ANALYSIS

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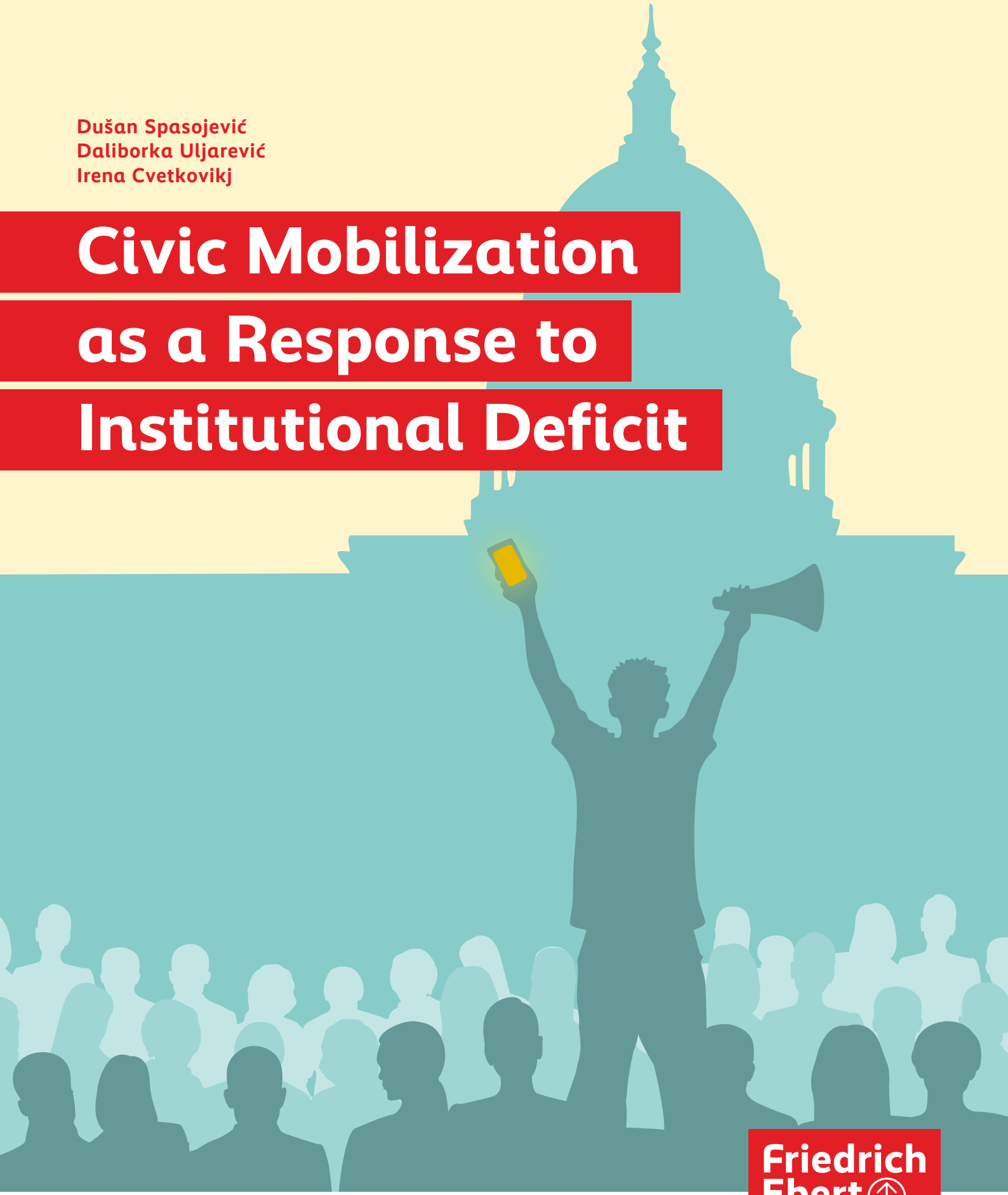
Civic Mobilization as a Response to Institutional Deficit



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Content

INTRODUCTION

Across the Western Balkans, the last decade has seen an intensification in democratic backsliding, a rise in competitive authoritarian regimes, and increased instrumentalization of nationalism and religion in public life.

While the formal frameworks for EU integration remain in place, the spirit of democratic reform is increasingly under strain. Institutions are often captured, public discourse is deeply polarized, and civic engagement is frequently met with repression, marginalization, or co-optation. Within this fragile democratic landscape, youth movements in Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro have emerged as some of the most resilient and imaginative responses to systemic erosion.

