

Announcement

Information on the student's movement in Serbia 2024/5

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A historical look back on bottom-up movements

The student initiated uprising in Serbia developed since the autumn of 2024 in line with historical trends changing suppressive societal structures bottom-up if not bearable anymore. Historical dynamics begin to develop with the discovery of the potential of agriculture several thousand years ago. Permanent settlements and hierarchies to protect the seed and the harvest developed which required differentiated organisational structures acting top-down but were regularly restructured by wars or bottom-up turn-overs. More recent examples of bottom-up initiated developments are documented in Table 1.

Table 1: Examples of historical change bottom-up during the last millennium.

- 1) The Magna Carta 1215 in England, restricting monarchical domination of the baron's class.
- 2) The Peasants' Revolt across medieval Europe in 1381.
- 3) Martin Luther's 95 theses pinned 1517 to a church door in Wittenberg, protesting at various Church practices.
- 4) The ideals of liberté, égalité, fraternité of the French Revolution 1778 – 1799 became universal ideals.
- 5) The peaceful revolution of 1989 overturning the Eastern European communist regimes supported by large numbers of young people.

Student movements in recent history

In the 20th century increasingly student movements made key contributions: One of the earliest was the [White Rose Society](#) in Munich/Germany during the second World War. In the 1960s Students became central to the [Civil Rights](#) and Anti-War Movement against the Vietnam War in the USA followed in 1976 by the [Soweto Uprising](#) in South Africa. In 1989 the [June Democratic Struggle in South Korea](#) saw students play a crucial role in dissolving a military regime and establishing democracy paralleled by the [Tiananmen Square protests](#) in China. In 2019 Greta Thunberg became the face of the [Global Climate Strikes](#) "Fridays for Future".

The student protests in Serbia 2024/5

The students-initiated mass protests in Serbia began in November 2024 in Novi Sad after the collapse of the recently renovated city's railway station canopy on November 1, which killed 16 people and left one severely injured. By March 2025, the protests had spread to 400 cities and towns across Serbia and were ongoing.

Authorities launched an investigation into the causes of the incident in Novi Sad, but public frustration grew due to lack of accountability in the response. The station building was constructed in 1964, and was renovated from 2021 to mid-2024 with support from China's Belt and Road Initiative. The official cause of the collapse is still under investigation with government corruption and opaque dealings with Chinese contractors blamed.



Figure 1: Protestors gather up at Slavija Square in Belgrade on 22 December 2024

Corruption and control of the media in Serbia

- Corruption:

The occurrence of corruption is perceived to be high by surveyed residents of Serbia, and public trust in key institutions remains low. Under [Aleksandar Vučić](#) - due to his increasingly authoritarian regime - Serbia reached in 2024 its all time worst score of the

international [Corruption Perceptions Index](#) by a value of 105th in international comparison (e.g. North-Macedonia 88th position). Corruption is considered the most problematic factor for doing business in Serbia, followed by inefficient government bureaucracy and Serbia's judiciary, police, health and education sectors that are particularly vulnerable to corruption. According to the [Global Corruption Barometer](#) 2016, 22% of Serbian citizens who had contact with public institutions had paid a bribe at least once in the previous year.

- *Media control:*

In 2025, Serbia ranked 96th out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) media freedom ranking list¹. Associated Press suggested that the collapse of the station's canopy in Novi Sad has also served as a flash point for expressions of dissatisfaction with the Serbian government as a whole, as protesters also stage daily "Serbia, stop" traffic blockades from 11:52 am to 12:08 pm—the time of the collapse—symbolizing the 16 lives lost, accompanied by silent protest.

The protests began with student-led blockades of educational institutions, starting on 22 November at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade after students were attacked in Novi Sad during a silent tribute to the victims of the 1 November collapse.

Other faculties and high schools soon joined in. As well as daily protests, also several large-scale student protests were organized: In the university centers Novi Sad (1 February 2025), Kragujevac (15 February), Niš (1 March) and Belgrade (22 December and 15 March). Other protest actions were staged, including walking protests, a protest biking race from Belgrade to Strasbourg, and the blockade of the Radio Television of Serbia that severely disrupted their programs. As of April 2025, most of the public and many private universities remain in student-led blockades, as are many high schools.

