With regard to corruption, Serbia was black-listed by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in 2018 – a status reserved for countries that fail to combat money laundering and terrorist financing. In addition, Transparency International findings portray a significant increase in perceived corruption beginning in 2012, coinciding with Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party coming to power. Last but not least, taking into account the importance of the European integration process for the country, leading EU institutions, the European Parliament and the European Commission, have all been increasingly critical of the Serbian authorities in their reports, drawing particular attention to the deteriorating situation in the fields of freedom of expression and the rule of law.

The worsening situation in the aforementioned fields was also facilitated by a weak and fragmented opposition, distrusted by citizens, that could neither efficiently counteract detrimental policies, nor offer a coherent and attractive alternative. There are two main reasons for the lack of confidence in the opposition: many of their leaders held senior positions in the post-Milošević governments that disappointed citizens who had high expectations from the democratic transition, and these opposition leaders have been regularly discredited, not only by the pro-regime information outlets that dominate the media scene in Serbia, but also by some influential anti-government oriented public figures. Such a situation motivated a large number of citizens critical of the Vučić regime to look for alternative means of political engagement.

Simultaneously with the deterioration of democratic standards, Serbian society has also been affected by new trends that have reshaped civic activism globally. The main features of this new civic engagement are a growing distrust of the long-lasting political establishment, particularly traditional political parties and their leaders, resulting in absenteeism; dislike of the represen-



Protest "Against Dictatorship"



tative system; advocacy for direct democracy; populism and the personalisation of socio-political activism. New technologies are probably a crucial enabler of these new forms of civic activism, particularly the development of various digital platforms and applications – so-called social networks – such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These apps, commonly used on smartphones, have become an integral and indispensable part of civic activism and protest organizing.

In the last few years, these new developments have significantly influenced civic engagement and mass protests in Serbia; both those taking place before and after the "1 of 5 million" protest. Just as in many other countries, such protests have most frequently been initiated and/or organised by an individual or informal group on the Internet, the primary channel through which participants learn about political events. As a consequence, individuals congregating frequently come from different social backgrounds, representing diverse, often opposing ideologies, or lacking any ideology.

After the failure of the "Against Dictatorship" Protest, a core group of student organisers



stayed together and continued with activities. They were primarily engaged in providing legal support to those arrested during the protest and processed by the court, as well as in supporting various civic initiatives. Dissatisfied citizens continued with their periodic protests, particularly against controversial urban and infrastructure projects, environmentally detrimental policies (mostly against the construction of mini hydro power plants), problematic social policies (such as lowering the level of social rights for pregnant women, young mothers and mothers of children with disabilities), the forced evictions of families not provided with adequate alternative housing, as well as fuel price rises, which provoked a blockade of roads across Serbia.

In the period leading up to the protest, the authorities stepped up repressive measures against critics: occasional attacks on journalists took place, an exhibition by two of the most distinguished political caricaturists was banned, while prominent public figures were ruthlessly targeted by the tabloids. Fake news also gained in intensity: in 2018 alone more than 700 fake

news stories were published on the front pages of the pro-regime newspapers.² Moreover, five TV stations with national outreach were utilised as the Vučić regime's propaganda tool, impeding any possibility for presenting opposing views and ideas to the Serbian public. The most illustrative example of such an approach is the fact that since 2012, Vučić has not participated in a single political debate, including during the pre-election period. Following Vučić's example, authorities at different levels of government have ignored every criticism of their policies, measures and projects, and rejected any serious debate. The regime's intransigence and unwillingness for dialogue with all relevant actors on matters of general interest, has created a space not only for accusations of incompetence, arrogance and authoritarianism, but also for the abuse of power, corruption and crime.

Bearing all the aforementioned in mind, it can hardly be a surprise that in the 2012 to 2018 period more than 300,000 people left the country, while the results of a 2018 survey show that 22% of interviewees wanted to leave Serbia due

2 Rasrkinkavanje, 2019 <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=346>



Borko Stefanović showing the bloodied shirt



to the worsening situation. Consequently, one of the most distinctive student slogans during different protests in the last few years has been: "As soon as I graduate, I will emigrate".

