Social Protests and the Hybrid Media System in Serbia

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Kids, Foreign Agents, Criminals, and the Taliban: President Aleksandar Vučić's Shifting Rhetoric on the Student-Led Protests in Serbia

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Abstract: The student-led protests in Serbia that began in November 2024 constitute the most significant challenge to Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarian regime since 2012. Unlike previous anti-regime protests (2016–2024), the student-led movement has proved resilient to the regime's established strategy of combining orchestrated smear and disinformation campaigns with delegitimising narratives aimed at undermining the protesters' credibility. While these tactics contributed to the substantial weakening of previous protest movements, they have failed to exert the same impact on the current movement. Instead, throughout the nearly two years of protests, President Vučić has repeatedly shifted his rhetoric in an effort to discredit the students. This article analyses these evolving narratives of delegitimisation. The author first outlines the narratives employed by the regime during earlier protests before examining the presidential speeches, media statements, and social media posts since November 2024, highlighting the changes in content, form, and intensity of the president's rhetoric.

Keywords: student-led protests; Serbia; delegitimisation; disinformation; frame analysis

Introduction

In post-communist Serbia, mass anti-regime protests have been more the rule than the exception. Since 1990, the country has twice experienced decade-long periods of governance under regimes variously defined in the literature as authoritarian,

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competitive authoritarian, or hybrid (Levitsky and Way 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010; Levitsky and Way 2020; Bieber 2018; Diamond 2002; Bermeo 2016; Castaldo 2020). The first authoritarian regime, under Slobodan Milošević (1990–2000), was repeatedly challenged by anti-regime protests, eventually being overthrown by a mass mobilisation following election fraud in October 2000 (Cohen 2001; Vladisavljević 2016).

The second authoritarian period, under Aleksandar Vučić (2012–present), has been marked by recurrent mass protests against the regime. As Figure 1, based on V-Dem data, shows, the period since 2012 has witnessed a steady increase in anti-system movements and protests seeking fundamental changes to Serbia's political system or public policies. During the same period, key features of electoral and liberal democracy – including government responsiveness to citizens, the integrity of elections, the rule of law, and the separation of powers – have deteriorated substantially, while media corruption has increased correspondingly.

Until 2024 none of these protests had succeeded in challenging the dominance of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS) in the elections that followed (Table 1), nor had they managed to halt Serbia's democratic decline and ongoing autocratisation. Given the sustained dominance of the SNS and its leader Aleksandar Vučić, as well as the enduring weakness of the opposition parties, few

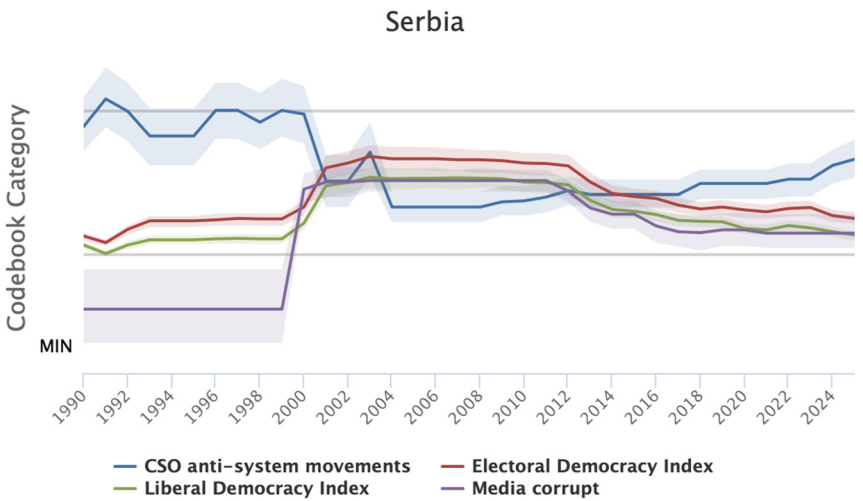


Figure 1: Serbia's Democratic Trajectory – Anti-Regime Protests, V-Dem Indexes and Media Integrity. *CSO* = civil society organization; *Codebook Category* refers to the coding/measurement categories assigned to each V-Dem indicator; *MIN* marks the minimum/reference point of the graph's scale. The grey shaded bands show uncertainty around the estimates of the V-Dem data. For the indicator *Media corrupt*, the direction is reversed: a higher score indicates less media corruption, while a lower score indicates more corruption. Source: V-Dem Codebook v16 + V-Dem Dataset v16.

Table 1: SNS Election Results in Parliamentary and Presidential Elections, 2012–2023.

Election date	Parliamentary elections Votes in % won by the SNS/SNS coalitions (number of seats out of 250)	Presidential elections Votes in % and total number of votes for SNS candidate Aleksandar Vučič	Duration of anti-regime protests
May 2012	25.16 (73)		
March 2014	49.96 (158)		
April 2016	49.71 (131)		April–July 2016
April 2017		55.08 (2,012,788)	April–May 2017
June 2020	63.02 (188)*		November 2018–March 2020; April 2020–April 2021
April 2022	44.27 (120)		September 2021–February 2022
April 2022		60.01 (2,224,914)	
December 2023	48.07 (129)		May–November 2023

*Boycotted by the majority of opposition parties. Source: Republička izborna komisija (RIK), official electoral results; compiled by the author.

observers would have expected the latest wave of protests in Serbia – triggered in November 2024 by a preventable tragedy – to herald a potential turning point. Yet, almost two years later, it is clear that this protest has succeeded in at least one respect: it has demonstrated to the regime that its long-standing strategy of undermining earlier protests has, in this case, proven to be ineffective.

In competitive authoritarian regimes, the central strategy of maintaining a democratic façade typically involves not a single repressive response, but unfolds gradually, with increasingly violent forms of coercion introduced only when other tactics fail. This strategy begins with a phase of tolerance and waiting-out, followed by efforts at delegitimisation and narrative control (manipulation), and finally, if necessary, culminates in targeted repression (coercion). During the initial phase of tolerance, competitive authoritarian regimes usually show no sign of panic, instead emphasising that protest is a democratic right. This serves to both minimise the protest's domestic impact and to preserve the regime's international legitimacy (Levitsky and Way 2010).

Coercion and repression are tactics that competitive authoritarian or hybrid regimes tend to employ later, if at all, given their negative image and the risk that they may ultimately prove counterproductive. However, the initial waiting-out phase of the strategy, on the one hand, and its final repressive phase, on the other, are connected by the overarching tactic of constructing delegitimising narratives about demonstrators and disseminating disinformation about political opponents. This article examines these narratives through the lens of President Vučić's public statements with the aim of understanding exactly how the Serbian regime has been framing the protesting students and how these frames and rhetorical strategies have shifted over time. To this end, I will first provide a theoretical framework and outline my methodology. In the main part of the article, I will then focus on my case study, providing an overview of the current student-led protest and examining how the state has responded so far. This is followed by a comparative analysis of the rhetoric and narratives of President Vučić used both during the previous and the current anti-regime protests.

Theoretical Framework

Authoritarian regimes rely not only on coercion and cooptation but also on legitimation by actively constructing meanings that shape how the public perceives political events (Gerschewski 2013). In their legitimising function, these meanings serve as propaganda for the regime and its leader. As tools of delegitimisation, they enable regimes to strategically construct and control meaning in order to undermine political opponents and alternative sources of authority. By stigmatising and

suppressing individuals, protest movements, and social groups that oppose the regime, they seek to maintain political control (Bar-Tal 1990; Benford and Snow 2000; Bondes and Heep 2012). Framing opponents as dangerous, illegitimate, or as presenting an external threat allows regimes to shape public perceptions, justify repression, deter political participation, and normalise extraordinary measures, while preserving the appearance of democratic order. These dynamics are particularly salient during periods of mass protest, when regimes face heightened threats to their authority (Levitsky and Way 2010).

To analyse the mechanisms through which meaning is constructed, this article draws on framing theory, which posits that political actors shape public understandings of events by emphasising certain aspects of reality while downplaying or omitting others. As Entman (1993, 52) argues, framing involves selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described". While democratic contexts are characterised by competing frames circulating in pluralistic media environments, authoritarian regimes use framing differently. Seeking to monopolise the communicative space through media systems tailored to their interests, they exercise extensive control over dominant narratives (Edel and Josua 2018).

