

HOW SERBIA'S STUDENTS DEFEATED VUČIĆ

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A LEADERLESS MOVEMENT BROUGHT HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS BACK TO THE POLLS. WHETHER IT CAN CHANGE THE MODEL THAT SUSTAINED THE REGIME IS ANOTHER QUESTION.

After fourteen years, Aleksandar Vučić's regime has been voted out in Serbia. How many people believed that a broad social movement, led by students organised across the country on the principles of direct democracy, could defeat an authoritarian leader who had usurped a significant part of the state apparatus, above all parts of the judiciary and the police, and built a network of economic power around it? Today, many will probably say the outcome was expected. But seen from the inside, the fear that things might not go as hoped persisted until Sunday, 25 October, at 9.31 pm, when Vučić admitted that his list had been defeated.

The arithmetic of defeat

The tension had been building for weeks. As the vote approached, Vučić warned that any unrest after the elections would be "quickly quelled". On election day, voters, polling board members and observers faced pressure at nearly a third of polling stations, and violent incidents outside them grew as the day went on. By evening, the ground had been prepared for potential violence in the streets, with police and criminal gangs gathering in central Belgrade. But turnout made the outcome impossible to contest.

Clear on the night, the result was far from predictable beforehand. To understand why so few dared to expect it, one has to look at the electoral arithmetic since the SNS came to power. In the 2023 parliamentary elections, Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won 1.78 million votes, or 46.7 per cent of votes cast. Together with the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the ruling coalition received 2 million votes. The largest opposition list won 900,000. Turnout was 58.7 per cent, or 3.8 million voters.

Since 2012, when the SNS came to power, turnout in parliamentary elections has never exceeded 59 per cent. The party's vote has never fallen below 1.6 million, and it has never surpassed 2 million. This was the structural ceiling of Serbian politics: a stable, disciplined bloc of voters for the ruling party, facing a fragmented opposition and a large share of citizens who had stopped voting altogether.

After two years of protests that began with the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy, which killed sixteen people, it was hard to expect the SNS to increase its vote. The real question was whether turnout could rise high enough for another list to win more votes.

It did. According to the preliminary results of the Republic Electoral Commission, 4.43 million citizens voted, a turnout of 69 per cent, about ten points higher than in 2023. The Student List won 2.35 million votes, or 53 per cent of votes cast. Vučić's list won 1.73 million, or 39 per cent. The SPS, running separately this time, received 2.1 per cent, or around 95,000 votes, and will be left out of parliament for the first time since its founding in 1990.

The most telling figure, however, is not the winner's. The SNS-led list did not collapse: its 1.73 million votes fall squarely within the range the party has held for over a decade. The regime did not lose because its voters abandoned it. It lost because roughly 600,000 more people went to the polls than three years earlier, and because the opposition vote consolidated behind a single list. Some opposition parties read the referendum-like mood correctly, backed the Student List and withdrew from the race. Those that ran anyway did not reach even one per cent, falling far below the threshold.

This raises the central question of the election: how did a movement with no party infrastructure, no electoral experience, no access to national television and no leader bring hundreds of thousands of citizens back to the ballot box, citizens whom the established opposition had been unable to reach for years?

Politics beyond the parties

The answer is sociological rather than arithmetical. For years, the dominant view in Serbia held that young people were politically inert, disengaged and indifferent, more likely to emigrate than to organise. The methodology of measuring may have been wrong. The conclusion rested on a premise that went unexamined: that the political system, as it was arranged, was the natural frame through which political engagement should be read.

Young people were not indifferent. The existing political structures had simply become too narrow to respond to a new time and new demands.

Professionalised political parties have increasingly ceased to represent social groups. Rather than voicing the interests of those they claim to speak for, they reproduce a technocratic mentality, a supposedly neutral, managerial approach to politics that preserves the political and economic status quo. In Serbia, this general tendency took an extreme form. The opposition had fragmented into narrow circles driven by personal rivalries rather than ideological differences, with leaders treating parties as private property. While some in the opposition held their ground at considerable personal cost, others showed how little ideology mattered, turning from opponents of the regime into its partners once a lucrative position or deal was on offer.

The regime, for its part, colonised the public sphere: every television station with national coverage was brought into line, and anyone who opposed it was exposed to sustained defamation. Independent media were branded “terrorists” by the president himself. Their reach was deliberately limited: the most influential independent television channels could be watched only through a single cable operator, while advertisers kept their distance and public funds for media projects flowed overwhelmingly to outlets loyal to the government.

With too little transparency and a public and political sphere closed to new voices and ideas, something had to give.

It gave way when the canopy of the newly renovated Novi Sad railway station collapsed, exposing a system in which public projects served private profit and political promotion, and in which safety came last. The response took a form Serbia had never seen on this scale. Until then, electoral change in the country’s post-socialist history had always been led by parties.