In these circumstances, in early September 2018, part of the re-coalescing Serbian opposition created the right leaning Alliance for Serbia, a program coalition of four major and several smaller political parties, organisations and trade unions. A majority of the Alliance leadership had held senior government positions before Vučić came to power as Prime Minister in 2012. It didn't take long for the coalition to start campaigning in various Serbian cities. On 23 November, one of the opposition leaders, Borko Stefanović, along with two activists, was attacked by a group of hooded men and beaten up before a rally in Kruševac, one of the major cities in central Serbia. Stefanović was hospitalised after experiencing severe head injuries caused by the metal crowbar with which he was hit. The following day he organised a press conference at which he showed the bloodied shirt he was wearing when attacked. The image later became a symbol of protests, and "A Stop to Bloody Shirts" the slogan under which these protesters would rally.



The opposition's first reaction to the violent attack was a public gathering organised by the Alliance for Serbia on 28 November in the building of Belgrade's central municipality. Due to the prominent participation of public figures, it became apparent at the very beginning that the upcoming protests would exceed the boundaries of the organised political opposition. The opposition around Alliance for Serbia came to the correct conclusion that this new situation, if students and public figures were at the forefront, provided an opportunity to broaden and strengthen anti-government sentiments and attitudes, and channel the widespread dissatisfaction.

The first outdoor protest was organised on 30 November in Kruševac, the city where Stefanovic had been attacked. Some speakers at the gathering blamed President Vučić for the incident and it was announced that the next protest would take place on Saturday, 8 December, in Belgrade. Following that protest, which attracted around 10,000 people who walked the central streets, blew whistles and banged drums, the student leaders of the 2017 "Against Dictatorship" protest, together with public figures

and the opposition, organised regular Saturday gatherings for more than a year.

In the following weeks, not only did the number of people attending the protests in the Serbian capital gradually increase, but the dissatisfaction with the regime also spilled over into the streets of cities throughout Serbia. By early 2019, regular protests were taking place in some 50 cities and towns, including all the major cities such as Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac. These protests were to a great extent decentralised and spontaneous, independent from the organisers in Belgrade. On the one hand, such a situation made coordination very difficult. On the other hand, due to such fluidity, the authorities faced a bigger challenge in suppressing the protests across Serbia.

The event that marked the protest and significantly contributed to its intensity and outreach was President Vučić's dismissive statement after the first outdoor gathering in Belgrade that he would not fulfil any of the opposition's demands, even if five million people went to the streets. This statement provoked and inspired the organisers of the protest to adopt the slogan



"1 of 5 million", which in the following months would symbolise not only the protests, but the overall opposition struggle against the regime.

During the main protests which took place in Belgrade, tens of thousands of protesters regularly rallied in front of the Faculty of Philosophy and marched in processions, stopping in front of main government institutions and the public service broadcaster (RTS), calling on RTS to stop ignoring the protests since, as all Serbian citizens are obliged to pay a subscription, they are therefore entitled to be objectively informed. With a few exceptions, the protests were generally peaceful and incident-free; law and order were maintained by the organisers' monitors rather than the police.

THE MOTIVATION, DEMANDS AND PROFILE OF THE PROTESTERS

Even though the protest was provoked by violence against political opponents, this motivation rapidly lost its strength in the ensuing political dynamic. Most citizens were motivated to join the protest by three main issues: lack of media

freedoms, government corruption and the failure to successfully address important social issues (such as rising inequality, the absence of unemployment protection, and the exodus of young and qualified people). The protesters perceived these problems as a consequence of the manipulation of the media (including exerting pressure, streamlined government funding and a changing ownership structure), the establishment of clientelistic networks based on the structures of a growing party state, and the deterioration of the rule of law and formal institutions.

Consequently, the protesters' expectations and demands proceeded from their perception of the major problems in the country. They included calls for greater freedom of the press and freedom of expression, increased government transparency and accountability, guaranteed political freedoms, pluralism, and democratic standards, an independent judiciary and respect for the rule of law. The protesters were particularly critical of a perceived increase in authoritarian tendencies by President Vučić, manifested in constant vicious verbal attacks on the opposition, the suppression of dissenting voices, and tight media control creating a climate of fear and violence. An

►
important number of protesters, including some prominent public figures, also called for Vučić's resignation.

