

ANTI-CORRUPTION FOUNDATIONS OF THE STUDENT MOVEMENT IN SERBIA 2024/2025

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the student movement that emerged as a reaction to the death of 16 people in the collapse of a canopy at the Novi Sad railway station, on November 1st 2024. This movement is the response of the student population to lawlessness, social injustice and repression by the corrupt regime. The current student movement in Serbia is a social and political avant-garde, which has not existed in Europe since 1968. In terms of its character, duration, mobilization of citizens and pressure on the regime, this movement has no counterpart even on a planetary level since the beginning of the 21st century. The student movement is by its nature anti-corruption, sovereignist, focused on building legal identity and the rule of law as the supporting pillars of the new order. The author of the paper starts from the hypothesis that anti-corruption is a centripetal force of the student movement that mobilizes citizens in the fight to establish Serbia as a legal state in which the rule of law exists. Student movement influenced the construction of a student protest identity and the formation of a generation of critically thinking and socially engaged youth. The political awareness of Generation Z, the mobilization of citizens and the offering of alternative ways to resolve the institutional, political and social crisis is the legacy of the current student protests. The student movement is deeply rooted in anti-corruption foundations, which dictate a policy of discontinuity and the responsibility of high politics for the abuse of the public interest. The political activism of students in the blockade exposed the corrupt, blackmailing and repressive nature of the hybrid regime and gradually led to a change in the value and political pattern. The student movement has changed tactics and forms of manifestation since its inception, but the demand for a legal state and the rule of law has remained an unchanging variable. As the most credible social actor capable of mobilizing citizens to support its demands, the student movement is becoming a political actor oriented towards institutional changes and the redefinition of political and economic processes.

Keywords: student movement, anticorruption, rule of law, Serbia.

Field: Social sciences (Politology)

1. INTRODUCTION

The right to revolt is a meta-right, an inalienable right that is above all other rights, and over the past half century, this right has been most often exercised by the student population on a global scale. The most famous global student revolt took place in May 1968, and the main protagonists were baby boomers, whose focus was not primarily on existential problems, but on personal, political, and sexual freedoms. The 1968 movement, which originated in France as the cradle of the civil revolution, spread to many European countries. The social engagement of the '68ers under the motto "let us be realistic, let us seek the impossible" was strongly influenced by the intellectual concepts of the Frankfurt School, as well as the theoretical considerations of Lacan and Horkheimer (Pavlović, 2021: 88, 90). The most significant social impact of the French student demonstrations was the general strike of the trade unions, which resulted in the improvement of workers' rights (Pavlović, 2021: 91) and the promotion of violence as a legitimate form of political struggle. In the existing body of scientific knowledge about the legacy of the May 1968 student uprising, there is no consensus, and there are views that these events had a minor impact (DeGroot, 2009: 355), that they were mythomaniac and romanticized, but also opposing views that these events were harbingers of new ideas that shaped new generations (Marwick, 2006: 39). The protests during 1968 could not be characterized as an attempt at revolution, or rather a collective student mobilization that seeks to overthrow the existing regime by force. Terminologically, it is more accurate to classify these events as radical politics that seek to redefine the model by which society functions, through institutional changes and the transformation of political, economic and symbolic processes (Chaumont, 2015: 2). The 1968 demonstrations also spilled over into the then Yugoslavia, primarily to the universities of Belgrade, Zagreb and Sarajevo (Fichter, 2016: 99) and were most intense in the period from 2 to 9 June 1968. The demands of the Belgrade students, which arose in the milieu of Yugoslav socialism, naturally related to social and economic issues such as reducing social inequality, increasing the employment rate, democratizing social organizations (a priori the League of Communists), freedom of expression and assembly, as well as improving the status of universities (material and immaterial). When it comes

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to the position of the university, students demanded their participation in the decision-making process on all important issues, democratic re-election of teaching staff, elimination of clan and monopoly politics in departments, free enrollment in faculties, as well as improvement of the overall material position of the university. Due to the violent reaction of the police forces towards the rebellious students, the Belgrade '68ers demanded the dismissal of police officers at all state levels (local, republican and federal) and the abolition of all protest participants. In the domestic sociological literature on the '68ers movement, critical tones appear about its nature and scope, characterizing it as a politically ambivalent and inconsistent reflection of the internally contradictory Yugoslav society of the time (Popović, 1998: 131).