Social movements had emerged in waves throughout the century, and above all over the past decade, from the mobilisations against the Belgrade Waterfront project to the mass protests against Rio Tinto’s planned lithium mine. Each of them left behind people who had learned how to organise, and networks that did not disappear when the protests ended. What is new now is that a social movement imposed itself as the dominant political actor, and the parties had to follow it.

The movement’s internal mechanism has been direct democracy. Students organised through plenums, open assemblies at each faculty where anyone could propose, debate and vote. There were no leaders whose co-optation, discrediting or arrest could bring the movement down. This, too, has a history. Plenum democracy first developed at the University of Belgrade in 2006, in the struggles against the Bologna reform and rising

tuition fees. In the years that followed, it spread to the universities of Ljubljana and Zagreb, and it has now returned to students in Serbia. In the spring of 2025, students invited citizens to adopt the same model through local assemblies which spread across the country and in many towns became permanent forums for discussing local problems and organising collective action.

Just as important was the movement's ability to connect struggles that had long remained separate. It crossed class lines, building ties with farmers, teachers, lawyers and the IT sector. Five of Serbia's largest trade union confederations signed a joint platform with the students to reform labour legislation, including an outdated strike law, in force since 1996, that makes organising a general strike practically impossible. Together they organised what was likely the largest May Day rally in decades.

Novi Pazar, a Bosniak-majority city in southern Serbia long pushed to the margins of Serbian society, was brought back to its centre. Its students, who had felt invisible to the rest of the country, became an important driving force of the movement itself. After decades in which nationalist narratives dominated public life, the student movement, under banners declaring that there was no longer "yours" and "ours", showed that Serbia belongs to all its citizens.

Students also literally walked across Serbia, town by town and village by village, meeting people face to face in places that had not seen a politician in decades. Through initiatives such as "A Student in Every Village", they bypassed the regime's media monopoly and spoke to people without a filter. According to the students' internal figures, they knocked on more than 600,000 doors, roughly one in five households in the country. It was this continuous work that showed in the turnout figures.

The same organisation extended to election day itself. In a country where the ruling party had long controlled the electoral process down to the smallest polling station, the Student List set out to place two trained controllers at each of the roughly 8,300 polling stations in Serbia, including those in the most remote villages. No opposition list had ever achieved such coverage. Most of those who took on this role had never been involved in an election before. For weeks, they prepared: they studied electoral law and procedures, attended trainings and coordinated with others at their polling stations and at the municipal level. Together with observers and mobile teams monitoring what happened outside the polling stations, they carried a significant part of the victory themselves. This did not prevent every irregularity, but it made the familiar mechanisms of manipulation far harder to use.

Organisation alone, however, does not explain why so many people were willing to give so much of their time and take such risks.

What drove them to organise went deeper than a single tragedy or the corruption it exposed. Across the world, social movements are growing because existing political structures have become too narrow to articulate the interests of social groups. In Serbia and the wider region, this frustration has a broader material basis: the way our societies have been integrated into the periphery of the world system, as suppliers of cheap resources and cheap labour to the countries of the core. Low wages, subsidies for foreign investors, extractive projects imposed on local communities and the steady emigration of young people are all part of the same arrangement. In this clientelist relationship with the core, ruling structures secured their own position and interests, at the expense of broader social strata. The canopy collapse made visible what this model costs. What voters rejected on 25 October was not only a government, but the model it administered.

Why the SNS cannot win without the state

The SNS's 1.73 million votes deserve as much attention as the Student List's victory. They show that the ruling party lost the election without losing its base. To understand that base, and why it is unlikely to hold once the party is out of power, one has to look at how it was built.

The SNS came to power in 2012 in a country still reeling from the global financial crisis, which hit Serbia particularly hard because it had little productive base left to absorb the shock. That base had been eroded twice: first in the 1990s, by war, sanctions and hyperinflation, and then after 2000, by a wave of privatisation that closed or stripped much of what remained of domestic industry.

The SNS drew its support from those this double collapse had left without work or prospects. It campaigned against tycoons and corruption, and the arrest of the country's richest businessman, Miroslav Mišković, in its first months in government gave that promise a face. At the outset, it presented itself as a political project speaking for ordinary people, not merely an instrument for turning political power into private wealth.

It soon turned out that the opposite was happening. Rather than dismantling the networks of privileged wealth it had campaigned against, the SNS rebuilt them around itself.