Framing theory therefore provides a useful method for analysing how authoritarian governments shape meaning, construct social and political realities, and secure interpretative dominance. Lastly, framing theory is particularly relevant in contexts of contentious politics, where actors compete over the meaning and legitimacy of collective action. In authoritarian settings, official representations of protest movements frequently rely on simplified moral binaries portraying protesters as sources of violence, instability, economic decline, moral corruption, or threats to national sovereignty and unity. These narratives are articulated through recurring frames centred on stability, security, legality, national unity, and (alleged) foreign interference.

Among the most common frames used is the stability-versus-disorder frame, which portrays protesters as extremists, rioters, deviants, or social parasites who generate instability and social disruption (Bar-Tal 1990; Opotow 1990), while simultaneously presenting the regime as the guarantor of stability and order. Dissent is thus framed not as a legitimate expression of dissatisfaction but as a threat to social cohesion, legitimising the regime by linking its survival to stability (Gerschewski 2013; von Soest and Grauvogel 2017), while delegitimising protesters as irresponsible or dangerous (McLeod and Hertog 1999).

Closely related to this are the national security and legality frames. The former portrays protesters as threats to national security, economic development, and social order, often labelling them as terrorists or criminals (Buzan and Wæver 2003). The latter presents them as lawbreakers violating legal and constitutional norms. Together, these frames securitise and criminalise dissent, discredit protesters, and justify arrests, coercion, restrictions on assembly, and the use of exceptional force, portraying repression as necessary to safeguard constitutional order, public security, and the rule of law (Gerschewski 2013).

The patriotism and national unity frame depicts the regime as the embodiment of the nation, while portraying protesters as divisive actors whose actions threaten national unity. Loyalty to the regime is equated with loyalty to the nation, and protesters are often described as manipulated or financed by foreign powers and "hidden" elites (Spasojević and Lončar 2023). This overlaps with the foreign interference frame, one of the most common frames employed by authoritarian regimes. It presents protests as externally orchestrated rather than as genuine expressions of domestic grievances. According to this narrative, foreign governments, international organisations, or hostile powers finance and orchestrate protests to weaken the state and undermine national sovereignty. A specific subframe has become the colour revolution narrative, which claims that foreign actors mobilise civil society, media, and opposition groups to engineer unconstitutional regime change and install governments aligned with Western interests (Bjeloš 2026).

Regardless of their specific content, these frames pursue three interrelated objectives: disseminating false information, undermining trust, and creating confusion (Guriev and Treisman 2019; Garbe and Maerz 2026; Bennett and Livingston 2018). More broadly, they delegitimise protests and discourage their spread while presenting the regime as the indispensable guardian of the state, nation, and society. Because authoritarian control is never complete and informal networks and digital communication can magnify their vulnerabilities, regimes must continuously adapt their narratives. As protests evolve, they often switch between different frames depending on the perceived level of threat.

Applied to the Serbian context, framing theory enables an examination of how official discourse has narratively constructed the student-led protests since 2024 by attributing responsibility for their emergence, evaluating their legitimacy, and justifying the state's responses. It also facilitates the identification of recurring official narratives portraying the protests as threats to social stability, economic development, and national sovereignty, and, particularly interestingly, through labelling them as a "colour revolution".

Methodology

In this article, I employ qualitative frame and narrative analysis to examine how Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vučić, has constructed representations of the student protesters in his public statements since the protests began in late 2024, and how these frames and narratives have shifted over time. Though my focus is on the ongoing student-led protests, I also examine earlier protests against the current Serbian regime and the dominant frames through which they were depicted, allowing me to identify shifts both within the current protests and across protest cycles.

My analysis covers speeches, press conferences, television interviews, public addresses, and official statements disseminated through media and governmental as well as presidential communication channels in which President Vučić discussed the student protests, their participants, demands, or their broader political implications. Although the president is not the sole producer of (delegitimising) frames – and indeed pro-regime television channels and (online) newspapers, particularly tabloids, arguably play an even greater role – these other sources are excluded for three reasons. First, the informational environment during the protests has been highly saturated, and conducting a comprehensive analysis of the pro-regime media landscape would be a quite different research project, requiring a different methodological approach. Such an endeavour also goes beyond the scope of a single research article.

Second, and more importantly, given Vučić's dominant position within Serbia's authoritarian regime, his disproportionate presence across major television stations, online portals, and traditional media (Dragojlov 2026), and the importance of his Instagram account as a source of political communication (Krstić 2022), the frames and narratives he articulates can be regarded as representative of the arguments advanced by pro-regime media channels. That said, pro-regime outlets have also developed other narratives that, despite being informally approved by President Vučić and his cabinet, have frequently appeared to be in contrast to the president's own political communication. Third, the often aggressive and informal language Vučić employs, even in official settings, warrants analysis in its own right. While pro-regime sources tend to employ even harsher language, including them would add little analytically and risk diluting, rather than sharpening, the focus on the president's discourse.

The material was collected from publicly available online sources covering both previous and current protests. The sampling strategy is purposive rather than representative: texts were selected because they explicitly addressed the (student) protests. The main aim is not statistical generalisation but the identification and

interpretation of dominant framing patterns and narratives. The analysis draws on Entman's (1993) framing function of moral evaluation and asks how President Vučić has characterised protesters and what positive or negative attributes he has assigned to them. Rather than reconstructing his overall framing of the protests, I focus specifically on the normative representations of (student) protesters embedded in his discourse. This analytical dimension is particularly relevant because it reveals how Vučić simultaneously seeks to delegitimise and criminalise opponents while attempting to win them over. Through this approach, the article identifies the dominant interpretive frames employed by the president and examines how they contributed to shaping public perceptions of the student protests and the growing dissent in contemporary Serbia.

The Student-Led Protests and the Regime's Response

In November 2024, the canopy of the recently renovated central train station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing 14 people immediately and two more who later succumbed to their injuries. Within two weeks, spontaneous gatherings of citizens and opposition party members, who had begun publicly expressing their grief and demanding state accountability shortly after the tragedy, had evolved into daily peaceful protests with steadily increasing participation. Government officials, including President Vučić, initially denied any personal or state responsibility, insisting that the canopy had not been part of the station's renovation.[1] However, this claim was quickly proven to be false by official documentation demonstrating that the works had been undertaken and institutional safety certificates issued before the station's formal reopening in July 2024. Goran Vesić, the Minister for Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure, subsequently resigned on moral grounds, though he denied personal responsibility

1 The statement by the President of Serbia on the national state-owned radio and television broadcaster RTS was uploaded on *Tanjug News Agency*'s official YouTube channel. "1.11.2024. Obraćanje predsednika Srbije na RTS-u." *Tanjug News Agency*. 1 November 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvLYtAhXKcw. See, in particular, footage from 6:25 min. (accessed 11 August 2026); "Vesić tvrdi: Nadstrešnica nije rekonstruisana." *Danas*. 1 November 2024. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vesic-tvrdi-nadstresnica-nije-rekonstruisana/ (accessed 11 August 2026). Mirković, Jelena. "Predstavnici vlasti horski – nadstrešnica nije rekonstruisana: 'Ako političar laže, Gugl ne laže.'" *N1*. 2 November 2024. https://n1info.rs/vesti/predstavnici-vlasti-horski-nadstresnica-nije-rekonstuisana-ako-politicar-laze-gugl-ne-laze/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

for the disaster.[2] Tomislav Momirović, who had served as minister of the same sector (2020–2022) before being appointed Minister of Internal and External Trade, also resigned two weeks later.[3]

In mid-November, the growing protest movement launched the "Serbia, stand still" (*Zastani, Srbijo*) campaign, calling on citizens to gather at the nearest intersection and stand in silence at 11:52 – the exact time the canopy collapsed – for 14 minutes, one for each of the then 14 victims, thereby peacefully disrupting traffic through coordinated blockades. Students and university staff soon joined, organising similar actions in front of their faculties. Despite initial government responses, including ministerial resignations, criminal proceedings against state officials, and the arrests of employees responsible for railway and construction oversight, the mobilisation continued to grow. A turning point came on 22 November 2024 when students and professors staging a sit-in outside the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade were violently attacked by a group of individuals, some of them masked and reportedly including SNS members. The public prosecutor's failure to act despite the available evidence prompted students to occupy the academy and staff to suspend lectures. This tactic rapidly spread to universities in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Niš, and Novi Pazar, where students occupied faculties, halted classes, and coordinated protest activities, largely with the support of deans and professors.[4]