Table 2: The requests for change, listed in the “Joint Statement of Students and Professors from Serbia - Public Health Diplomacy in Action: The Voices of Serbian Students” (Full text in Annex I).

We address you today not only as professors of medicine and public health, but also as witnesses and supporters of an extraordinary and powerful democratic movement unfolding in Serbia, led not by political figures or institutions, but by students.

Students’ Legitimate Demands

The Serbian student movement has articulated a series of clear and justified demands:

¹ <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Reporters+Without+Borders+%28RSF%29+media+freedom+ranking+list>

1. **Full transparency and accountability** regarding the reconstruction of the Novi Sad train station. All relevant documentation concerning the reconstruction of the Novi Sad Railway Station must be made public.
2. **Legal action against unlawful violence** perpetrated against peaceful protestors. 2. The relevant authorities must confirm all persons suspected of physically assaulting students and professors, and criminal proceedings should be initiated against them. If they hold public office, they must be dismissed.
3. **Dropping charges against arrested students**, as per the rule of law. Criminal charges against arrested and detained students during the protests must be withdrawn, as well as the suspension of already initiated criminal proceedings.
4. **A 20% increase in funding allocated to state universities needs to be ensured**, safeguarding equitable access to education.
5. **An investigation and sanctions for the use of unidentified** and harmful crowd-control measures, including the alleged use of sound cannons on peaceful demonstrators. A thorough investigation by the competent authorities must be conducted to determine all circumstances and liabilities regarding the phenomenon that caused fear and panic during a peaceful protest on March 15, 2025.
6. **Accountability in medical teaching institutions** for ethical and legal breaches of patient privacy and safety. Protection of patients' rights must be ensured.

It is clear that the core of the students' movement is not ideological, but about social justice, human rights, and the rule of law.

Developments until August 2025

Early protests primarily took the form of quiet vigils for victims of the collapse. However, these protests began to morph into larger and angrier demonstrations, with demonstrators accusing police and local authorities of negligence and corruption. Protesters began demanding a transparent investigation into the collapse, and the release of documents related to the incident.

The President Aleksandar Vučić, Minister of Construction [Goran Vesić](#) and the pro-government news outlets initially claimed the canopy was never reconstructed, even though news articles and videos about the reconstruction were still available online, showing Vesić officially opening the reconstructed Novi Sad Railway Station. Faced with accusations and public outrage, Vesić announced his resignation.

Initial political fallout and arrests

On 20 November, current Minister of Trade and former Minister of Construction [Tomislav Momirović](#) resigned from the ministerial function. In his resignation letter, he pledged his "eternal loyalty to president Vučić".

In spite of the big resonance the Serbian student movement received - for example, but not only - during their famous cycling from Belgrade through Vienna and Munich in April 2025 to the EU-Parliament in Strasbourg.

The government under president Vucic did not react on the students' requests. As well, the Serbian government did not start convincing investigations of the canopy crash in Novi Sad. Therefore, the protest movement initiated mainly by students spread throughout Serbia bringing hundreds of thousands of people on the streets including trade unions, professors, and students. As the mass protests did not achieve that the government react accordingly, mid-2025 the students initiated preparations for a students' Trade Union and the potential perspective of a new opposition party. In response the government hardened its position imprisoning individual students for days or weeks without clearly formulated reasons.

Annex I

Full text:

Joint Statement of Students and Professors from Serbia Public Health Diplomacy in Action: The Voices of Serbian Students

We address you today not only as professors of medicine and public health, but also as witnesses and supporters of an extraordinary and powerful democratic movement unfolding in Serbia, led not by political figures or institutions, but by students.

Serbia and Its Academic Landscape

Serbia is a country with a population of approximately 6.6 million people. Our higher education system comprises nine public universities, over 70 faculties, and more than 220,000 students. This population of young people represents our country's most vital potential, and a driving force for its prosperous future and development.