An indispensable part of the research on student movements in Serbia is the student movement of the 1990s, which was an important agent of civil society in opposing the hybrid regime. Due to the general social situation in the country, the war years and the international embargo, this student movement from its beginnings had horizons and ambitions that went beyond issues of educational policy and university status. In addition to advocating for the autonomy of universities, which was violated by the normative solutions of the politically passionate legislator from 1992 and 1998, the student movement was aimed at the democratization of society. By its nature, this movement, like the opposition and civil movements of the time, was deeply anti-regime. In the last decade of the 20th century, three waves of student protests took place, in 1991/1992, 1996/1997 and 1998-2000. The first wave began after the March 9 protest in Belgrade (March 10-14, 1991) in front of the Terazije Fountain, modeled after the then Eastern European "velvet revolutions", and according to estimates, these demonstrations were attended by 15 to 20 thousand people. The students' demands included: the resignation of Slobodan Milošević, the adoption of a new law that would guarantee the autonomy of universities, the end of the regime's media control, as well as the publication of the names of students who died in the war in Croatia and the resignation of the Belgrade student leadership (Tomić, 2011: 338). The first major student protest was organized in June and July 1992 in Belgrade, on Students' Square and at individual faculties. This time, the students' demands were exclusively political and, in addition to repeatedly demanding the resignation of President Milošević, they also demanded the dissolution of the House of Representatives and the Government, the formation of a government of national salvation, and the calling of multi-party elections for the Constituent Assembly (Tomić, 2011: 339). After a month-long protest, the Law on Universities was passed in August, which was detrimental to political activism at the university, which discouraged students from continuing their protest activities. The student lull lasted until November 1996, when four-month student demonstrations began, the most massive and longest during the harsh 1990s. The demands of the '96ers were less ambitious and more realistic than previous student demands and were a reaction to the regime's resistance to recognizing the results of the local elections held on December 17, 1996. The 1996/1997 student movement demanded the establishment of an independent commission to determine the election results and the resignation of the rector and vice-rector of the University of Belgrade.

2. THE Z GENERATION STUDENT MOVEMENT IN SERBIA 2024/2025

Z generation, as the first global and digital generation in the world (Töröcsik et al. , 2014: 30) for a long time in Serbia was perceived as uninterested in social and political events, led the most massive student and civil protest in the history of Serbia. The student activism of this generation was anti-Bologna and against the market logic of neoliberalism that encroached on their financial opportunities. This generation is formed under the influence of legal gelatinization, media darkness, state capture, privatized institutions, informal institutional patterns and social anomie. The Serbian elite, prone to corruption, repression, and crony capitalism, has determined insurmountable social and economic inequality, which has resulted in distrust in the state and its institutions (Perić Diligenski 2020: 416). The student movement of Z generation in Serbia 2024/2025 is a social avant-garde, unseen on European soil since 1968. The occasion for student organizing was the unfortunate event of November 1, when a canopy at the Novi Sad railway station collapsed, killing 15 people and seriously injuring two, one of whom later succumbed to his injuries. The collapse of the canopy was a trigger due to the existence of well-founded suspicions that informal, corrupt arrangements were involved in the reconstruction of the railway station. After this event, the regime denied that the canopy had been reconstructed, making the tragedy an unpredictable and unexpected force, vis major event, which in theory is conceptualized as a black swan (Jervis, 2009: 475) denying it as a consequence of the human factor. A financial analysis of the reconstruction of the canopy shows that its price was increased many times over through contract annexes (from 1.9 million to 5.2 million euros) and that the contractor was awarded the job on the basis of "friendly consultations", bypassing public procurement procedures. The irresponsibility of high politics, developed clientelistic networks, institutionalized and normalized corruption (Perić Diligenski, 2021: 43), hibernated institutions,

the suppression of rights and its decades-long political instrumentalization have resulted in the deaths of innocent people. The centralization of power in a single political figure, combined with the absence of governance mechanisms and a parallel established order of informal institutions, has led to death, as the most dangerous unintended consequences of political corruption. Death, as the most severe and irreparable repercussions of systemic corruption, is rarely the subject of scientific analysis, but there are studies that also address this issue (Gillanders & Tawiah 2025).