By December, the students had taken over the management of the protest, articulating four conditions for calling off the occupation of the universities: full disclosure of all documentation relating to the renovation of the Novi Sad railway station; the dropping of all charges against detained protesters; the prosecution of those responsible for the attacks; and a 20% increase in public university funding. Emphasising nonviolence, organisational horizontality, and political nonalignment, the movement framed its strategy around transparency, accountability, rule of law, and education. This positioning enabled it to rapidly broaden its support base across professional and social groups, while simultaneously displacing opposition parties from the leading role.[5]

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2 "Ministar građevinarstva Srbije podnosi ostavku, kaže da nije kriv za nesreću u Novom Sadu." *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. 4 November 2024 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vesic-novi-sad-nesreca-ostavka/33187355.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

3 "Ministar u Vladi Srbije Tomislav Momirović podneo ostavku zbog tragedije u Novom Sadu." *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. 20 November 2024. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ostavka-momirovic-tomislav-novi-sad-stanica-zeleznicka/33209453.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

4 "Rukovodstvo FDU jednoglasno podržalo zahteve svojih studenata." *Vreme*. 27 November 2024, https://vreme.com/vesti/rukovodstvo-fdu-jednoglasno-podrzalo-zahteve-svojih-studenata/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

5 Komarčević, Dušan. "Šta student protestom traže i kako je vlast Srbije na to odgovorila?" *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. 31 December 2024. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-zahtevi-studenata-

Within a month, the protests had developed into a nationwide student movement backed by university professors, teachers, secondary school students, cultural workers, and ordinary citizens, who coordinated daily micro-protests across the country. Following a mass demonstration in Belgrade on 22 December 2024, attended by around 100,000 people, the movement continued to expand throughout 2025, culminating in a protest of more than 300,000 participants in Belgrade in March 2025 – the largest demonstration in Serbia since October 2000 (Race Maksimović and Popović 2025). By then, it had become clear that, by adopting new strategies to circumvent established methods of suppressing dissent, this student movement had challenged Serbia's autocratic system more effectively than previous waves of protest, generating unprecedented public support.

To avoid organisational fatigue, the movement changed strategy in May 2025, replacing its initial four demands with a call for early parliamentary elections.[6] This came after President Vučić stated that the protesters could "have elections whenever you want them".[7] However, in a departure from previous practice, the regime initially rejected this demand, arguing that Serbia needed stability and that the government retained a clear parliamentary majority. This position was notable given that between 2012 and 2024 Serbia had held six parliamentary elections, four of them early (2014, 2016, 2022, and 2023). These snap elections, held without the government losing its parliamentary majority or facing a political crisis, have generally been interpreted as strategically timed to renew the ruling party's mandate, exploit favourable political conditions, address emerging challenges, and maintain its advantage over a fragmented opposition (Bursać and Vučićević 2025).[8] Eventually, after more than 20 months of protests, in September 2026 President Vučić capitulated and called early parliamentary elections for 25 October 2026, subsequently announcing that he would resign as President of Serbia and run as the SNS candidate for prime minister.[9]

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fakulteti-blokade/33259259.html (accessed 19 September 2026); See also the website of *Studentski lista "Studenti pobeđuju"*. https://studenti.org.rs/zahtevi/ (accessed 29 September 2026).

6 "Studenti traže izbore – šta kaže vlast, a šta opozicija." *BBC News na srpskom*. 6 May 2025. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/articles/c4g9l1d4z23o/lat (accessed 11 August 2026).

7 "Vučić se sprema da napiše knjigu do Vidovdana: Kako sam pobedio obojenu revoluciju u Srbiji." *Danas*. 8 February 2025. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-obojena-revolucija-2/ (accessed 19 September 2026).

8 Ivanov, Helena. "Timing Is Everything: Why Does the Election Date in Serbia Keep Moving?" *eureporter*. 26 August 2026. https://www.eureporter.co/world/serbia/2026/08/26/timing-is-everything-why-does-the-election-date-in-serbia-keep-moving/ (accessed 19 September 2026).

9 Božić Krainčanić, Svetlana. "Kako Vučić kao predsendik ulazi u trku za premijera Srbije?" *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. 9 September 2026. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-izbori-25-oktobar-raspisivanje/ (accessed 24 September 2026).

Despite the prolonged uncertainty over the election date, the protests nevertheless continued alongside efforts to institutionalise political participation, including the creation of a student-backed electoral list and the training of election observers. Initial electoral effects became visible in local elections held on 29 March 2026 in nine municipalities and one city.[10] Although these local elections did not represent an outright electoral defeat for Vučić, as SNS-backed lists won in all ten locations, the significant decline in SNS support and strong performance of student/opposition lists showed that his political dominance was weakening, sending an important signal ahead of the next national elections.

Initially, the Serbian regime responded to the protests by employing the same strategy it had used during earlier waves of protest, at least since 2016 (Spasojević and Lončar 2023), that is publicly tolerating and downplaying demonstrations while emphasising the constitutional right to protest, including through university blockades.[11] The expectation was that the movement would eventually lose momentum as a result of fatigue, fragmentation, or the absence of clear leadership. At the same time, however, pro-government media launched smear campaigns that spread delegitimising narratives designed to threaten, ridicule, coopt, and repress the protesters (Jerkov, Bešlin, and Radelić 2025).

After the students presented their demands in December 2024, President Vučić repeatedly claimed they had already been fulfilled,[12] including the demand for the release of all relevant documentation concerning the renovation of the railway station.[13] Students rejected this assertion with the slogan *Nisi nadležan* ("You are not in charge"), emphasising that institutions should act within their constitutionally defined competences and that executive overreach must end. As the regime's strategy of waiting out the protests failed and support for the movement continued to grow, the authorities increasingly turned to coercion, including arrests, mistreatment in custody, extralegal detention, judicial proceedings lacking a clear

10 "Zvanični podaci RIK-a: Rezultati lokalnih izbora u 10 gradova i opština." *Danas*. 31 March 2026 https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/rik-lokalni-izbori-2026-konacni-preliminarni-rezultati/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

11 "Vučević: Nejasni zahtevi studenata, dokumentacija o nesreći u tužilaštvu." *Radio Televizija Srbije (RTS)*. 11 December 2024. https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/5600146/vucevic-nejasni-zahtevi-studenata-dokumentacija-o-nesreci-u-tuzilastvu.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

12 "Vlast tvrdi da su ispunjeni zahtevi studenata, ali blokade traju." *BBC News na srpskom*. 12 December 2024. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/articles/cg7r2jkkl3vo/lat (accessed 11 August 2026).

13 "Vučić u Sremskoj Mitrovici: Spolja pokušavaju da sruše Srbiju, u taj cilj uloženo tri milijarde." *Euronews Serbia*. 15 February 2025. https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/157589/vucicev-govor-u-sremskoj-mitrovici/vest (accessed 11 August 2026).

evidentiary basis, and economic and workplace pressure on public sector employees, including university staff.[14]

Delegitimising Frames Used by Serbian Regimes before 2024

The above-described mechanism of discrediting oppositional political activists by using delegitimising narratives has been a central component of political communication both during the autocratic regime of Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s and under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić and the SNS. Under Milošević, the dominant narratives framed those attending the first mass anti-regime protests in 1991 as anti-Serbian and as undermining national unity; during the second wave, in 1996–1997, regime opponents were portrayed as foreign-controlled Western proxies seeking to destabilise the country politically and economically; and, finally, during the protests of 2000, participants were presented as an existential threat to the state (Gordy 1999). Hence, dissent was largely seen as a security threat, and the discursive strategy of Milošević's regime blurred the line between political opposition and national betrayal. As I will show, the narratives employed by Aleksandar Vučić's regime in response to the anti-regime protests from 2016 to the beginning of the student-led protests in 2024 followed this pattern to some extent, while also exhibiting new features.

"Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own"

From 2016 to 2024, anti-regime protests in Serbia took place almost annually. Although they were sparked by different issues, their common denominator was a widespread dissatisfaction with the erosion of democracy and the country's growing autocratisation (see Figure 1). While the protests had different structural preconditions, triggers, actors, types of leadership, strategies, scales of participation and outcomes – all of which go beyond the scope of this article – each wave was

14 Nowinowski, Jan. "Protests in Serbia: The Government and Its Opponents Close Ranks." *Center for Eastern Studies*. 2 March 2026. https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2026-03-02/protests-serbia-government-and-its-opponents-close-ranks; "Resolution on Polarization and Increased Repression in Serbia Adopted by the EP." Centre for Contemporary Politics, Belgrade. Webportal "European Western Balkans." 22 October 2025. https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/10/22/resolution-on-polarization-and-increased-repression-in-serbia-adopted-by-the-ep/ (both accessed 11 August 2026).

accompanied by narratives about the actors aimed at delegitimising their dissent and reducing the movement's social base.