According to surveys, the profile of participants in the "1 of 5 million" protest was very similar to the profile of protesters who had participated in the major preceding protests: against the construction of the Belgrade Waterfront and "Against Dictatorship". They were mostly young and belonged to a highly educated, urban middle class. Interestingly, more than 25% of them worked in the public sector, and many of them had either temporary jobs, or were informally employed.³ This educational and socio-economic profile of the protesters to a great extent explains their motivation and demands – their interests go beyond purely economic ones and they see the strengthening of democracy and the rule of law as a precondition for improving the quality of their lives.

Protest participants had different political views, from far right to extreme left, but centrist and moderate left views were in the majority. Despite

all their political diversity, the protesters managed to stay together for a long period of time and define common goals mostly due to a high level of tolerance for different political views: almost 75% of respondents declared their tolerance for the presence of any group or individual at the protest. As for the rest, they found the presence of those who fell into some of the following categories unacceptable: 1] members of the far right, particularly the Dveri movement and their leader Boško Obradović (1/3 of all negative answers); 2] opposition parties and their leaders, primarily the leader of the Freedom and Justice Party, the former Mayor of Belgrade, Dragan Djilas (28%); 3] the far left, Marx 21 above all (17% of negative answers); and 4] both the far left or the far right (5%).⁴ Since there was no ideological coherence that would keep the protesters together, the binding force uniting them was a mixture of dissatisfaction with the regime and the situation in the country (the strongest factor), and a desire for change, especially for a change in government. In a nutshell, pure civic activism directed against the regime kept them together.

3 Demokratijom protiv stabilokratije: Ko su i šta žele učesnici protesta „1 od 5 miliona“, MONS, 2019

4 Demokratijom protiv stabilokratije: Ko su i šta žele učesnici protesta „1 od 5 miliona“, MONS, 2019



Besides the distaste for and rejection of established political parties, the protesters also distrusted the most important political institutions – all three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judiciary. According to a Eurobarometer survey, trust in the institutions of representative democracy, political parties and parliament, is lower among the total population of Serbia than the European average. As a result, more than half of participants claimed that no one authentically and validly represented their interests. At the same time, approximately 40% recognised two new political movements that had not participated in government as their representatives – Don't Drown Belgrade and Movement of Free Citizens.⁵

The protesters rejected the formal institutions of representative democracy not only in attitude, but also in concrete action. They saw those institutions as devoid of democratic substance and preferred participating in forms of direct democracy. Only a small portion of protesters were members of traditional “political”

organisations: 5% members of political parties, and 3% of trade unions. On the other hand, 9% were members of professional associations and 10% members of non-governmental organisations. In contrast to that, the percentage of those who had participated in civic actions is significantly higher.⁶ Through these civic actions and various protests, the participants gradually built their particular identity and a political protest culture. As a result, more than half of the “1 of 5 million” protesters shared common traits with other protests that had taken place in the preceding years.

THE ORGANISERS—INTERNAL DYNAMICS AND CONTRADICTIONS

At the very beginning of the protests the organisers remained anonymous. The driving force was a group of students who led the “Against Dictatorship” protest in April 2017, some of whom were close to opposition political parties. They incorporated lessons learned from the former protest into the plan for organising

5 Demokratijom protiv stabilokratije: Ko su i šta žele učesnici protesta „1 od 5 miliona?”, MONS, 2019

6 Demokratijom protiv stabilokratije: Ko su i šta žele učesnici protesta „1 od 5 miliona?”, MONS, 2019

▶ that which had just emerged, primarily trying to avoid two major mistakes that had led to previous failures: the absence of a tight organisational structure and the lack of inclusiveness. Taking this into account, by the third week of the protest a regular coordination mechanism, including a Viber group, and weekly meetings, internally labelled the "Holy Trinity", had been established. The group included student organisers, public figures and opposition political leaders from the Alliance of Serbia. The opposition parties provided logistical and financial support, but remained in the background of the protest due to the distrust, and sometimes even intolerance, felt towards them both by some of the student organisers and, particularly, by the protesters. One of the consequences of such mistrust was the students' decision, taken in complete secrecy in the first weeks of the protest, to register an NGO under the name "1 of 5 million". This decision was made in order to prevent the opposition from using the name for their election list, something that the students had heard rumours about. This move further increased divisions between the three groups that coordinated the protest. Political leaders were particularly unhappy with such an at-

titude, since they had kept themselves away from the front line of the protest even though their parties were financing the activities. As a result, at the internal meetings, some party leaders increased calls for the opposition to take over the protest. The outcome was that by the second month, the political parties had further distanced themselves from the protest, although they continued to finance the logistics. The increased tension among the three major driving forces resulted in the resignation of the most vocal public figures.