At the top of this structure, a new business elite emerged whose wealth depended on preferential access to state contracts and publicly funded projects. It was concentrated in sectors sheltered from competition, such as construction, infrastructure, finance and consultancy, where revenue came less from the market than from public procurement, permits and deals with state-owned companies. In 2024 alone, companies owned by ten businessmen close to the government generated more than €1 billion in revenue. This was the domestic side of the peripheral model: foreign capital was offered cheap labour and subsidies, while domestic capital close to the ruling party was offered the state.

At the bottom, those who depended on the state for a job, a pension or a contract were bound to the party that controlled it. In December 2013, a ban on hiring in the public sector was introduced as a fiscal measure, with every new hire requiring the approval of a government commission. In practice, it turned public employment into a resource the ruling party could distribute at its discretion. Jobs, contracts, subsidies and social benefits became the currency of political loyalty. Around them grew a system of so-called “secure votes”: party members were expected to deliver the votes of their colleagues, neighbours and relatives, and their own advancement in the party depended on how many they could guarantee. Public sector workers were pressured to attend rallies and to vote for the ruling bloc under threat of losing their jobs.

It would be a mistake to read this as a moral failure of those who voted for the SNS. In a society hollowed out by deindustrialisation and insecurity, where rights are not guaranteed but distributed, clientelist networks are often the only available way of solving everyday problems: securing a job, a permit or a place in a hospital. Loyalty in such conditions is less a matter of conviction than of dependence, and dependence is not an individual choice but a product of the system itself.

Not every vote for the SNS was clientelist, of course. Part of its support rests on ideological identification, on national sentiment and on fear of change, all of them amplified daily by a media landscape the ruling party dominated and by tabloids that served as its instrument. But the core of its electoral machinery was built on control over distribution.

This is why the SNS is unlikely to repeat its result without power. Its vote was not simply the sum of individual preferences, but the product of a structure that required access to the state to function. Once that access is lost, so is the lever. For the same reason, losing power is not an ordinary electoral setback for this structure. Wealth acquired through the state remains dependent on control over the state, and for those who accumulated it, the stakes of the election were not only political – they were about keeping their wealth and, for some, avoiding prosecution.

The same logic extended beyond Serbia's borders. At home, the ruling party acted as a patron. Abroad, it offered itself as a client to every major power at once. The European Union received stability, cooperation on Kosovo and access to lithium, with the Jadar mine placed on its list of strategic projects. France sold billions of euros' worth of fighter jets. The family of the US president was offered a historic military building in central Belgrade for a luxury development. Russia retained its hold over the country's energy sector, China secured infrastructure contracts, including the railway reconstruction of which the Novi Sad station was part, and Israel gained a production site for military drones.

Each patron received its deal, and in return the regime received what it needed most: political recognition and silence about its authoritarian practices. It was not a balancing act between East and West, but the same transaction, offered to everyone.

The question for the new government is whether it will break the mechanism, or merely take control of it, at home and in its relations with the powers that sustained the old regime. Clientelism cannot be dismantled by appeals to conscience, or simply by replacing one set of officials with another. It lives on discretionary power: on jobs, benefits and permits that depend on someone's goodwill. It can be undermined only by rights that are universal: labour rights that are actually enforced, social benefits that are entitlements rather than favours, and transparent public employment. Abroad, the equivalent is transparency: agreements with foreign states and investors negotiated openly, subject to public scrutiny and judged by the common interest rather than the survival of those in power.

What the new government inherits

The SNS has lost what mattered most to its electoral machinery: control of the government, the budget and the ministries through which jobs, contracts and subsidies were distributed. But it has not lost all of its positions. The structure built over fourteen years remains largely in place where these elections do not reach directly or quickly: in the prosecution service and parts of the judiciary, in the security services, in public enterprises and in the ownership of the country's most influential media. At the local level, the SNS still governs every city and municipality in the country except one. These positions can obstruct the new government and give the old structure a foothold from which to try to defend what it accumulated.

Even the transition itself runs through the old regime. Under the constitution, the president consults parliamentary groups and proposes the prime minister. Since Vučić's resignation,

that role has been held by Ana Brnabić, a senior SNS official who also chaired the outgoing parliament. A presidential election must be held by the end of December.

The first days after the vote have shown how quickly institutions can change sides. A commission of the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office has begun reviewing cases handled by the Belgrade prosecutor's office, long seen as an instrument of the ruling party, and the director of the public broadcaster has resigned. This is necessary, but it is not without risk. Institutions that remained silent for years are suddenly discovering their independence. An apparatus that served one ruling party can just as easily offer its services to the next. The real test is whether the new government changes the rules by which these institutions operate.

There is also the question of money. Fourteen years of enrichment through the state have left the structure built around the SNS with vast resources, and it is not yet clear whether they will be used to obstruct the changes ahead. There are already indications that illegally acquired funds are being moved out of the country, if they have not left already. The programme of the Student List promises a law on the origin of assets and the seizure of illegally acquired wealth. Whether that promise means anything will depend above all on the judiciary: on whether courts and prosecutors can act quickly and effectively enough to cut off the hidden channels through which this money flows, before it disappears beyond reach.