In April 2016, following parliamentary and local elections, masked individuals demolished several buildings in Belgrade's Savamala district, an area earmarked for the controversial Belgrade Waterfront project, a large mixed-use urban renewal development on the right bank of the river Sava. The project had attracted criticism over its lack of transparency, allegations of corruption, and the bypassing of legal and democratic procedures through special legislation designed to favour foreign investors (Perić 2020; Grubbauer and Čamprag 2019). The grassroots movement "Don't let Belgrade d(r)own" (*Ne da(vi)mo Beograd*), which had emerged in 2014 in opposition to the project on grounds of corruption and gentrification (Džuverović and Milošević 2020), began organising protests after an official report confirmed police complicity in the demolition. At its peak the movement mobilised 25,000 participants, demanding accountability from key officials, including then mayor Siniša Mali, a close ally of Aleksandar Vučić.[15]

Despite their visibility, the protests remained geographically and socially limited, largely confined to urban Belgrade and focused on local governance and municipal issues. Clearly not perceiving the protests as a threat, Aleksandar Vučić, who was at the time about to become prime minister and forming his cabinet, responded by acknowledging that state institutions had made certain mistakes, describing those who had demolished the buildings as "complete idiots",[16] and announcing that the individuals responsible would be held to account: "We will lay everything out and tell the public the truth, no matter how difficult it is or what problems it causes us […]. The state will find out who did this and who ordered it."[17] At the same time, Vučić seemingly generously permitted democratic dissent, while ignoring claims of electoral fraud or calls for new elections: "As long as the protests are peaceful and democratic, I see no problem with them. Anyone can bring me down, but only during elections, if the citizens allow it […], and the next elections are in three years and nine months."[18]

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15 Krstic, Emma. "25,000 Attend Savamala Demolitions Protest in Belgrade." *BalkanInsight*. 25 June 2016. https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/25/25-000-attend-savamala-demolitions-protest-in-belgrade-06-25-2016/bi/all-balkan-countries/ (accessed 19 September 2026).

16 "Vučić: Nepotrebno je bespravne objekte rušiti noću." *Radio Televizija Srbije (RTS)*. 10 May 2016. https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/2312189/vucic-nepotrebno-je-bespravne-objekte-rusiti-nocu.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

17 "Vučić: Reči ćemo istinu o Savamali, ma koliko nam teška bila." *N1*. 29 May 2016. https://n1info.rs/vesti/a164540-Vucic-najavio-resenje-slucaja-Savamala/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

18 "Vučić o Savamali: Ne vidim problem dok su protesti mirni." *Blic*. 27 June 2016, https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-o-savamali-ne-vidim-problem-dok-su-protesti-mirni/t3emb3t (accessed 11 August 2026); Žigić, Radoslavka. "Incidenti na protestu 'Ne davimo Beograd'." *Radio Televizija Vojvodine*. 18

However, while his official position reflected a commitment to taking responsibility and upholding the rule of law, Vučić's speeches tended to then discredit the protesters in manipulative and colloquial terms. He even targeted and referred to some of them by name, portraying them as corrupt and financed from abroad, and claiming that their sole objective was to topple him. The speech he gave following the destruction of the buildings was no exception: "Let's see who these people are, who's behind these stories […]. People should simply look at how this is being financed and where the funding is coming from. I checked, and since it's a source of foreign currency for our country, it's something I'm happy about. It's a great deal when their money ends up in our country."[19]

The narrative that was constructed was consistent with the regime's perception of the protests as posing no substantial threat and thus served to delegitimise the protesters by not taking them seriously, even ridiculing them, while also framing them as financed from abroad and, hence, foreign traitors. Moreover, by claiming that state officials who exceeded their authority would be held to account and acknowledging that this behaviour was shameful,[20] Aleksandar Vučić acted in a manner typical of authoritarian leaders who emphasise their commitment to democratic rules while, in practice, doing little to uphold them. By reiterating until the protests came to an end that the demonstrations were welcome only insofar as they remained peaceful and democratic, he succeeded merely in underscoring this cynical attitude; strong delegitimising narratives from the regime were not even necessary.[21]

Seven years later, when asked by a journalist why the investigation had still yielded no results and whether he could say who these "complete idiots" were and who had given them the order to demolish the buildings, Vučić replied cynically and with apparent personal indignation, relativising the issue and creating even more confusion:

> I am proud to inform you that I was the man who made the decision to tear down the illegal shacks, where some people had been generating extra profit for themselves, in order to build Belgrade Waterfront. It was me, born as a negative, father of criminals, brother of criminals, myself a villain and a criminal, a fascist, a radical's ghost, me. And the complete idiots are those who didn't listen to me when I told them to tear it all down in broad daylight, and then called me

July 2016. https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/incidenti-na-protestu-ne-davimo-beograd_737961.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

19 "Vučić: Reči ćemo istinu o Savamali, ma koliko nam teška bila." *N1*. 29 May 2016.

20 Erceg, Tanja. "Beograd na kruhu u vodi." Portal Novosti. 4 June 2016. https://www.portalnovosti.com/beograd-na-kruhu-i-vodi/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

21 "Vučić o Savamali: Ne vidim problem dok su protesti mirni." *Blic*. 27 June 2016; Žigić, Radoslavka. "Incidenti na protestu 'Ne davimo Beograd'." *Radio Televizija Vojvodine*. 18 July 2016.

> to drive the bulldozer to tear it all down and build a city within a city and the pride of the nation. […] The authorities are trying to pin down who the complete idiots were, when in fact it was the idea of doing it at night that was idiotic.[22]

Protest Against Dictatorship

A year later, in April 2017, students launched the "Protest Against Dictatorship" via social media to express their opposition to Serbia's presidential election, which they regarded as unfair and dominated by the ruling party. The campaign period had been marked by an uneven playing field: incumbent prime minister, Alexandar Vučić, remained in office during the electoral race, while pro-government media strongly favoured him and critical outlets faced pressure and smear campaigns, contributing to a highly polarised environment. The student-led movement called the electoral process into question and demanded Vučić's resignation, new free elections, media freedom, decentralisation, and broader political and economic reforms. Although formally non-partisan, the protests attracted support from opposition groups and intellectuals. At their peak, demonstrations drew around 20,000 people in Belgrade and thousands more in other cities (Kleut & Milojević 2021).

As in previous protests, Aleksandar Vučić and his government did not engage substantively with the protestors' demands, instead largely dismissing them. While rejecting any claims that the elections were unfair, Vučić simply stated repeatedly that "Serbia is a democratic country in which anyone can be happy or unhappy with the election result and anyone who has time to spare can demonstrate as long as it is peaceful."[23] He thereby conveyed the dominant narrative portraying protestors as idle, aligning with the stability-versus-disorder frame. Yet, once again, Vučić went further, linking the opposition protests to foreign influence and, this time, also to a colour revolution:

> Today, some politicians want to introduce a new principle: if we don't like something, we will resolve it on the street. You won't resolve anything on the street […]. There are attempts to exploit young people for political purposes. […] I said earlier, before the elections, that they would attempt a "Macedonian scenario", and I was just waiting for it to happen.[24]

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22 "Vučić: Ja sam doneo odluku o rušenju u Savamali." *Danas,* 24 April 2023, https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-ja-sam-doneo-odluku-o-rusenju-u-savamali/ (accessed 11 August 2026). The issue remains unresolved.

23 "Vučić: Protesti su u redu dok su mirni." *Danas*. 4 April 2017. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-protesti-su-u-redu-dok-su-mirni/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

24 "Vučić: Upozoravao sam na makedonski scenario i čekao da dođe." *N1*. 10 April 2017, https://www.vesti.rs/Politika/Vucic-Upozoravao-sam-na-makedonski-scenario-i-cekao-da-dodje.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

By "Macedonian scenario", Vučič was referring to the regime change in Macedonia in 2016 and 2017. While scholars typically describe the Macedonian regime change as a colour revolution with a positive outcome (Markovikj and Damjanovski 2022; Esteso-Pérez 2021), Vučić framed it as a violent overthrow of the government on the streets, with the support of external actors.[25] He thereby once again emphasised the narrative of a conspiracy against him, financed by external actors and carried out by manipulated and naïve young people.