The withdrawal of public figures was one of the contributing factors to the weakening of the protest. However, the most important reason was the unmet challenge of maintaining intensity over a prolonged period of time without visible results. At the same time, the original basic demands for democratisation and free and fair elections were too general, so they could not be a source of constant tension and permanent motivation. In trying to keep the intensity, the movement began to respond to ongoing affairs. Some of the demands – such as requesting the resignation of the Interior Minister, or the identification of the killers of Kosovo Serb



leader Oliver Ivanović – added to the original demand of finding the organisers of the attack on Borko Stefanović, which had provoked the protest, were a result of this approach. Along with natural fatigue due to the length of the process and lack of tangible results, this approach contributed to the loss of citizens' motivation. Last but not least, different concepts among the student organisers about how the movement should evolve also led to a weakening of the protest. There were three factions: one opted for NGO status, a second saw their role as similar to the Resistance (Otpor) movement in the late 1990's which had contributed significantly to toppling Milošević, and a third advocated for becoming a political force and running in the election. The third faction, which became dominant in mid-2019, after some of the most prominent original student organisers retired from the protest, realised that intent, but won only 0.6% of the votes in the parliamentary elections held on June 21, 2020. This faction, which grew increasingly distant from organised opposition parties over time, damaged the idea of a boycott, for which they had initially advocated, by deciding to participate in the parliamentary election.

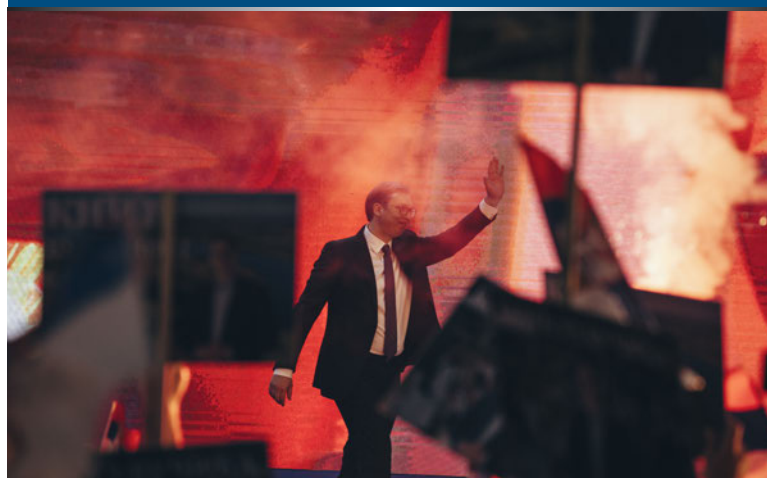
GOVERNMENT RESPONSE AND THE EVENTS THAT MARKED THE PROTEST

The regime's response followed the dynamic of the protest. As mentioned before, President Vučić's initial dismissive statement that, even if five million people took to the streets, he would not give in to their demands was one of the most significant events that marked the entire protest. After this initial response, besides continuing to downplay the importance of the protest or completely ignoring it, President Vučić also stigmatised political opponents in the tightly controlled media and tried to pin the protests on the unpopular opposition, through intensified tabloid lynching of their leaders, accusing the opposition of seeking the violent takeover of power, and exerting pressure on the organisers, particularly in smaller towns in Serbia. In addition, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) staged a few counter-demonstrations at some critical moments in order to demonstrate broad popular support.

The first of these rallies was organised in January 2019 to welcome Russian President Vladimir