In recent months, Serbian students have demonstrated what it truly means to stand for the values of justice, democracy and public health diplomacy. With dignity and resolve, they have mobilised in defence of truth, safety, and institutional justice. These are the values that go to the heart of our mission as educators and public health professionals.

These students, soon to be our future physicians, public health professionals, scientists, and community leaders, have chosen the difficult path of ethical resistance and democratic engagement in a time of deep societal crisis, demonstrating immense courage in the pursuit of justice.

Peaceful, Civic, Public Health Activism

Following a tragic incident on November 1st, 2024, in which 16 lives were lost due to the avoidable collapse of a train station structure in Novi Sad, students from across Serbia mobilised peacefully and purposefully.

When denied access to national media, a consequence of the current lack of media freedom, they did not withdraw. Rather, they became messengers of democratic values. They walked hundreds of kilometres across

Serbia to speak directly with citizens in small towns and rural areas, ensuring their voices could not be silenced. They organised peaceful protest actions across university campuses and city squares.

But their efforts didn't stop at national borders.

In an act of courage and sacrifice, Serbian students cycled from Belgrade to Strasbourg and completed a relay race from Belgrade to Brussels, via the European capitals en route, to hand their demands directly to the European Union institutions. Along their route, they encountered solidarity and support from European citizens and the Serbian diaspora.

In Vienna, Austria's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Beate Meinl-Reisinger, greeted them with these powerful words: "What you are doing is unbelievable, so brave." She recognised that Serbian students were promoting the very same values that define the European Union: freedom, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

Although exceptional, these are not the first student-led protests for social justice. What we are witnessing in Serbia is part of a continuation of the global democratic tradition. For example, in 1968, students in France sparked one of the most significant societal transformations in post-war Europe. In 1989, students in Prague led peaceful protests that contributed to the Velvet Revolution and the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia. In Chile, students have led mass demonstrations since 2011, demanding accessible and equitable public education. More recently, climate justice movements led by young people across the globe, from Sweden to Uganda, have demonstrated that young people are at the forefront of ethical leadership.

The Serbian students of today stand proudly within this lineage.

A Movement of Courage and Creativity

As health professionals and educators, we are obligated to reflect on societal processes through the lens of ethics, equity, and the social determinants of health. We cannot stay silent when injustice, corruption, and the erosion of civil rights harm the very fabric of our communities.

Serbian professors have joined the students' protests in solidarity. The Faculty of Medicine at the University of Belgrade went on strike on May 5th, 2025. This was for several reasons: the failure of state institutions to respond to legitimate student demands; illegal reduction of public financing of academic research; unacceptable threats and public humiliation directed at students and faculty staff; and repression of university leadership by law enforcement. The reduction in funding was imposed by a caretaker government, contrary to the Serbian constitution, which permits such a government only to manage ongoing affairs and not to introduce new general acts or regulations with long-term impact.

This is not only a political issue, but also a public health matter. Democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, academic and professional integrity, justice, and institutional trust are fundamental **social determinants of health**.

Students' Legitimate Demands

The Serbian student movement has articulated a series of clear and justified demands:

7. **Full transparency and accountability** regarding the reconstruction of the Novi Sad train station. All relevant documentation concerning the reconstruction of the Novi Sad Railway Station must be made public.

8. **Legal action against unlawful violence** perpetrated against peaceful protestors. The relevant authorities must identify all persons suspected of physically assaulting students and professors, and criminal proceedings should be initiated against them. If they hold public office, they must be dismissed.
9. **Dropping charges against arrested students who did not commit any crime**, as per the rule of law. Criminal charges against arrested and detained students during the protests must be withdrawn, as well as the suspension of already initiated criminal proceedings.
10. **An immediate 20% increase in funding allocated to state universities**, safeguarding equitable access to education.
11. **An investigation into the use of unidentified** and harmful crowd-control measures, including the alleged use of sound cannons on peaceful demonstrators. A thorough investigation by the competent authorities must be conducted to determine all circumstances and liabilities regarding the phenomenon that caused fear and panic during a peaceful protest on March 15, 2025.
12. **Measures to assert accountability in medical teaching institutions** for ethical and legal breaches of patient privacy and safety. Protection of patients' rights must be ensured.