The "1 in 5 Million" Protest

In September 2018, opposition parties in Serbia formed the Alliance for Serbia (*Savez za Srbiju*), a heterogenous alliance united primarily by demands for free and fair elections opposition to Aleksandar Vučić. Protests began in December 2018 after opposition politician Borko Stefanović was assaulted in Kruševac, sparking demonstrations under the slogan "Stop bloody shirts". Though officially nonpartisan, the movement – supported by opposition groups – drew up to 15,000 people every week. Over time, demands began to focus on media freedom and fair elections.[26]

Once again, Vučić dismissed the protests, declaring he would never concede even if millions of citizens were to participate:[27] "Even if five million of you were to gather, I would never meet a single one of your demands […]. I did not do so even when they marched for four months."[28] He was referring here to previous protests held in 2016 and 2017, wrongly describing them as having lasted for four months. It was this utterance which prompted the movement's slogan, "1 in 5 million". Protests spread to over 70 municipalities but were weakened by a poorly defined strategy and internal divisions (Kralj, Sircar and Dolenec 2020). Despite attracting over 30,000 participants at its peak in Belgrade, the movement ultimately faded without achieving its goals. That being said, it nevertheless exposed widespread public dissatisfaction and pressured the government into limited dialogue, while authorities responded by launching media attacks against the protest leaders. Although the

25 Rujević, Nemanja. "Makedonski scenario u Vučićevoj režiji." *Deutsche Welle*. 5 May 2017. https://www.dw.com/sr/makedonski-scenario-u-vučićevoj-režiji/a-38698646 (accessed 11 August 2026).

26 Cvetković, Ljudmila. "Koliko ljudi broji '1 od 5 milion'." *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. 29 January 2020. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bojkot-1-od-5-miliona/30405563.html (accessed 19 September 2026).

27 Janković, Marija, and Stefan Veselinović. 2018. "Novi talas protesta: Budi li se opozicija u Srbiji." *BBC News na srpskom*. 11 December 2018. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-46508214 (accessed 11 August 2026).

28 "Vučić: Neka se skupi pet miliona, nijedan zahtev neću da ispunim." *Istinomer*. 10 December 2018. https://vesti.istinomer.rs/vesti/2018/12/10/vucic-neka-vas-se-skupi-pet-miliona-nijedan-zahtev-necu-da-ispunim/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

European Union facilitated talks, it offered little concrete support, and the protesters' demands ultimately remained unmet (Pollozhani & Bieber 2025).

However, this time, Aleksandar Vučić's position showed a marked change compared to previous protests. The superior, relaxed, and somewhat cynical attitude that he had previously adopted to emphasise citizens' democratic rights to demonstrate and express their political dissatisfaction had vanished. His message – that the number of demonstrators would not impress him – and the tone in which he delivered it revealed that he perceived the protests as a threat, particularly since opposition parties were actively involved and had created the above-mentioned alliance prior to the start of the protest. To discredit the opposition parties participating in the protest, while emphasising his openness to criticism from ordinary citizens, he claimed that the protest was political, not civil. This was obviously another attempt to create confusion, given that civil protests are also political. In using the word "political", he was referring to the opposition parties involved:

> The protests are political, but they have the right to protest. As long as it's peaceful, there will be no police at the protests. I am prepared to observe and find out what these people are dissatisfied with […]. There are many decent people among them, between the ages of 48 and 60, who deserve attention, and should not be lumped together with petty criminals or drug dealers, like Nikola Sandulović, or with the thieves Đilas, Jeremić, and Obradović [opposition party leaders, I.R.], who can no longer plunder the country, or with the interest groups that are affected by the introduction of order in the country. […] Citizens who are dissatisfied and protesting deserve a rational approach and attitude, for us to look at what we did wrong and what we might do next.[29]

As the protests intensified over the months, Vučić's strategy increasingly focused on exclusively and repeatedly attacking opposition leaders, openly portraying them as violent liars, imbeciles, and fascists:

> I will never yield to the fascist leader Boško Obradović or to Đilas and Jeremić, the tycoons and thieves who have crippled our Serbia. […] There are about 450 or 500 of them here, no more than that, they are not the violent ones; Boško Obradović, Đilas, and Jeremić are the violent ones, a gang of thieves and fascists who have decided to destroy the country. […] We want to build a modern and decent Serbia, and that is why we will never agree to any compromises with thugs, with those who would destroy the country. I am here, and will always be everywhere to oppose violence, fascism, and thievery.[30]

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29 "Održan protest "1 od 5 miliona"; Vučić: Protesti su politički, građani zavređuju pažnju." *Radio Televizija Vojvodine*. 29 December 2018. https://www.vesti.rs/Sport/Odrzan-protest-1-od-5-miliona-Vucic-Protesti-su-politicki-gradjani-zavredjuju-paznju.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

30 "Vučić: Građani, ja sam na svom radnom mestu, nikuda neću pobeći." *Blic*. 17 March 2019. https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-gradjani-ja-sam-na-svom-radnom-mestu-nikuda-necu-pobeci/zny8tj6. Cf. "Vučić o pismu organizatora protesta: Toliko je glupo da nemam reči." *Danas*. 12 January 2019.

At a party convention a month later Vučić was even more overtly aggressive: "I'm telling them now: 'Come on, try to block us, and you'll see, you fascist gang!' […] [W]e will go to every town and village where the supporters of the fascist (Boško) Obradović and the tycoon (Dragan) Đilas are blocking us, and we will liberate every single one of those places."[31]

Only when these protests too began to dwindle did President Vučić once again adopt a more defiant stance, trying to convey that he was unconcerned about dissent, although he continued to mock the protest organisers, calling on them to participate in elections.[32] As such, during these protests, the external interference frame was less prominent, while the use of the national unity frame indicates a shift in narrative. It was conveyed primarily by discrediting the protestors, particularly the opposition parties coorganising the protests, which were branded as morally questionable and antipatriotic.

The Environmental Protests, 2021–2022 and 2024

Driven by environmental concerns, a new wave of protests emerged in Serbia in late 2021. Suspicions of regime corruption and concerns about the government's lack of transparency were also integral to the protests. The protests were triggered by the regime's agreement with Rio Tinto, a multinational mining company, to develop a lithium mine in the Jadar region of northwestern Serbia, based on deposits of the newly identified mineral jadarite discovered there in 2004. Critics have argued that the proposed changes to expropriation and referendum laws were designed to benefit the company and could cause serious environmental damage (Djukanović 2025).

Protests started in Belgrade and quickly spread to western Serbia, the region most affected by the project. The protests also included road blockades involving up to 30,000 people, further increasing pressure on the government and coinciding with a decline in President Vučić's popularity and democratic legitimacy, partly as a result of the growing personalisation of his rule and his handling of the protests related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Burazer 2022). In December 2021, the government withdrew Rio Tinto's mining plans and the related legal amendments, which the protestors saw as a major victory. However, the issue resurfaced in 2024, when the government

https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-o-pismu-organizatora-protesta-toliko-je-glupo-da-nemam-reci/ (both accessed 11 August 2026).

31 "Vučić za opoziciju kaže da je 'banda fašistička'." *Al Jazeera*. 17 April 2019. https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2019/4/17/vucic-za-opoziciju-kaze-da-je-banda-fasisticka (accessed 11 August 2026).

32 "Vučić: Spreman sam da idemo na izboru u svakom trenutuku." *Danas*. 25 December 2018. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-spreman-sam-da-saslusam-nezadovoljne-gradjane/ (accessed 19 September 2026).

announced that it would reconsider its decision to abandon lithium mining. The regime-controlled Constitutional Court of Serbia ruled in July 2024 that the government's 2022 decision to suspend mining was unconstitutional, while at the Serbian Critical Raw Materials Summit later that month, German chancellor Olaf Scholz urged renewed cooperation on lithium mining.[33] This reopened the project and sparked new protests.