SNS welcome rally for Vladimir Putin



President Vučić at the "Future of Serbia" rally in Belgrade



Александар Вучић



"Future of Serbia" rally in Belgrade

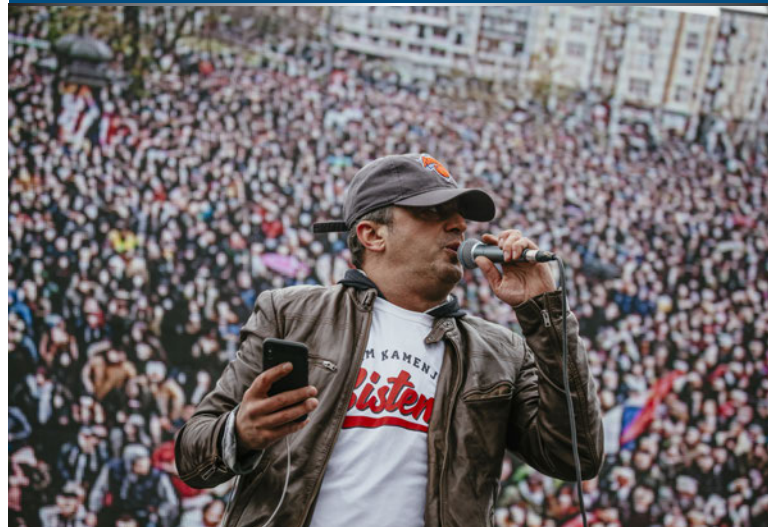


Putin. In accordance with already well-developed SNS practice, citizens from all over Serbia were bussed to Belgrade to participate in the event that bore a slogan "1 of 300 Million" – an obvious reference to the slogan of the ongoing protest, alluding to the overall number of Russians and Serbs together. Due to the lack of adequate parking space, Belgrade streets were turned into parking lots for the hundreds of buses that arrived. A similar event was organized in July 2019 to greet French President Macron – when the SNS rallied their supporters in front of the Monument of Gratitude to France in Belgrade.

As a way of responding to the largest opposition rally held on 13 April, 2019, SNS and President Vučić organised two classical counter-demonstrations to which large number of citizens was also bussed from other parts of Serbia: one in Novi Sad on 12 April, and the main one in Belgrade on 19 April. These two events were staged under the auspices of the "Future of Serbia" campaign, launched two months previously. During this campaign senior government and SNS officials visited a few dozen municipalities and promised new investment and employment opportunities.

As already mentioned, the largest “1 of 5 million” protest took place in front of the Serbian Parliament in Belgrade on 13 April, under the slogan “All for One – One in Five Million”. The protest was divided into three segments: speeches by public figures, procession in the streets of central Belgrade, and concluding speeches by opposition leaders. The organisers invited citizens from outside the capital to join the rally, which prompted the regime’s officials to accuse the opposition of preparing disturbances and “a new Maidan”. Such an approach raised unrealistic expectations among some opposition supporters, particularly those coming from inner Serbia, that the day of the protest would be a decisive one in bringing about regime change. Failure to meet such expectations significantly demotivated a majority of the protesters, many of whom considered 13 April as the concluding rally. Consequently, in the aftermath of this event, the strength and scale of the protest began to wane, leading to a fizzling out of the rallies across Serbia.

During the protest there were several events that periodically raised tensions and brought more people onto the streets: a candlelit vigil for



“All for One – One in Five Million” rally in Belgrade



"All for One – One in Five Million" rally in Belgrade



the murdered Serbian politician in Kosovo, Oliver Ivanović; the storming of the headquarters of the public broadcaster RTS and the siege of the Serbian Presidency the following day requesting the release of those arrested during the raid which had been met by a violent police response; the announcement of the Agreement with the people defining the opposition's demands and promises; an unsuccessful attempt to hand over the demands to the Presidency during which security guards used force to prevent the protest leaders from entering the building, etc. However, the major success, and probably the only tangible result of the protest, came from the 12-day long blockade of the Belgrade University Rectorate in September 2019. Students demanded the completion of a long-lasting review of the PhD thesis of one of the closest associates of President Vučić, Finance Minister Siniša Mali, who was accused of plagiarism. They reached an agreement with the Belgrade University Rector on the resolution of this case, stopped the blockade, but also threatened to continue it if a decision was not reached by an agreed deadline. As a consequence, Belgrade University annulled Mali's PhD in December.

►
Soon after this major victory, and just before the COVID-19 pandemic started, a major split between the organisers in Belgrade and those in a few cities where the protests were still ongoing took place. Since the organisers of the protest in Belgrade decided to stop the rallies, the gathering in the Serbian capital and other remaining cities continued under the slogan “Boycott the 2020 Elections” until mid-March when the state of emergency was introduced and public gatherings forbidden due to the pandemic.

