**Headline:** Serbia’s Political Deadlock: Do Students Have a Plan?

By Biljana Vankovska

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**Source:** Globetrotter

**Tags:** Europe/Serbia, Activism, News, Politics, Opinion

**[Article Body:]**

For nearly five months, Serbia has lived in a state of limbo – one that cannot be described as either political paralysis or transformation. Since the tragic [railway station accident](https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/02/14/why-did-the-novi-sad-railway-station-accident-trigger-such-large-protests-in-serbia/) in Novi Sad, where the collapse of an awning claimed 16 lives (including children), time seems to have stretched endlessly, yet nothing substantial has been done. The mayor of Novi Sad and the prime minister have resigned, triggering deadlines for forming a new parliamentary majority or calling early elections. However, the protest wave continues.

After countless creative performances, marches, and rallies, they now appear to be entering a new phase – the formation of so-called *zborovi* (citizen assemblies). This is presented as a legal and legitimate form of civic participation, even guaranteed by the [Law on Local Self-Government](http://ricl.iup.rs/1356/). Some enthusiasts claim this marks a unique model of direct democracy, a radical awakening of citizens from apathy, from the ground up and in all places. Leftists see it as a step toward communal organisation, drawing parallels with the 1871 Paris Commune or the wartime people’s liberation councils that laid the foundations for the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. At the same time, the term *zbor* also carries a strong right-wing [connotation](https://balkaninsight.com/extreme-right-organisations/orgSerbian-Peoples-Movement-Zbor.php). Thus, the situation remains unclear to observers and the people of Serbia: What’s the next step?

The students’ initial demands seemed modest – though difficult to achieve in deeply corrupt societies like those in the Balkans (and much of Europe as well): the consistent rule of law and institutions that function competently within their legal mandates. This leaderless movement, with no explicit calls for regime change and no Euro-enthusiasm, has successfully distanced itself from political parties. This is precisely what makes it appealing to the broader public: its innocence, youth, and detachment from the repulsive and deeply distrusted world of party politics. Ordinary people no longer believe in fairy tales – neither about the European Union nor about multiparty democracy, which, as an old proverb suggests, is merely about switching ‘Kurto’ for ‘Murto’, while everything stays the same. Some voices call for systemic change, but no one knows what kind of system they want – if the liberal parliamentary model is seen as so repulsive, does this lead to a politics of [anti-politics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-politics)?

After years of President Aleksandar Vučić’s rule, his party has not only established capillary governance (boring into and controlling society from the ground up, a metastasis of power, one might say) but has also disarmed the opposition – leaving it amorphous, uninspired, compromised, and weak. It is no surprise that some [intellectuals](https://biljanavankovska.substack.com/p/a-colored-revolution-in-serbia?r=y92pq) dream of a Serbian Zaev, referring to the leader of Macedonia’s Social Democrats, who came to power after the 2016–2017 ‘colorful revolution’. But no such figure has emerged – at least not yet. Zaev himself was neither exceptional, nor intelligent, nor charismatic. He was simply a businessman who owned the (essentially financially bankrupt) party he led. But he had [massive](https://english.republika.mk/macedonia/usaid-paid-tens-of-millions-for-left-wing-politicized-projects-and-media-outlets-in-macedonia-including-the-soros-foundation/) international backing: PR advisors, media funded by foreign money, an entire network of NGOs, and students rallying to ‘save’ the country from the alleged regime.

Croatian leftist activist [Srećko Horvat](https://diem25.org/shttps://diem25.org/srecko-horvat-on-serbia-protests-students-are-showing-europe-the-path-forward/recko-horvat-on-serbia-protests-students-are-showing-europe-the-path-forward/) recently called the Serbian student movement ‘geopolitical orphans’. And that is the key difference from Macedonia, which was adopted by the West when it needed a cooperative government in Skopje to push the country into NATO – at any cost, even at the price of changing the country's name and selling off its identity. Vučić now resembles Milošević, who was tacitly supported by the West when they needed a signatory and guarantor for the Dayton Agreement. As the old saying goes: ‘He may be a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch’. The fear was that if Milošević fell, someone even worse and less cooperative might take power. The same logic applies to Vučić, whether the issue is Kosovo or lithium mining.