This analysis focuses on three emblematic waves of student and youth-led mobilization - Serbia's civic uprising for accountability, North Macedonia's renewed student plenums, and Montenegro's "Kamo śutra?" movement - as critical expressions of generational resistance and societal dissatisfaction. Despite differing local triggers and political configurations, all three movements articulate a shared rejection of apathy, authoritarian drift, and served manipulation. They assert a demand for dignity and a future anchored in democratic values.

Each of these cases exemplifies the role of youth not merely as passive recipients of democratic deficits but as active protagonists in the ongoing struggle to reclaim the public sphere and reshape civic life.

This comparative analysis aims to illuminate the shared structural conditions that give rise to youth resistance in the region - shrinking civic space, weakened democratic institutions, and the instrumentalization of identity politics - while also recognizing the distinct local dynamics and political consequences of each movement. It further explores how performative protest, digital mobilization, and non-hierarchical organization have contributed to shaping a new protest grammar across the Western Balkans.

Ultimately, this study argues that youth are not merely symbols of tomorrow but agents of democratic defence today. Their movements offer both critique and vision: disrupting authoritarian routines while constructing alternative imaginaries of citizenship, participation, and public accountability. As such, they are indispensable to understanding both the risks and the possibilities for democratization in the region.

STUDENT PROTESTS IN SERBIA - THE FALL, THE RISE AND ATTRITION

The fall of the canopy of the freshly renovated railway station on 1 November 2024 in Novi Sad sparked the most significant protest wave in Serbian history. The protest exceeded the largest of the anti-Milošević protests, including the day of his downfall - 5 October 2000. This protest wave has lasted longer than the glorious "winter of discontent", the three-month protests across Sebia caused by electoral fraud in 1996 and 1997. Nine months after the beginning of the protests, it is still unclear what the outcome might be.

The fast rail connection between Belgrade and Novi Sad was established in 2022. It immediately became the symbol of development and government success and changed the dynamic between the two largest cities in Serbia. Although there were many unfinished elements, including the new main train station in Belgrade (construction began in 1977), people felt safe and used the railway in large numbers. However, the collapse of the canopy changed everything in a split second. The initial public reaction was shock and mourning for the 14 dead and injured. However, when government representatives, including President Aleksandar Vučić, began to spin and reduce the potential accountability by saying that the canopy had not been reconstructed, rage and disaffection swiftly followed.

Political and Social Context

Since 2012, Serbian politics has been dominated by Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Since the 2014 elections SNS has held the predominant position in the party system (winning almost half of the votes ever since) and from the 2017 presidential elections onwards the party has held all major political positions in the country. SNS rules in a stable coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia (10% of the vote on average) and minority parties. On the other hand, opposition parties are divided based on ideological foundations (between pro- and anti-EU camps) and atomized, with constant failed attempts to form functional, long-lasting coalitions. The lack of trustworthy leaders or parties among the opposition prevents them from successfully challenging the regime.

SNS rule is also characterized by a significant erosion in democratic standards (Freedom House, 2020) and Serbia is often characterized as a hybrid regime or a competitive authoritarian regime (Levitsky and Way, 2020), with national elections which are not fully free and fair. This assessment was confirmed by local (Crta, 2023) and e international observers (ODHIR, 2024). An important part of the regime's strength is the international legitimacy and support it receives from western actors, including the EU, often in return for cooperative positions during international crises (e.g., during the migrant crises of 2015 and 2016) and regarding regional affairs (Bieber, 2019).

Due to the capture of the institutional dimensions of politics by SNS, opposition actors are often focused on non-institutional politics, including frequent protests. This tactic is also part of a wider regional trend (Pudar Draško, Fiket and Vasiljević, 2019). Some of these protest waves led to the formation of new parties (Spasojević, 2019) but often failed to capture and transform significant support from the street into an institution due to strong anti-political and anti-party sentiments. Several recent protest waves have represented the most significant challenges to Vučić's rule, including 'One Out of 5 Million' (2019-2020), the 'Rio Tinto Protest' (2021) and 'Serbia Against Violence' (2023). However, none of them managed to sustain pressure for a lasting period or to damage the regime in terms of electoral support. On the other side, the government developed specific tactics of attrition against the protests – as most of them could not transform support into votes - the government simply waited for them to wear out without using open and massive repression (Spasojević and Lončar, 2023).