ANTI-GOVERNMENT COVID-19 PROTEST

Since late February 2020, the Serbian authorities have been implementing inconsistent, incomprehensible and contradictory anti-pandemic measures that have resulted in an even greater loss of trust in the government and its Crisis Centre. At the beginning of the pandemic, the government underplayed the seriousness of the threat, labelling Covid-19 “the most laughable virus in the history of mankind”. However, only two weeks later, the authorities made a U-turn and, unconstitutionally bypassing Parlia-

ment, declared almost a two-month long state of emergency. An array of restrictive measures was introduced at the very beginning of the state of emergency: kindergartens, schools, sports facilities, bars and restaurants were closed and public transportation was suspended, both within and between cities. A countrywide curfew with frequent changes of duration was declared, instilling confusion among citizens. The curfew lasted until the end of the state of emergency. Senior citizens, those over the age of 65, faced the toughest restrictions: for a month and a half they were forbidden to leave their homes, except for buying groceries once a week between 4a.m. and 7a.m. Such restrictive and inconsistent measures provoked dissatisfaction and anger from many citizens. By way of protest, angry citizens banged on pots and pans, and produced noise from their balconies and windows every evening at 8.05p.m., after applauding medical workers five minutes earlier.

Due to the general election that was to be held on 21 June the government, in a matter of a few days, revoked restrictive anti-pandemic measures in order to create an impression of normalcy – even large-scale sports events with



Anti-government COVID-19 protest

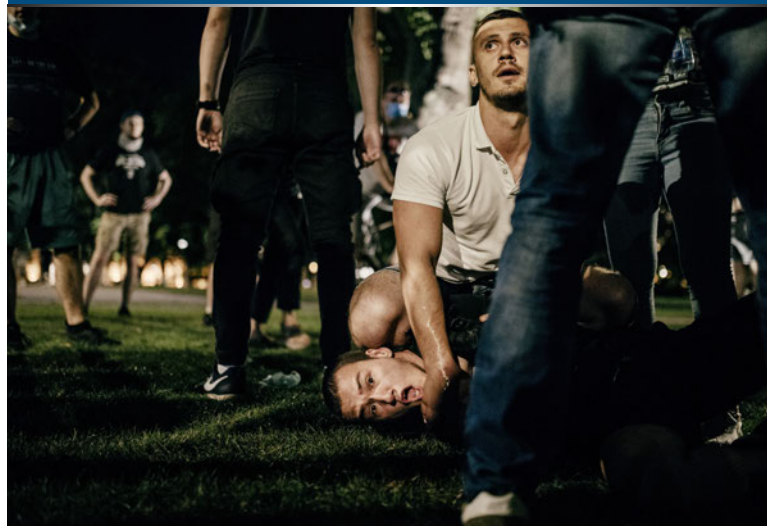


tens of thousands of spectators were allowed. Moreover, the government declared victory over Covid-19 before the election. As it turned out later, there is a reasonable suspicion that the authorities were intentionally presenting lower new infection and mortality figures in order not to discourage people from participating in the election.⁷ After the election, the number of new infections began to skyrocket and the authorities put the blame for the sudden spread of the disease on "irresponsible citizens." When the President announced, on 7 July, that a curfew would be reintroduced, thousands of outraged citizens, united only by their revolt against the government, spontaneously gathered in front of the Parliament. The protest was peaceful at first, but it wasn't long before violent clashes with police occurred. Taking into account that the regime had already used nationalistic groups and football hooligans under their control to confront their opponents, there is well-grounded suspicion that the government was also behind the violence instigated by small, but well-organised, groups of provocateurs

7 Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), <https://javno.rs/analiza/korona-broj-umrljih-i-zarazenih-visestruko-veci-od-zvanicno-saopstenog>

▶ with the aim of discrediting justified citizen anger. The violence even worsened on the second day, when a radical minority stepped up attacks on the police provoking a brutal and indiscriminate police reaction also directed at the overwhelming majority of peaceful protesters. Considerable quantities of teargas were randomly fired, police forces – including mounted police, dogs and the Special Anti-terrorist Unit – occupied the streets in the vicinity of the Parliament, an unheard of scene since the times of the Milošević regime.

The following days saw fluctuations between peaceful and violent protests, and the overall number of protesters steadily dropped. The reasons were three-fold: the protesters didn't have coherent demands due to their heterogeneity; the government immediately backed down from imposing another curfew; by way of hijacking the protest the radical groups derailed the citizens' anger over government misconduct and demotivated peaceful citizens to continue with gatherings. In such a situation, the protest faded away in less than 10 days.