It is clear that the core of the students' movement is not ideological, but about social justice, human rights, and the rule of law.

The Power of Public Health Diplomacy

What we are witnessing in Serbia is not just a national protest, it is an act of public health diplomacy from within. Students are not only demanding justice at home, they are building bridges abroad, engaging with European values, and using peaceful, evidence-based advocacy to reclaim democratic space through public health ethics.

Their journey from Belgrade to Brussels was more than symbolic. It was an act of citizen diplomacy, performed by those with no political mandate, only moral authority and civic courage. These students turned their bicycles and running shoes into instruments of dialogue, bypassing captured media systems to reach people directly.

This is the very essence of public health diplomacy: using health-based values, dignity, equity, truth as the language of international engagement. The Serbian student movement has made public health an actor in democratic dialogue. They've shown that even non-state actors, especially youth, can speak with global resonance.

Their efforts demonstrate that diplomacy today extends beyond the realm of foreign ministers and ambassadors. It is also a role exercised by students, scientists, and health professionals, who act to defend public interest through transnational solidarity and the pursuit of truth.

Our Shared Responsibility

We, as professors and public health educators, must stand in solidarity with those who fight for all our shared European values. This is not just a struggle for Serbia, it is for Europe and the world. It is for us all. Let this be a moment of transnational solidarity.

Serbian professors and students are protesting to protect human rights, public health, and the future of their country.

Today, we support our students to ensure health and well-being for everyone tomorrow. Let their action awaken us. Let it bind us in a collective purpose.

We, the students and professors from the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Belgrade, proudly join in signing this statement. Bound by our dedication to ethics, human dignity, and democratic principles, we endorse the peaceful movement for justice, transparency, and accountability within Serbian institutions.

Students (alphabetical order):	Professors (alphabetical order):
1. Aleksandar Bresliev	• Milos Bajcetic
2. Mia Cukovic	• Vesna Bjegovic-Mikanovic
3. Lazar Dimitrijevic	• Ljiljana Cvorovic
4. Luka Jankovic	• Smiljana Cvjetkovic
5. Sara Jovovic	• Marija Djuric
6. Stefan Jurik	• Milan Djukic
7. Marko Lazarevic	• Vida Jeremic Stojkovic
8. Mila Martic	• Aleksandar Ivanovic
9. Uros Novakovic	• Olivera Kontic Vucinic
10. Ognjen Pokimica	• Milutin Kostic
11. Tara Radak	• Zeljko Lausevic
12. Andrijana Ristic	• Emina Milosevic
13. Filip Simovic	• Aleksandar Neskovic
14. Nikolina Stanimirovic	• Dusan Skiljevic
15. Jana Stevanovic	• Maja Stanojevic
16. Veljko Stojanovic	• Aleksandar Stevanovic
17. Petar Stojkovic	• Ivan Soldatovic
18. Lena Stokic	• Oliver Stojkovic
19. Nikola Tasic	• Dejana Vukovic
20. Djordje Udovicic	• Nikola Vojvodic

ANNEX II

Selection of national and international support of the students' 6 requests (as listed in Table 2)

Protests were publicly supported by over 5,000 university professors, cooperators and researchers.

Professional associations

Serbian Medical Society, Dental Chamber of Serbia, Bar Association of Serbia, [Association of Writers of Serbia](#), [PEN Center](#) Serbia, Association of Drama Artists of Serbia, Association of Screenwriters of Serbia, Association of Composers of Serbia, Association of Musical Artists of Serbia, Association of Jazz, Pop and Rock Musicians of Serbia, Association of Literature Translators of Serbia, [ICOM](#) Serbia.