Therefore, the Novi Sad tragedy and its political consequences should not be viewed in isolation. Exactly 18 months earlier, Serbia was shocked by two mass shootings with 19 casualties (10 in "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School in Belgrade and 9 in a rural area near the town of Mladenovac). An outraged public demanded investigations and responsibility; however, despite hundreds of thousands protesting for months on the streets (*Serbia Against Violence* movement), nothing happened. A Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry was established and cancelled, reinforcing the conviction that no one close to the ruling party can be held legally responsible and politically accountable.

The Beginning of the Protest – the Rise of the People

The first large-scale protest after the fall of the canopy was organized immediately after a five-day mourning in Novi Sad. It began in front of the railway station with a large turnout and ended in violent clashes with the police in front of Novi Sad city council. Violence was both grassroots and instigated by regime provocateurs, with several arrested. As the next rally in Belgrade gathered fewer people, it was obvious that these classic forms of protest would not work this time, likely due to fresh memories of how the Serbia Against the Violence movement was worn down without achieving any outcome.

The next attempt came from opposition parties in Novi Sad, who proposed holding 14 minutes of silence, one minute for each casualty of the tragedy; this mourning was held in public spaces, often as street and crossroads blockades. This form of protest spread across the country and involved high school pupils and students as well. It was perceived as well-crafted and in line with the spirit of the circumstances, although there were voices demanding more concrete actions. During one of these events, on 22 November, students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) were attacked by members of the local branch of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). The incident was recorded and documented, but there was no corresponding action from the police and prosecution, which triggered a blockade of the FDU building

and the formulation of four initial demands: the publication of the entire documentation on the reconstruction of the Railway Station; the dismissal of charges against arrested and detained students activists and citizens after the Novi Sad protests; the filing of criminal charges against all assailants of students, professors and citizens; an increase in state funding for universities of 20 percent.

Students from other faculties and universities initiated similar actions in support and solidarity, and blockades soon spread across all state universities in Serbia. By December and January, almost no faculties remained operational. Organized through plenums (a form of direct democracy), students made collective decisions on blockades and adopted the initial demands of the FDU students as their own. After the New Year and Christmas holidays, protests spread to non-university towns and high schools, which were under different forms of strikes and blockades for most of February and March. These strikes and blockades were organized by professors and pupils as a sign of support to the students' demands. Students were, among others, supported by a number of social groups, including farmers, lawyers (who were on strike for 30 days), artists and war veterans.

During this period, several violent incidents were reported - mostly related to in memoriam minutes of silence and committed by those opposing with the action and blockades. In some cases, drivers tried to break the blockade, causing substantial injuries and later prompting the presence of traffic police. However, the incidents were not limited to street blockades. The most notorious occurred during the night of 28 January in Novi Sad when several members of SNS attacked students with baseball bats and caused serious injuries. The attack led to the resignation of Prime Minister Milos Vučević and the Mayor of Novi Sad, Milan Đurić, who claimed ultimate responsibility.

Besides holding minutes of mourning and the faculty blockades, students organized marches across Serbia to tackle media blockage by the ruling parties. These marches became very popular and enabled people to meet students in person and to engage in their struggle by providing food and shelter. Some local administrations under SNS rule tried to prevent these acts of support and solidarity but this only fueled resistance. The most notable case was when students were forced to sleep in tents on a football pitch in the town of Inđija, at the end of January with temperatures below zero. These examples of determination and personal sacrifice were incremental in boosting support for the student movement and its demands. In return, support from the public strengthened the movement creating a synergetic effect.

March saw a peak in this phase when students organized the largest rally in recent Serbian history in Belgrade, drawing over 300,000 people. Previously, protests had been held in the three largest Serbian cities, culminating in a Belgrade event, alongside more than 500 protests nationwide. These rallies and student marches showed broad support for the students' demands and posed the most significant challenge to Aleksandar Vučić's rule since 2012. Their spread across the country and inclusion of diverse social groups demonstrated that this was not a typical urban protest by the educated, but one involving people of all classes and backgrounds. This was crucial in countering the government's populist narrative portraying the protests as an elite, higher-class attempt to overthrow SNS's "rule of the people."

On the other hand, the regime stuck to its usual blend of tactics against the protests – some affirmative actions including claims that they had met the demands, followed by more defamation against students and university representatives, coercive politics against the university and occasional violence by regime supporters. The fall of the government in January was not seen as an opportunity for snap elections: instead, a new government under Đuro Macut, a university professor, was elected. The choice of new Prime Minister (previously completely unknown in the political arena) shows an attempt to produce an alternative university representative who was loyal to the government; similarly, the government created new student groups loyal to them.