This protest movement unfolded in several stages, as did the shifts in the regime's narrative. Initially, the regime depicted the protesters not as environmentally concerned citizens, but as political activists who were against the president and the SNS and wanted to use violent protest to topple the government:

> Despite the environmental protests being politicised, they show how much Serbia has progressed. […] I don't know what it's all about, but I can see that protesting has become fashionable. Still, all these environmental protests reflect positively on Serbia. Five, six, seven, eight years ago, even just three or four years ago, nobody was thinking about the environment – people were just trying to survive. This indicates a higher standard of living and a change in priorities.[34]

However, from the outset, Vučić also claimed external interference, insinuating that previous environmental protests, including those against the construction of small hydropower plants, had likewise been organised from abroad and were contrary to Serbia's interests:

> The government should show what it is doing […] to tap into clean energy sources as much as possible. It's interesting however that there are 24,000 small hydropower plants in Europe, but only 90 in Serbia. And yet in Europe, they're funding campaigns against small hydropower plants – so why don't you shut them down in Europe, too?[35]

As the protests against lithium mining gained momentum and spread to rural areas towards the end of 2021, leading to road blockades in both larger cities and the countryside, Vučić changed his narrative, now claiming that nothing would be undertaken without the citizens' approval.[36] Consequently, the regime decided to

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33 Cvetković, Ljudmila. "Šolc u Beogradu poručio da je litijum važan kao nafta nekada." *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. 19 July 2024. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-samit-litijum-jadar-vucic-scholz/33042653.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

34 "'Ekološki protesti govore koliko smo napredovali.' Vučić: ranije niko nije razmišljao o ekologiji već kako će da preživi, ovo pokazuje veći standard." *Blic*. 17 April 2021. https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/ekoloski-protesti-govore-koliko-smo-napredovali-vucic-ranije-niko-nije-razmisljao-o/1d8fh4g (accessed 11 August 2026).

35 "'Ekološki protesti govore koliko smo napredovali'."

36 "Srbija, ekologija i Rio Tinto: 'Stavili smo tačku na Rio Tinto' - kaže premijerka Ana Brnabić, šta piše u obimnoj dokumentaciji." *BBC News na srpskom*. 20 January 2022. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-60072036 (accessed 11 August 2026).

withdraw from the mining project. They framed this decision as a response to citizens' needs, while emphasising that it did not constitute a victory for the politically motivated protests led by the opposition: "This is not a victory for the streets, but a step towards engaging with the public. With this, we have shown that caring for people is our top priority."[37]

Only after the lithium issue and protests against it were back on the agenda two years later did Aleksandar Vučić go back to framing protestors as a violent minority that terrorised the majority and was driven by external forces. He added that "Russian security services have warned me that mass unrest is being planned in Serbia, with the ultimate aim of staging a coup and overthrowing the country's leadership. This is part of a hybrid approach and an attempt to carry out so-called colour revolutions in various ways."[38] He accused both "the West" and other countries in the region of supporting the protests: "Do you think I'm so stupid that I don't see how loud the West's silence is? Countries that ought to be rejoicing at the idea of us opening the mine? Instead, some thought they could kill two birds with one stone – bring Vučić to his knees and leave us to decide what to do with the jadarite."[39]

Once again the dominant narrative shifted: from discrediting the protestors by labelling them as morally questionable and unpatriotic, led by corrupt opposition leaders who politicised every issue, to portraying them as a force seeking to destabilise the country, backed by foreign (external) actors and paving the way for a colour revolution. At the same time, by alleging external interference, the narrative also shifted the focus from a local issue to geopolitical suspicion, thereby reinforcing the security threat frame.

Protest Against Violence

In May 2023, between the two waves of anti-regime protests against lithium mining, Serbia was shaken by two mass shootings, including one at an elementary school in central Belgrade. These tragedies shifted public attention to the problem of violence

37 "Srbija, politika i protesti: Vlada Srbije povukla Zakon o eksproprijaciji, Vučić: 'Sumanuto kratki rokovi'." *BBC News na srpskom.* 8 December 2021. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-59582104 (accessed 11 August 2026).

38 Bogdanović, Nevena, and Iva Gajić. "Posle ekoloških protesta u Srbiji vlast odgovara hapšenjima i optužbama protiv Zapada." *Radio Slobodna Evropa.* 12 August 2024. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/protest-litijum-srbija-vlast-hapsenja/33076035.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

39 Bogdanović and Gajić. "Posle ekoloških protesta." 12 August 2024.

in Serbian society. On 3 May, a 13-year-old boy killed ten people and injured six in the region's first mass school shooting perpetrated by a child. A day later, a second shooting in a Belgrade suburb left nine dead and 13 injured. Public mourning quickly turned into protest. Rather than being seen as isolated incidents, the events were widely interpreted as symptoms of the prevailing political tension, polarisation, and authoritarianism. Within days, the "Serbia Against Violence" movement had emerged, demanding political accountability – not for the shootings themselves, but for the broader culture of violence they were seen to reflect, particularly in the media and political discourse. Although these protests, too, were orchestrated by opposition parties, their leaders refrained from speaking at rallies. That being said, they did articulate demands, including greater public debate, the resignation of senior officials, the immediate dismissal of all members of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), and an end to the promotion of violence.[40]

Vučić's initial reaction to the emerging protests saw him revert to his well-rehearsed narrative of portraying the protestors as opposition activists, declaring that it was impossible for two such tragedies to occur on consecutive days and for protests to be organised as early as one day later. He claimed that the protesters were "misusing the feelings of the people in the most brutal way", instrumentalising the tragic events for political gain in an attempt to overthrow him: "All proposals came down to pure party politics. Not a single thought was given to our children's future. I had expected a bit of seriousness and responsibility."[41]

Vučić neglected to mention that the protest consisted largely of citizens with no political affiliation. It did not take long for him to once again frame the protest as an attempt at a colour revolution: "I am receiving reports from various agencies, while our sister agencies in the East are telling us that these are attempts to carry out a two-pronged revolution."[42]

Using almost the same wording and invoking the same sources, notably Russia, as he had during the second phase of the environmental protests, President Vučić once again dismissed the protesters' genuine grief and concerns, instead portraying

40 "Završen protest 'Srbija protiv nasilja', sledeći 19. maja." *Autonomija*. 12 May 2023. https://autonomija.info/poceo-novi-protest-srbija-protiv-nasilja-najavljena-blokada-mosta-gazela/ (accessed 19 September 2026).

41 Rujević, Nemanja. "Protest na ulici, Vučić na TV-u: zloupotreba tragedija?" *Deutsche Welle*. 9 May 2023. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-protesti-srbija/32402153.html. Also: "Vučić kritikovao protest protiv nasilja u Beogradu." *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. 8 May 2023. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-protesti-srbija/32402153.html (both accessed 11 August 2026).

42 "Vučić: Dobio sam informacije da su protesti u Beogradu 'pokušaj obojenih revolucija'." *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. 19 May 2023. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-necete-dobiti-nezavisno-kosovo/32419426.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

the protests as politically motivated and aimed at ousting him personally. Later, as the protests gained momentum, he also claimed to have proof that "some German foundations are transferring money for the protests".[43] The aim of this well-rehearsed frame was to depict the protestors as morally shameless people opportunistically taking advantage of tragic circumstances in order, with foreign backing, to illegally overthrow the government and to destabilise the country. Vučić never provided any evidence to support this claim. Eventually, more than two years later in an interview with the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, he was asked directly why he had not made public the alleged evidence that German political foundations had financed protests against him. He replied that he had such evidence in his possession but would not disclose it as doing so would damage Serbian–German relations. When it was suggested that his claim implied that German foundations were paying people in Serbia to protest against him, Vučić denied this, arguing instead that these foundations finance organisations that stage protests.[44] This episode, once again, exemplifies the broader pattern of disinformation: serious allegations are publicly advanced, then relativised when challenged, while the purported evidence remains withheld in the name of "higher interests".

Aleksandar Vučič's narratives about the protests during the period between 2016 and 2024 evolved in line with how threatening he perceived the protests to be. In the early phase (2016–2017), he largely downplayed and minimised, even ridiculed, the protests, labelling them as small, unimportant, and not worthy of any serious political attention. As demonstrations became more frequent and better organised (2018–2020), his narrative shifted toward delegitimisation, portraying protesters as violent, politically motivated, and driven by corrupt and opportunistic opposition elites, rather than by genuine civic concerns and a legitimate expression of civic engagement and public interest. By 2023, the narrative had escalated further, incorporating conspiratorial and moral framings. Protesters were accused of exploiting national tragedies, operating on behalf of foreign actors, and attempting to destabilise the country by organising a colour revolution backed by the West. By 2024, especially during the second phase of the environmental protests, the discourse had hardened into full-scale securitisation. Protestors were depicted as direct threats to public order, national interests, and the stability of the state, claims that were frequently used to justify stronger control and repression. Overall, the trajectory

43 Bednar, Bojan. "Nemci daju novac za proteste." *FoNet*. 2 July 2023. https://www.fonet.rs/politika/36329470/nemci-daju-novac-za-proteste.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

44 Martens, Michael. "Serbischer Präsident Vučić: 'Das habe ich nie gesagt'." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. 27 September 2025. https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/serbischer-praesident-aleksandar-vu-i-das-habe-ich-nie-gesagt-accg-110704424.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

moved from ignoring or ridiculing protests, to discrediting them and portraying them as conspiratorial, financed from abroad and, lastly, as a threat to the state.