The geopolitical landscape has changed. The political West is fracturing (as [Richard Sakwa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyNO7jp_Wko) elaborates), leaving Serbia’s protest movement truly orphaned. They have no leader, and none of the existing political figures seem trustworthy enough to sustain the Balkan model of [stabilitocracy](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/05/05/west-is-best-how-stabilitocracy-undermines-democracy-building-in-the-balkans/). More significantly, these orphans are not only without overt foreign patrons but also without an ideology. They form a mixed bag, perhaps united in their desire to take centre stage and be the ‘darlings of the public’ (a status that can quickly backfire), but they lack the experience and knowledge to build a new system.

Historically, leftist movements have been more visionary. Yet, even *plenums* (student assemblies) are little more than a passing trend, [copied](https://studentskeborbe.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/kuvar.pdf) from the same cookbook and past initiatives in Croatia, Bosnia, and [Macedonia](https://old.delo.si/svet/evropa/glas-revolucije-ne-seze-do-siromasnih-in-ponizanih.html). The cycle repeats [itself](https://biljanavankovska.substack.com/p/a-colored-revolution-in-serbia?r=y92pq). (In Macedonia, after the disaster in Kočani, there was an unsuccessful attempt to revive the plenums of the Faculty of Philosophy. Today, another loosely organised [movement](https://telegrafi.com/en/There-is-a-march-in-Skopje-for-the-Kocani-tragedy./) protests under the slogan ‘Who’s Next?’). In theory, plenums resemble direct democracy, an agora, but in practice, when it comes to systemic solutions, it becomes painfully clear that these ‘orphans’ lack even a rudimentary understanding of alternative systems. They are children of transition – a period when unfinished liberal systems seemed to be ‘Europeanising’ and heading toward democracy (which, ironically, is now in decline across Europe, where fascism and militarisation are on the rise). They know nothing about leftist (Marxist, socialist) [thought and practice](https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745338941/partisan-ruptures/).

For some intellectual circles, these events are fascinating – a light in the darkness of transition to nowhere (as Boris Buden puts it) – but they remain focused on the political and media spectacle. What about economic democracy in countries that have become mere colonies of Western capital? How do you build a new political home when the very foundations are imperialist?

The most telling sign of this dynamic is the (allegedly independent) media, which desperately seek to awaken Western interest in Serbia’s ‘orphans’. They seem almost ready to shed tears over the fact that neither European Commission President Ursula van der Leyen ([Frau Genocide](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MNBsrRHK9Y)), nor French President Emmanuel Macron, nor any other Western leader shows the slightest concern for the protests. Few would deny that a call for ‘more Europe’ today de facto [means](https://www.cadtm.org/From-welfare-to-warfare-military-Keynesianism) more warfare, less welfare.

As someone not far from the epicenter, I can only assume that Serbia’s ‘spring’ will soon lead to a dead end. It will fizzle out soon, not just due to fatigue but also because of existential pressures. Recently, a young, enthusiastic [protester](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENPIkFRJ4Ss) expressed on a leftist YouTube channel her excitement about spending all her free time at plenums and citizen assemblies (since the universities are under blockade). These students likely have parents who provide for them. What about those who don’t have the luxury to strike and debate – those in precarious jobs, the working class, or rural farmers? How long can the poor citizens offer them homemade bread and meals?

Any leftist desires systemic change – a complete overhaul. Multiparty democracy is merely a facade for corporate power and neocolonialism. But with the world at a dangerous crossroads, there is no time for experiments doomed to fail. A student’s post is not a profession – it’s a temporary status. Once they graduate (whenever that may be), they will return to reality, to practical concerns. The revolution will remain a fond memory.

The real question is: Who will fight for those who don’t have the luxury of indefinite protest? Without a concrete vision for systemic (political and economic) transformation or even a lesser evil of elections, the movement’s impact may remain superficial – another cycle of resistance that leads nowhere. Or, if Branko Milanović is [right](https://standard.rs/2025/03/19/kakav-ce-biti-ishod-sloma-politickog-sistema-u-srbiji/), it may end up in chaos or overt dictatorship.