The economic model poses a different test. The Student List's programme states plainly that Serbia must not remain a country of cheap labour and natural resources exploited by foreign companies. It proposes shortening fixed-term employment and protecting agricultural land and water as national goods. It also promises free textbooks for all schoolchildren, a doctor in every village, affordable rental housing for young families and workers in education and health, and the seizure of illegally acquired wealth for public investment. The Student List's pledge to open all contracts and review the secret agreements and special laws through which the old regime struck its deals is a starting point.

These are real steps. But the programme does not say how Serbia is to stop being a country of cheap labour. Beyond the commitment itself, its vision of development remains at the level of general formulas: a "knowledge economy", grants for start-ups and domestic entrepreneurs, a shift towards "high-value" sectors. There are no concrete steps, no developed industrial policy, that would make the economy less dependent on foreign capital and allow it to move up from the bottom of multinational supply chains. It promises a fairer market economy, not a different one.

External pressures will test these intentions quickly. The European Union, which for years treated Vučić as a guarantor of stability and investment, now welcomes the students as the embodiment of its values, and expects alignment in return, above all on sanctions against Russia, an issue on which eight member states blocked progress in Serbia's accession talks as recently as July. The Student List has said it will not introduce sanctions. Brussels will also expect the Jadar lithium mine, which it designated a strategic project, to move forward. France will expect its fighter jet contract to be honoured, Israel its drone factory, Russia its stake in the oil and gas sector, China its infrastructure deals. Each patron of the old regime will now seek the same deal with the new one.

Yet the change of government also opens possibilities that did not exist before. Under professional politicians who traded in everything, from public contracts to the national question, decisions were made behind closed doors. A government that emerged from a movement built on demands for transparency will find it harder to do the same. EU accession, long negotiated out of public view, can become a matter of public debate. Above all, the change opens the way to democratising institutions that for over a decade served one party.

The same applies to Kosovo. For years, nationalist rhetoric at home went hand in hand with deals struck in Brussels and Washington, whose content the public learned of only in fragments. Having built its entire struggle on respect for the constitution, the Student List can hardly be expected to take a different position from the one enshrined in its preamble, which defines Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia. But it can approach the question more openly – by telling citizens what is being negotiated, and by building contacts and cooperation between the two societies rather than reducing everything to recognition or non-recognition. Mutual understanding and cooperation could be built by focusing on pressing issues for both sides like energy supplies, transport, economic and environmental questions. Progress, however, does not depend on Belgrade alone. Albin Kurti's government has kept up pressure on the Serb community in the north and blocked the self-government it was promised. Without a partner willing to move in the same direction, openness in Belgrade will not be enough.

The movement after victory

The question that will decide whether this election marks a change or merely a change of government is what happens to the movement that won it. The Student List was never meant to replace the movement. It was conceived as an instrument – its candidates were selected according to criteria set by student plenums, and its programme was voted on by them. The plenums were the principle, the list was the means.

That distinction will now be tested. Institutions have their own logic. Parliamentary majorities, ministries and the discipline required to hold a majority together pull representatives away from those who elected them and towards the demands of governing. The movement has already argued over how much control the plenums should have over their candidates. These tensions will only grow once the list holds power.

Direct democracy grew out of faculties and neighbourhoods, and the question now is how its principles can be built into institutions. There are concrete ways to begin: participatory budgeting at the local level, giving the decisions of local assemblies real weight rather than a consultative role, making public spending and official decisions open by default, strengthening independent oversight bodies, establishing civilian oversight of the police, and supporting trade union organising.

The movement's strength never lay in the list. It lay in people who organised themselves, the alliances with trade unions and farmers, and the hundreds of thousands of conversations held door to door. If those structures remain active, they can act as a check on the new government from below, independent of it, and keep on the agenda the questions the programme leaves open. This is where the left has a role to play – to give the anti-corruption consensus a social content, and to insist that corruption was not an aberration of the old regime but the organising logic of its economic model.

In the longer term, the most important consequence may be the one least visible today – the conditions for a return to a political life in which parties actually represent social groups rather than themselves. The movement filled a vacuum left by professionalised parties. Whether new political organisations, including on the left, can build on the experience of the plenums and local assemblies will shape Serbian politics long after this government.

The change of government will not resolve Serbia's structural problems. It can, at best, create the conditions for addressing them. Two years ago, few believed that a movement without leaders, parties or mainstream media access could defeat an authoritarian leader such as Vučić. Whether it can now change the system that sustained him depends less on the new government than on whether the movement that brought it to power continues to exist.