The deaths of 16 people, which sparked demonstrations under the slogan "corruption kills", and the attacks on students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts while they were paying their respects to the victims, have triggered blockades of state faculties in four university centers (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac) as well as many colleges and private faculties. The students in the blockade have mapped out key problem points, formulated in their demands, which relate to: the publication of complete documentation regarding the canopy collapse, the dismissal of criminal charges against all students and citizens arrested during the protests, the initiation of criminal proceedings against the person who physically attacked them and citizens during the protests, and an increase in budget funds for state faculties by 20%. From the wording of the demands, it is *prima facie* evident that they are primarily aimed at the institutional work of the repressive authorities, primarily the prosecutor's office, which has the power to prosecute. Secondly, the focus of the student movement is on improving the financial situation of the university, the only demand that was fulfilled by regime in early March 2025. After the Belgrade protest on March 15, when a sonic weapon was used during a 16 minutes of silence, the students added another demand on their day, April 4, related to conducting a detailed investigation, establishing all the circumstances and responsibility for that event. The last non-political demand of the student movement related to establishing responsibility for the stay of President Vučić and the journalistic teams in the intensive care unit, where patients seriously injured in the fire in Kočani were hospitalized. Aware of the regime's legal nihilism and deafness to student demands, the student movement formulated political demands par excellence for the first time since the beginning of the blockades. The demands of an ultimatum nature were addressed to the Government of the Republic of Serbia, which was asked to submit to the President of the State, by June 28.6.2025. at 9 pm, a reasoned proposal for the dissolution of the National Assembly with the aim of calling early parliamentary elections. The second request addressed to the Ministry of Internal Affairs related to the termination of the quasi-registered rally in Pioneer Park, colloquially called Čaciland. The Vidovdan demands represent the entry of the student movement into the political field. The Vidovdan protest was a watershed on two levels, political and reactionary, because police repression against protest participants was exposed.

3. THE ANTI-CORRUPTION ETHOS OF STUDENT MOVEMENT

At the core of all aforementioned the students' demands are respect for human rights (primarily the right to life and the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly), the separation of powers and its compliance with the constitution and law, as well as the independence of the third branch of government. In short, the students' demands, through their anti-corruption ethos, have the ambition that Serbia has a legal, not a party, sign and that the constitutional principle of the rule of law comes to life. It is necessary that the entrenched rule of people be replaced by the rule of law, which is reflected in a sustainable system of regulations, institutions, norms and community commitments that establish accountability, just laws, open government and justice accessible to the people in a manner most appropriate for governance in accordance with universal principles" (Paleri, 2022: 303). Without the rule of law, it is not possible to restore trust in the state and its institutions, combat systemic corruption and consolidate democracy (Perić Diligenski, 2024: 398). The establishment of Serbia as a state governed by the rule of law is a national issue of the first order for the student movement, for which they walked across Serbia and cycled to the European bureaucratic capitals, Strasbourg and Brussels. Students, united with citizens, through various forms of civil disobedience, are simultaneously fighting on the streets of Serbia for the constitutional order and for the principles formulated in cluster 1, which Serbia, as a candidate country for membership in the European Union, should fulfill. The aforementioned cluster refers to the foundations of a state governed by the rule of law, such as an independent judiciary, respect for human and civil rights, the fight against corruption, justice, freedom and security. In Serbia, as a partocratic and lawless state, anti-corruption sentiments and the will for justice have determined the largest scale of civil disobedience in its history. Aggression and violence against the authorities are not the ambitions or goals of student civil disobedience. The deconstruction of the existing corrupt system, along with the standard claims of civil disobedience that are reflected in the development of moral virtue, civic courage and human dignity (Stevanović, 2005: 1) are the main motives of the peaceful general uprising.

The dominant anti-corruption protest character is visible in the banners from the protests, and one could also speak of anti-corruption protestography. The plenums of all the faculties in the blockade are unanimous in the view that corruption is the most dangerous manifestation of social pathology (Stanković & Perić Diligenski, 2023: 228) which had reflections on the multidisciplinary approach to the corruption phenomenon and proposals for reducing corruption.

The most recognizable protest banner that summarizes the problems of Serbia as a textbook example of a state capture (David-Barrett, 2023: 224) is the message of students of the Belgrade Faculty of Mechanical Engineering - Machines against machinery. Machinery is a synonym for the theoretical construct of a captured, kleptocratic state, in which the public is essentially manipulated by the private, in which the judiciary functions according to the dictates of the executive branch and according to the principle of the Soviet model of telephone justice (Ledeneva, 2013: 160). In a captured Serbia, the law is ignored and circumvented on a daily basis, with an omnipresent democratic deficit, which is reflected in absence of media freedoms, centralization of power, and disrespect for basic human rights. In addition to advertising for future mechanical engineers, biologists also spoke out on the topic of corruption with banners: Corruption mutates faster than viruses, Corruption is not a model organism but it is time to investigate it, Mutations in the system bring deadly consequences - it is time for responsibility, The system is contaminated - we are changing the system. The protestography of the construction profession, which has been the focus of most interest since the fall of the canopy, is reflected in the following messages: We will build prisons against corruption, Attention. The reconstruction of the constitutional order is underway. Future holders of judicial offices, law writers and human rights defenders, inspired by Balašević's verses "There would be no blood if everything was according to the law", have designed banners that directly target those responsible for the abuse of rights. Worth mentioning is the banner referring to Zagorka Dolovac, the Supreme Public Prosecutor - Zagorka, burn us Serbia, as well as the messages: Lawyers want justice, An attack on one is an attack on all, Beating is legal only in obligatory relations, There will be justice only when this empire falls, I will EXPOde, We will also remember who was silent. The anti-corruption message is also sent by the banner of the students of the Faculty of Forestry - We cut corruption, we plant justice, as well as the banner of future doctors - Students heal the system.