After realizing that the regime could not crack the movement easily, SNS decide to revert to its original tactics of attrition and to try and cause rifts among the students and groups that supported them. One of the key mechanisms was applying pressure on university professors to resume teaching and attempting to break the blockade by illegally reducing their salaries to 12% of the original amount. The government used enrolment quotas for future students as an additional tool and most faculties decided to resume lectures, generating the first significant division between professors and students. From early June most universities recommenced through various forms of online teaching, as a response to pressure from the Ministry of Education, but the majority of students have been boycotting these lectures.

What's New about These Protests?

The student protests introduced several new factors to Serbian politics. Firstly, the students organized themselves through plenums as a form of *direct democracy*. This model has already been used in similar circumstances and Serbian students initially followed the *Blokadna kuharica* Handbook (Blockade Cookbook), compiled after the protest at Zagreb University in 2009 (this was used by the regime to claim that the students were working for the Croatian Secret Service). Plenums provided enough space for different voices to be heard and for the establishment of initial mutual trust between students but also served as a counter measure to Vučić's centralization and personalization of power. The choice of plenum led to organizational schemes different from established models of representative democracy. For example, when creating decision-making bodies at university level, students introduced a rotation of delegates to reduce the influence of individuals. Also, faculty plenums reserved veto rights, introducing confederal concepts into the student movement.

The second incremental invention was *the lack of leaders*. Key decisions were made by plenums and students restrained from expressing individual opinions before collective decisions on certain issues. Student representatives were not allowed to speak publicly without the consent of the plenums. To reduce potential personalization of the protests, strict rules prohibited multiple media appearances. Students who were previously active in civil society and political parties were also asked to be less visible. This is a significant contrast to previous cases, including both protests during the Milošević period and in recent years when "new faces" appeared as student or youth leaders.

The third characteristic and key difference from previous protest waves was the clear and formal *distancing from political parties*. Although some earlier protests had similar informal rules and civic framing, this time the distance was very apparent. Students were not against the presence of politicians at events, but they continually insisted on distance and asked politicians not to use student events for promotion. Likewise, students distanced themselves from salient political issues in Serbia, as those were perceived as divisive and a potential threat to the movement unity. For example, they urged participants to carry only national and university flags, as, for example, EU flags would be seen as inappropriate by anti-EU participants and vice versa. This policy initially benefited the movement but also led to several disputes and disassociations of plenums from certain politicians, activists, and students previously linked with political parties. Some of these disassociations were very controversial (i.e. the case of a tabloid campaign and indictment against students and activists from Novi Sad, prior to the protest in Belgrade on 15 March) and created internal divisions. They also reflected strong anti-political and anti-party sentiments among students and the public (Spasojević, 2024). It is also obvious that disassociations were more frequent from civic and pro-European actors, whereas similar actions from rightwing and conservative actors were overlooked or just tolerated.

Finally, in contrast to distance from political parties and civil society organizations, students *invited citizens to organize themselves* and proposed the *zbor* (a meeting of the local community) as a way of organizing and direct democracy. Zbors initially mushroomed across the country but failed to establish themselves due to several challenges (e.g., a lack of authority, lack of motivation and dispute over methods of organization, and so on). However, a number of zbors are still active, serving as local branches of the student movement. In the later stages of the protests, students invited trade unions to work closely with them and tried to organize a general strike. Although both attempts achieved considerable participation, the general strike failed, proving that most trade unions were under the strong influence of the ruling parties in Serbia.

The students managed to inspire and motivate significant parts of Serbian society. Initially, in contrast to the usual perception of youth as non-political and too individualist, the protest showed significant motivation of not only students but also high-school pupils, who proved very important in the initial proliferation of the protests. The involvement of youth on such an unexpected scale was another indicator that these protests have been deeply changing the fiber of Serbian society. Students gained support from almost the entire educational system, lawyers, farmers, and numerous other professions.

Receptions and Political Consequences

Well-crafted demands, organization and determination, followed by ideological pluralism and distance from parties, generated broad support for the students. Their movement started to serve as a blank canvas for anyone against the government. According to several public opinion surveys, the students' demands have the support of more than 60% of the population (Crta, 2025). This also means that they are supported by at least one-fifth of those who voted for the government. Since the March protests in Belgrade, students have been described as the key political actors in the country and the fall of the SNS government in January also confirms this. The students have encouraged other people to become politically active, and several local crises have recently been initiated.