Narratives About the Student-Led Protests Since Late 2024

Having identified the different frames and narrative shifts through which Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has addressed protests in the country over the past decade, I now turn to the narratives he has employed in response to the current student-led protests, focusing in particular on his attempts to delegitimising the movement. From the outset, the students have presented themselves as agents of democratic renewal, voicing frustration with the status quo and emphasising the need for systemic change. Yet, at first glance, their approach appeared neither revolutionary nor subversive. However, their very concrete, achievable, and measurable demands quickly proved to be a powerful force for mobilising broader segments of society and ultimately challenged the regime in an unprecedented manner, particularly its narratives about political opponents. Vučić has remained the dominant figure and of his almost daily statements about the student protestors in the media, particularly on his Instagram account, I selected those that are most representative of his narrative approach.

At the beginning of the current protests, in November 2024, when they were still conducted by the citizens and opposition parties, the regime used its well-rehearsed narrative of accusing the participants of instrumentalising the Novi Sad railway station tragedy in order to seize power and destabilise the country.[45] By early December, it had become clear that students would take over the lead, prompting Vučić to abruptly shift his rhetoric toward one emphasising tolerance:

> I'm calling on these young women and men who are fighting over the money that is aimed at my downfall, some of which has come from outside the country, some from within, all with the aim of bringing me down – don't fight over this, kids. Come to work for your country, we will make sure that you earn more money, honestly, in an honest way, and that you help your country. Don't be brawling and beating each other up, grabbing each other by the throat because someone wants you to bring down your country. Come to us, we'll help you. You'll get a clean job, a good job, a serious job – the kind of thing you're fighting for now. Tomorrow, the Expo flag

45 "Vučić u Novom Sadu: Država je preduzela sve mere, odgovorni za tragediju biće kažnjeni." *Radio Televizija Vojvodine*. 5 November 2024. https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/vojvodina/novi-sad/vucic-u-novom-sadu-drzava-je-preduzela-sve-mere-odgovorni-za-tragediju-bice-kaznjeni_1582033.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

> arrives in Belgrade, so you can work with us, so everyone is proud of what you're doing, so you can earn and provide more for yourselves and your families.[46]

The narrative portraying the students as naïve, inexperienced, and manipulated victims of foreign influence was not intended to delegitimise them outright, but rather to infantilise and thereby minimise them and their movement. In doing so Vučić simultaneously presented himself as a paternalistic figure who would resolve all the students' problems – as long as they cooperated. Yet, just two weeks later, although seemingly still speaking of the students with respect, Vučić subtly introduced references to the period between 2000 and 2012, claiming that they were forfeiting unprecedented opportunities: "I respond with love and respect for these young people. For 12 years now I have been doing my best to create the conditions for them to stay here. Before that for 12 years they had no prospects at all. Now they do."[47] He continued: "They are our children and we will do everything we can to help them."[48]

The first months of the protests were also marked by a series of statements in which President Vučić attacked and sought to discredit the students. However, these were also crafted to portray him as the benevolent, if strict, paternalistic figure, clearly demonstrating his efforts to maintain the narrative that the students were respected, yet also being manipulated and thus in need of protection and guidance. However, this narrative gradually shifted as the mobilisation and mass protests continued to grow and spread across Serbia, making it increasingly obvious that the regime's usual strategy of simply waiting out the protests was not yielding results. The regime therefore changed its strategy, instead framing the student-led protests as a threat to national stability. While continuing to urge the students to declare victory, on the grounds that they had allegedly achieved all their goals, Vučić began to introduce well-rehearsed references to a planned colour revolution, aimed at overthrowing him, destroying Serbia and its economic power, and depriving the country of Kosovo and Vojvodina, where the tragedy had occurred.[49]

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46 Aleksandar Vučić on Instagram. 5 December 2024. https://www.instagram.com/p/DDNHed8Oqy3/?utm_source=ig_embed&utm_campaign=embed_video_watch_again (accessed 11 August 2026).

47 "Vučić o studentima: Huškaju ih profesori, pre 12 godina nisu imali nikakvu šansu." *021*. 21 December 2024. https://www.021.rs/info/srbija/396604/vucic-o-studentima-huskaju-ih-profesori-pre-12-godina-nisu-imali-nikakvu-sansu (accessed 11 August 2026).

48 "Vučić: Studenti mogu da rade šta hoće – ispunjeni svi zahtevi, iza protesta politika." *Radio Televizija Srbije*. 31 December 2024. https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/5616917/aleksandar-vucic-studenti.html (accessed 11 August 2026).

49 "Vučić i Sremskoj Mitrovici: Poruka pomirenja đacima i studentima, pričao i o Vojvodini, novoj vladi, Trampu, obojenoj revoluciji." *Blic*. 15 Feburary 2025. https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/miting-sremska-mitrovica-vucic-poslao-poruku-djacima-i-studentima/9gvfkrv (accessed 11 August 2026).

This narrative shift towards depicting the students as violent actors was completed in March, during preparations for a protest in Belgrade that, on 15 March, attracted at least 300,000 people. It was the largest street mobilisation in Serbia since October 2000, when the Milošević regime was overthrown. By implying that the organisers were planning a violent demonstration and that the state would therefore be forced to react, Vučić consolidated his narrative of the students as aggressive actors who prevented ordinary people from going about their daily lives, created chaos, and destabilised the country: "Then they will realise that it is over […]. They will know they have nothing left […], and will resort to violence. At that point, many of those who have committed criminal acts will end up in jail, while others will realise that the politicians who convinced them they could achieve something through violence had been lying."[50]

Such statements were embedded in yet another familiar frame: that of an external threat and a colour revolution supposedly being organised and financed from abroad and carried out through the students, as President Vučić emphasised at a party convention at the end of February: "And now let me tell you – their colour revolution has failed. Tell them at USAID [US Agency for International Development], NED [National Endowment for Democracy], and EED [European Endowment for Democracy]. Let everyone, everywhere know that it's over. Serbia has won, and you will never defeat Serbia."[51] Earlier that same month, Vučić had announced that he planned to write a book entitled *How I defeated the colour revolution in Serbia*, to be published before 28 June, or St. Vitus Day, a politically symbolic Serbian national holiday. He claimed that his experience in "cracking down on protests" would serve as a model for other countries facing similar challenges from externally organised colour revolutions.[52]

By this point, the regime had already begun imposing increasingly repressive measures, including physical attacks on students and protesters by pro-government groups. These culminated at the 15 March rally in Belgrade, when masked men attacked demonstrators and, according to protesters and human rights groups, the regime allegedly deployed a sonic weapon during the 15-minute "Serbia, stand still" silence. This caused a mass panic and brief stampede, with many participants

50 "Vučić: Pokušaće 15. marta nešto nasiljem, tada ćemo svirati kraj." *NIN*. 8 March 2025. https://www.nin.rs/politika/vesti/70697/vucic-pokusace-15-marta-nesto-nasiljem-tada-cemo-svirati-kraj (accessed 11 August 2026).

51 Stojanović, Marija. "Kad je teško – 'obojena revolucija'." *Danas*. 21 February 2025. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ruski-hibridni-rat-i-zapadna-obojena-revolucija-u-srbiji/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

52 "Vučić se sprema da napiše knjigu do Vidovdana: Kako sam pobedio obojenu revoluciju u Srbiji." *Danas*. 8 February 2025. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-obojena-revolucija-2/ (accessed 19 September 2026).

subsequently reporting symptoms such as headaches, nausea, and tinnitus.[53] The Serbian authorities, Interior Minister Ivica Dačić and President Vučić, denied deploying such a weapon, reiterating even a year later that the claim was a fabricated lie, despite acknowledging that the police possessed long-range acoustic devices.[54]

In May 2025 then, the protesters abandoned all their previous demands in favour of a single one: the immediate holding of parliamentary elections.[55] Their conflict with the regime escalated once again. Yet, the protests continued, even through the summer, which is typically a critical period for sustaining social movements, while the regime unsuccessfully sought to discredit the students and even used force.[56] When the protestors announced that they would support an electoral list – which they declined to disclose until elections were announced in September 2026 – in the very election they had demanded, Vučić abandoned all restraint and began repeatedly portraying the students as political opponents. He compared them with fascists, Nazis, and terrorists.[57] Remarkably, just a few days later, the president called for a dialogue with representatives of the student-led protest, turning away from his apparently short-lived radicalised approach.[58] Similarly, a few months later, he used his public address commemorating the first anniversary of the Novi Sad tragedy to, once again, call for a dialogue with the students. In a long speech, he first accused the students of having, "in an unprecedented rage, slandered, broken rules, committed

53 Vasović, Aleksandar. "Protesters Flood Belgrade in One of the Biggest Anti-government Rallies." *Reuters*. 15 March 2025 https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/huge-crowds-join-anti-government-rally-belgrade-after-sporadic-violence-2025-03-15/ (accessed 17 August 2026); "Serbia – Amnesty International Submission for the European Union Enlargement Package 2025." Amnesty International. 16 May 2025. https://www.amnesty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Serbia-AI-Submission-to-Enlargement-Package-May-2025.pdf (accessed 17 August 2026).