Anti-government COVID-19 protest

WHAT'S NEXT?

The state of democracy in Serbia has been on a downward slope over the last few years, and this has been accompanied by the rising polarisation of society. One of the most important factors contributing to this is the consolidation and concentration of executive power in the hands of President Vučić and his most trusted associates from the Serbian Progressive Party, along with the dominance of the executive branch over the other branches of government. As aforementioned, this is evidenced in various periodic reports published by prominent international organisations assessing democratic developments in countries around the world. An illustrative example is also provided by the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, according to which Serbia has dropped from 8 out of 10 to 5 out of 10 in the separation of power category since 2012. Another important factor for this receding democracy in Serbia is the government's tight control over the most influential media, as well as the erosion of media freedoms.

In the environment of a captive state, where public interest is commonly neglected, with few

institutional channels for expressing various concerns and interests, with a weak and fragmented opposition, incapable of offering a credible, coherent and attractive alternative, dissatisfied citizens are frequently left only with a last resort – outdoor protests.

The recent parliamentary elections held in June 2020, boycotted by major opposition parties, with low turnout and marred by irregularities, have only deepened distrust in the electoral process. The resulting new legislature, whose composition does not correspond to the actual strength of political forces in society, will only further deepen the political crisis, since citizens will not be able to channel their dissatisfaction through political institutions.

Since the electoral shortcomings are not the result of technical flaws, but of a lack of political will to hold free and fair elections, the major challenge in the upcoming period is to establish conditions for conducting such elections, revive the democratic dialogue and process, and accordingly defuse growing societal tensions.



Taking into account the huge distrust between the government and the opposition, such a dialogue can only bring success if it is held under the auspices of the European Union, the international actor with the greatest leverage in Serbia. Despite all the setbacks on its European path, EU membership remains Serbia's strategic priority, still supported by the majority of the population. Dialogue should seek consensus among all relevant political forces on the mechanisms that would lead to democratic elections. The process should also be preceded by and go hand in hand with providing stronger support to those political and civil society forces that firmly uphold democratic values.

Special thanks to Ms Sanja Knežević for the photos in this booklet.



Jovan Jovanović

Jovan Jovanović was a Member of the Serbian Parliament 2016-2020. He is a former Serbian Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia and 7 South-East Asian countries on a non-residential basis, as well as to ASEAN (2011-14). He obtained a Master in Public Administration degree from the Harvard Kennedy School, as an Edward S. Mason and Harvard International Student Fellow. He is also a Stanford University Alumnus through the CDDRL Summer Program on Democracy and Development, as well as a Ron Brown Alumnus, a U.S. State Department program through which he obtained Master in Public and Int'l Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. Jovan has rich professional experience ranging from academic institutions and NGOs to government and international organizations. He is a Global Board member at the Platinum Circle, a business group involving corporations with annual revenues exceeding USD100 million, governments and inter-governmental organizations, as well as an Advisor in the 1000 Abrahamic Circles project, a global interfaith community-based project initiated in Indonesia. Jovan has also been very active in bringing together alumni from different U.S. funded educational programs in Serbia – he was a Board Member of the Fulbright Alumni Association of Serbia and Montenegro (2003-2005), and since 2015 he has been a Board member of the Harvard Club of Serbia. He translated ten books, and is also a black belt holder in the Japanese martial art Aikido.



Sanja Knežević

Sanja Knežević is a photographer attracted by humanity and unpredicted situations. Her interest in photography led her to the Faculty of Applied Arts where she graduated photography in 2009. Since 2006, she worked as a photojournalist in different media which she eventually left in order to have time for working on documentary projects of her interest. From 2010 Sanja has a status of an independent artist. In June 2018, Sanja attended Festival Pil'Ours in France being among 10 female photographers chosen from all around the world. Sanja has been publishing her work in National Geographic Serbia, where she is a regular contributor, as well in Vice UK, The Economist, Financial Times, Boston Globe, KfW Chancen - Hamburg. She has been collaborating with UNOPS, Open Society Foundation and Amnesty International. She won the most prestigious contest in her country Photo of the year twice: in 2020 and 2012 (BETA News Agency annual photo contest), as well as the Photo of the year at Press Photo Serbia (2010), and First prize for portrait in 2012 at Photo Week, Washington D.C. In September 2020 Sanja became a contributor of the German photo agency "laif".