How is it possible to have such an extraordinary development and to have a leaderless student movement as the key political actor in a country with established political pluralism? The students identified a vacuum between regime and opposition and occupied it, articulating existing dissatisfaction and grievances. As they were fighting for the rule of law and democracy, many opposition parties supported them, from the left to the right of the political spectrum. At the same time, most opposition parties have been unable to find a suitable position in these new circumstances - some of them have been highly supportive of students, some had concerns about the students' ability to sustain pressure and to articulate the movement politically, while others tried to act as if it were business as usual. The opposition has also constantly been caught between pressure from the public to be more active and concerns that their actions might be perceived as merely tagging along with the students or even damaging the joint cause.

As always, how these protests have been received internationally is critical. While students have maintained a broad catch-all approach, they have also balanced their stance toward international actors. There have been notably more affirmative gestures from the West, in contrast to Russia's formal support for the regime, coupled with claims that Serbia has been facing a Colour Revolution. Serbian and Russian officials have often drawn parallels between Ukraine in 2014 and the Serbian student protests. Students' initial demands reflect some of the EU's core values – accountability, transparency, freedom of assembly, and free speech – yet they avoided formal pro-EU statements to steer clear of divisive issues. Similarly, the EU, despite some affirmative gestures like hosting a student delegation in Strasbourg and support from certain MPs, largely stayed in between, sending signals to both sides. This was used by anti-EU and Eurosceptic actors in Serbia to increase criticism of the EU, claiming that the EU only cares about its own interests and "supports the Serbian dictator because he will deliver on

promises regarding Kosovo and lithium mining". These narratives are further reducing the appeal of the EU in Serbia.

The students share some of these views and most of them are concerned about potential lithium mining. Some of them are concerned about the situation in Kosovo and the rights of the Serbian minority there. However, as a movement, they do not have clear positions on these issues, besides a formal one rooted in the constitution and laws. Regarding the EU and international affairs, students are divided in the same way society is divided. It also means that most students and supporters of the students' demands are slightly more pro-EU compared to the rest of society.

Some concerns have been raised after the last large rally of 28 June, organized on Vidovdan - an important historical date as it was the date of the famous Battle of Kosovo in 1389, which is an important part of Serbian mythology and national pride. The rally was more national and conservative than previous ones and was used to frame the student movement as nationalistic by some stakeholders. Although national elements were present, these conclusions are exaggerated now. An understanding of patriotism and nationalism by the student movement (and their policy on related issues) is still unclear and open to shaping and interpretation.

An Uncertain Future – A War of Attrition

Since the march protests, it has become evident that the government has met only part of the students' demands and is not willing to comply with the rest. Additionally, this is the most profound crisis since 2012, and it has evolved from the students' demands to encompassing much broader issues. Since these protests, students have been discussing several potential directions of development and modes of political articulation for the protest. One idea was to hold a general strike to put pressure on the government; another concerned a transitional government that would fulfill the remaining demands and prepare conditions for free and fair elections, but both solutions failed to get support from most plenums.

Finally, since May, students have rallied behind the demand for snap parliamentary elections. They intend to stand with a 'student list' of candidates from different groups who have been supportive of students (professors, artists, athletes, lawyers, among others) and to have a caretaker government that would finalize the demands and prepare further democratic elections. In an ideal scenario for the students only two parties would compete, thus creating a referendum scenario. However, at this point, it is unclear what an appropriate role for the opposition parties would be as students are not willing to form any coalition with them. Data from the latest polls (July 2025) conducted by Sprint Insight and NSPM agencies showed that the student party could win as much as half of the total vote if the whole of the opposition parties back it. The poll also predicts that the ruling parties cannot win more than 40% of the vote in total. Other polls show equal distribution of the vote between the two blocks, which is a substantial change compared to late 2024 when the government held a significant lead.

The initial response from the government to the demand for a snap election has been negative, with their putting even more pressure on universities to end the blockades. The ruling parties invested much effort in solidifying their ranks and supporters. However, at this point, it is unclear how this situation might develop and whether there is sufficient pressure to put on the government to hold elections. The students held another large rally on 28 June, and although it was a large event (around 150,000 participants), it did show a certain decrease in enthusiasm among supporters. Since the students spent a considerable amount of time reaching a consensus on political articulation, they have been forced to engage in a war of attrition with the government. However, the battle of attrition relied on patience from both sides. A violent counter-protest organized by government supporters in mid-August broke that patience and triggered a series of violent clashes between students and citizens, on one side, and police and government supporters, on the other. The cooperation between the police and government supporters once again confirmed the misuse of police and state apparatus in favour of the ruling parties. These violent clashes can be seen as yet another indicator of the depth of the crisis and as the beginning of a new phase. The shifting dynamics between student movement and the government is one of the permanent features of these protests.