54 Rujević, Nemanja. 2026. "'Zvučni top' po drugi put u Srbiji." *Deutsche Welle*. 24 June 2026. https://www.dw.com/sr/zvučni-top-po-drugi-put-u-srbiji/a-77686398 (accessed 17 August 2026).

55 "Studenti traže izbore – šta kaže vlast, a šta opozicija." *BBC News na srpskom*. 6 May 2025. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/articles/c4g9l1d4z23o/lat (accessed 11 August 2026).

56 "Vidovdanski protest: Hapšenja i dan posle nemira, blokade u Beogradu, Novom Sadu, Nišu i drugim gradovima." *BBC News na srpskom*. 29 June 2025. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/articles/cx2n5009x1wo/lat (accessed 19 September 2026).

57 "Vučić o neredima posle protesta: Zahtevam od tužilaštava da rade svoj posao, biće još hapšenja." *NIN*. 29 June 2025. https://www.nin.rs/politika/vesti/81869/vucic-o-neredima-posle-protesta-zahtevam-od-tuzilastava-da-rade-svoj-posao (accessed 11 August 2026). "Vučić najavio zatišje pa akciju države, ponovo uporedio učesnike protesta sa fašistima i teroristima." *N1*. 17 August 2025. https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucicevo-obracanje-1782025/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

58 Ognjanovič, Tamara. "Vučićev put od 'nema pregovora sa teroristima' do poziva na dijalog: Zainteresovanih, izgleda, nema." *N1*. 22 August 2025. https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucicev-put-od-nema-pregovora-sa-teroristima-do-poziva-na-dijalog-zainteresovanih-izgleda-nema/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

violence against others and their property, and attempted to destroy the fabric of our society and the core values that connect us as a people", then adding that he, too, had "said some things at some moments" that he "regret[s] having said […] about the students, as well as about the protesters and other people with whom I had disagreed. I am sorry for that."[59]

However, this expression of regret, like the shift back to a more moderate tone, remained merely declarative. During the months that followed, and particularly during the tense local election campaign in nine municipalities and one city in March 2026, when student-led coalitions entered their own candidates for the first time, Vučić reprised his portrayal of the students as extremists and fundamentalists:

> In Pashto the word "talib" means "pupil", "student". The Taliban, you should know, are students. And they said – we, the students from the *madrasa*, want a different life, we want Sharia law. And you have seen what they have achieved in their country. […] In Cambodia, in Southeast Asia, there was Pol Pot's regime, and he used children because children were always the purest. The largest camps and the most heinous crimes were organised there, because they felt they had the right to do whatever they wanted.[60]

Evidently, President Vučić's narrative frames about the student-led protests between 2024 and 2026 have evolved in response to the movement's scale, persistence, and pursuit of legitimacy. His aim has always been to delegitimise and contain the movement, but he has repeatedly adapted the rhetoric tools used to achieve this. Initially, he infantilised the students, portraying them as naïve and inexperienced children who simply needed to be persuaded to abandon the protests through paternalistic promises of a better life under the wing of his regime. As the protesters continued to demand accountability and systemic change, his rhetoric shifted towards more adversarial portrayals. He increasingly framed the students as destabilising actors engaged in a broader anti-state project, invoking the classic stability-versus-disorder and legality frames. Vučić depicted the protests as violent, anarchic, or even as an attempted coup, attributing them to foreign influence and external orchestration. Importantly, this escalation also sought to turn public opinion against the movement, by portraying the students as obstructing not only everyday life but also Serbia's economic development. Since 2025, as the protests have gained broader public support, his narrative has hardened further, increasingly being focused on repression and criminalisation. Students and universities have been presented as

59 "Šta je Vučić rekao, a šta je prećutao u obraćanju povodom godišnjice pada nadstrešnice." *Nedeljnik*. 31 October 2025. https://www.nedeljnik.rs/sta-je-vucic-rekao-a-sta-precutao-u-obracanju-povodom-godisnjice-pada-nadstresnice/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

60 "Vučić nastavio kampanju: Taliban znači student, režim Pola Pota angažovao decu." *N1*. 13 March 2026. https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-nastavio-kampanju-taliban-znaci-student-rezim-pola-pota-angazovao-decu/ (accessed 11 August 2026).

threats to social order, thereby legitimising crackdowns, arrests, and pressure on academia. These measures have been framed as necessary to preserve stability. The protesters' demands for transparency and justice have continued to be dismissed. Overall, these changing narratives reflect a strategic adaptation to the remarkable persistence of the protests, from minimisation to delegitimisation and, ultimately, criminalisation. This time, Aleksandar Vučić is confronted with the apparent need not merely to respond to the dissent, but to redefine its meaning – to recast what is in fact a grassroots, anti-corruption student movement as an alleged foreign-backed existential threat to the state.

Conclusion

Over the past decade of protests in Serbia, the regime's narratives and framing strategies have adapted to the changing forms of dissent. Between 2016 and 2024, protests were primarily framed as extensions of the political opposition: partisan, electorally defeated actors attempting to regain influence through street mobilisation. By portraying protests as a continuation of political competition rather than expressions of broader social grievances, the regime delegitimised them with the help of stability-versus-disorder and national unity frames. Protesters were depicted as actors within the political system, but as losers in electoral competition. From 2018 onwards, and particularly during the 2018–2019 protests, the environmental protests of 2021–2022 and 2024, and the protests against violence in 2023, this framing was increasingly replaced by the foreign interference frame, portraying dissent as part of an orchestrated colour revolution.

All these strategies, despite their increasingly sharpened rhetoric, have proved less effective during the current student-led protests. The protesters deliberately and explicitly rejected any party affiliation, leadership structures, and ideological positioning. They have framed their demands in procedural and moral terms – such as accountability, transparency, and institutional responsibility – rather than around partisan political goals that risk being reproached. The students have thus challenged the regime's ability to portray them as conventional political opponents. The absence of clearly named leaders and party ties has deprived the regime of its usual targets of attack. In response, it has been forced to significantly shift its narrative.

The students were initially portrayed as naïve, manipulated, and lacking a coherent agenda. The movement's horizontality and lack of formal leadership were depicted as evidence of its insignificance and lack of professionalism. At the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, the rhetoric of minimisation on the one hand, and securitisation on the other, became more prominent. The scale and legitimacy of the protests were downplayed, while their disruptive potential was amplified to

frame them as sources of instability and chaos. Alongside accusations of foreign influence and of attempts to stage a colour revolution, the dominant narrative increasingly portrayed the movement not only as socially disruptive, but as fundamentally illegitimate.

A deeper shift has thus occurred in how the regime discursively manages dissent. Earlier protests were delegitimised by incorporating them into the partisan political conflict: opposition parties were treated as conventional competitors, while snap elections were used to reaffirm the regime's dominance. By contrast, this time the regime has sought to delegitimise the student protests precisely because they seek to operate *outside* traditional party politics, even as they demanded elections that the regime itself eventually called more than 15 months later, in September 2026. The regime's response thus reflects an inversion: whereas protesters were previously portrayed as political actors with questionable motives, they are now frequently depicted as actors who do not qualify as legitimate participants in politics anyway.

This shift underscores a broader tension. Protests that position themselves beyond party politics and focus on a more universal civic legitimacy have proven harder to categorise and delegitimise. The shifting narratives have thus revealed less about the protesters themselves, shrewd as their approach has been. Instead, they have revealed much about the regime's constraints. As the form of dissent changes, so too does the strategy of those in power attempting to contain it.

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