Theatres and orchestras

[National Theatre in Belgrade](#), Ballet Ensemble of National Theatre, [Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra](#), [Belgrade Drama Theatre](#), [Yugoslav Drama Theatre](#), [Terazije Theatre](#), [Atelje 212](#), [Zvezdara Theatre](#), Teatar na brdu, [Boško Buha Theatre](#), Duško Radović Theatre, [Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad](#), Orchestra of Serbian National Theatre's Opera, [Novi Sad Theatre](#), [Novi Sad Youth Theatre](#), [National Theatre in Niš](#), [Niš](#) Puppet Theatre, [Princely Serbian Theatre](#), [Kragujevac Children's and Youth's Theatre](#), National Theatre of [Sombor](#), [National Theatre of Zrenjanin](#), [Lazarevac Puls Theatre](#).

Museums, libraries and archives

[Ethnographic Museum of Serbia](#), [Historical Museum of Serbia](#), [Museum of Yugoslavia](#), [Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art](#), [Belgrade Museum of Applied Arts](#), [Belgrade Museum of Natural History](#), [Museum of Vojvodina](#), [National Library of Serbia](#), Belgrade's Historical Archives, [Yugoslav Film Archive](#).

Music festivals

[Exit music festival](#), [Nišville jazz festival](#).

Public figures, artists and celebrities

Numerous public figures, artists, athletes and celebrities from Serbia, as well as from other former Yugoslav republics supported the protests.

During the [February 2025 Pesma za Evroviziju](#) song contest, organized by Radio Television of Serbia to select the [Serbian entry](#) for the [Eurovision Song Contest 2025](#), a number of participants, including [Ana Ćurčin](#), [Oxajo](#), [Aleksandar Sedlar](#) and [Tam](#), expressed their support for the protests by wearing badges with messages of support or displaying red hands.

Television hosts and journalists

Religious officials

Support from neighboring countries and the Serbian diaspora

Since mid-December protests have been held by students in [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Montenegro](#), [Croatia](#), [Slovenia](#), [North Macedonia](#) and by Serbian diaspora in numerous cities around the world. Those include [Banja Luka](#), [Bijeljina](#), [Podgorica](#), [Sarajevo](#), [Zagreb](#), [Rijeka](#), [Split](#), [Osijek](#), [Pula](#), [Šibenik](#), [Hvar](#), [Komiža](#), [Skopje](#), [Ljubljana](#), [Maribor](#), [Paris](#), [Marseille](#), [Brussels](#), [Trieste](#), [Milan](#), [Athens](#), [London](#), [Manchester](#) [Cambridge](#), [Dublin](#), [Budapest](#), [Bucharest](#), [Sofia](#), [Vienna](#), [Graz](#), [Berlin](#) and about 120 more.

International support

Vasilije Čarapić, Montenegrin politician and member of the leading [Europe Now!](#) party, publicly expressed support for the students. In his statement, Čarapić emphasized the importance of regional solidarity and the need for accountability in infrastructure projects, urging governments to prioritize public safety to prevent such tragedies.

Former president of [Georgia Salome Zourabichvili](#) who is currently leading the [2024–2025 Georgian protests](#) supported the Serbian protests by calling them "similar" and also called for the stronger support from the EU for protests in Serbia.

European parties [Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats](#) (S&D), [European Green Party](#), [Renew Europe](#) and [European Left](#) supported the protests. **On 31 January, it was announced that the students of Serbia were a candidate for [2025 Nobel Peace Prize](#).**

Following March 15 protest in Belgrade, a group of 210 academics from Europe, the United States and South America signed a letter of support to Serbian students and academics. The list included [Étienne Balibar](#), [Judith Butler](#), [Annie Ernaux](#), [Nancy Fraser](#), [Thomas Piketty](#) and [Slavoj Žižek](#).

Public figures, artists and celebrities

Academics

[Yanis Varoufakis](#)

Actors

[Alyssa Milano](#), [Rob Stewart](#)

Music artists

[Azealia Banks](#), [Gala](#), [Bob Geldof](#), [Madonna](#), [Manu Chao](#)