The anti-corruption backbone of the student movement is also evident in videos and documentaries about pressing social problems caused by corruption, which were created by students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts. The anti-corruption identity is supported by the digital identity of Generation Z, which easily follows the technological pace and markets its ideas through social networks. A twenty-minute video about the EXPO 2027 project in an accessible and instructive way indicates to citizens the dangers of implementing the exhibition, which is an overly expensive and inexpedient project, a practical illustration of the theoretical concept of the white elephant (Robinson & Torvik, 2005: 2). In the aforementioned video, students map the non-transparent procedure in the implementation of the corrupt project as well as legal abuses, primarily the derogation of legal procedures on public procurement, thereby raising anti-corruption awareness among citizens. The student movement is the most important anti-corruption force and an extra-institutional substitute for anti-corruption institutions that are passive and have become accomplices of the regime in covering up corruption. In the absence of reactions from the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption and the Prosecutor's Office, which is not initiating an investigation into the cash flows in the reconstruction of the canopy, the student movement is the only anti-corruption messenger that citizens trust. Ergo, the student movement is a centripetal anti-corruption force that educates and mobilizes citizens in the fight for a legal state and the rule of law.

In addition to the socially inappropriate (and possibly unsafe) EXPO 2027 project, the students in the blockade focused on the issue of lithium mining, at the core of which are the lucrative motives of foreign investors and the domestic elite, and the case of the transformation of the Serbian Electric Power Company from a public enterprise into a joint-stock company. The fight against corruption is the backbone of the student political program that should be represented by the student list in the next elections. The student movement sets a priority on a Serbia as a corruption and organized crime free state, which is an overly broad and utopian formulated demand. Corruption as an informal institution cannot be completely eliminated, but it is possible to reduce it and bring it to a level that will not endanger the lives, safety and economic standard of citizens. The student anti-corruption program emphasizes the strengthening of internal control of the police and security services, along with the necessity of blocking the flow of dirty money and the practice of money laundering. An additional proposal is the publication of all commercial contracts concluded by the state with foreign and domestic investors. In order for corruption to become an unprofitable activity, it is necessary to adequately sanction it, which is why the student movement is putting the redesign of prosecutorial and judicial bodies on the political agenda. In this direction, it is proposed to establish an independent and efficient judiciary through the removal of responsible judicial

officials and the appointment of professional staff. Special attention is paid to political corruption, which relates to the very top of the state and has political consequences (Perić Diligenski, 2021: 39) through the proposal to introduce a special prosecutor's office responsible for prosecuting public officials.

4. CONCLUSION

The spirit of the student uprising of 1968 at the University of Nanterre, expanded to the Latin Quarter of Paris, European universities and New Belgrade overpasses as hotbeds of unrest and student rebellion, has found a worthy successor in the movement of students in Serbia in blockade. The student movement of 2024/2025 surpasses its historical predecessors from 1968 and 1996/1997 in its social and political achievements. This movement is not profiled in terms of leadership and did not produce a Serbian Daniel Cohn-Bendit, nor is it inspired by the theoretical reflections of contemporary world intellectuals. It emerged as a reaction of the student population to lawlessness, social injustice and repression of the corrupt regime. It influenced the construction of a student protest identity and the formation of a generation of critically thinking and socially engaged youth. The political awareness of Generation Z, the mobilization of citizens and the offering of alternative paths to resolving the institutional, political and social crisis is the legacy of the current student protests. Raising anti-corruption awareness among citizens is the most socially valuable legacy of student activism. Although it is not sufficient for social change, the protest practice has led to the strengthening of civil society aware of the dangers of informal institutions and social anomie. The student movement is deeply rooted in anti-corruption foundations, which dictate the politics of discontinuity and the responsibility of high politics for the abuse of the public interest. The political activism of students in the blockade has exposed the corrupt, blackmailing and repressive nature of the hybrid regime and gradually led to a change in the value and political pattern. The students in the blockade did not only teach the entire society a lesson in anti-corruption, but also in civil disobedience, courage, empathy and solidarity. The student movement has changed tactics and manifestations since its inception, but the demand for a legal state and the rule of law has remained an unchanging variable. As the most credible social actor capable of mobilizing citizens to support its demands, the student movement is becoming a political actor oriented towards institutional changes and the redefinition of political and economic processes.

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