Under such circumstances, it is quite hard to predict the mid-term consequences of these protests. It seems that there is a new actor who could successfully tackle the predominant SNS, but it is unclear if this would be enough to trigger a snap election in the following months and bring about a shift in power. The student movement appears to be strong, but there are many challenges ahead of it - from individual decisions on how to progress with the academic year and exams, to broader debates on how to deal with the opposition and the international community.

However, if they succeed and bring about a shift in power in Serbia, it will be one of the strangest tales of social movements and will open another challenging chapter with so many questions. The student movement and their future representatives in parliament would be ideologically heterogeneous, keeping many issues open for political debate and competition, likely until another election snap. Still, this would seem to be the best possible scenario for the democratization of Serbia, at least at this point.

CALLING POWER TO ACCOUNT: YOUTH, PROTEST, AND THE LEGACY OF 'KAMO ŚUTRA?' IN MONTENEGRO

In recent years, Montenegro has been marked by pronounced political turbulence and institutional stagnation, despite the lofty promises of reform made by the new authorities from 2020. As governance structures have drifted further from the needs of citizens, public frustration has deepened, particularly among younger generations. One of the most striking responses to this growing disillusionment has been the emergence of the student-led initiative "Kamo śutra?" (Where to Tomorrow?), which took root in late 2024 and rose to national prominence in early 2025.

Although the movement eventually disbanded, its significance has been far from short-lived. "Kamo śutra?" reshaped political discourse, reignited a dormant protest culture, and exposed the widening crisis of institutional legitimacy in the country. This was particularly important in a context where opaque political and policy processes, party manoeuvring without any principles, and the hollowing out of institutions had led many citizens - especially the youth - to question both their potential and the democratic trajectory of their society.

The 2025 protests led by the informal student group "Kamo śutra?" represent a significant moment in Montenegro's recent civic history. While they echoed broader regional trends in youth-led mobilization, such as in Serbia and North Macedonia, they were distinctly grounded in the Montenegrin context, where discontent with clerical nationalism, captured institutions, and democratic backsliding is reaching boiling point. The protests were not merely reactive but symbolically and strategically powerful: a refusal to remain passive in the face of systemic injustice, democratic erosion and arrogance of decision-makers.

While the protests did not result in immediate structural change, they did succeed in reasserting the role of youth as active shapers of public life. They challenged both the complacency of political structures and the apathy of citizens, carving out a new space for civic engagement and democratic resistance.

In this light, it is essential to examine the *origins, structure, tactics, symbolic resonance,* and *impact* of the "Kamo śutra?" movement. Situating it within the wider context of civic mobilization and democratic participation in contemporary Montenegro offers critical insights into the protest potential of a society still wrestling with questions of accountability, legitimacy, and democratic maturity.

From Neglect to Resistance

Since 2020, Montenegro has not advanced toward democratic consolidation but has instead slid into a deepening governance crisis, marked by strong polarization, the erosion of fragile institutions, the instrumentalization of religious identity, and a steady decline in rule of law standards (European Commission, 2024; Beširević, 2022). One of the most defining features of this period has been the rise of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) as a dominant political actor, which has significantly disrupted the balance between secular authority and religious influence (Vujačić, 2023). The ongoing process of clericalization has not only reshaped party dynamics but also permeated the symbolic and educational domains of public life.

Universities, traditionally expected to serve as spaces of critical thought, have never fully embraced that role in Montenegro. This inertia was further compounded when the university rector became one of the ideological promoters of a revisionist narrative aimed at erasing Montenegrin identity, with the SOC as its main instrument. The suppression of free institutions, such as the Faculty for Montenegrin Language and Literature (FCJK), the silencing of academic voices critical of clerical nationalism, and efforts to restructure the education system through the instalment of ideologically acceptable professors have raised alarms among both academia and civil society (CCE/CGO, 2025).

This trend was also illustrated by a controversial Government decision in early 2025 to cut public funding for FCJK, following an earlier attempt to block the reaccreditation of this education institution. The move triggered a swift and strong backlash, forcing an unusual quick policy reversal. Yet the episode was emblematic of a broader pattern: a steady stream of regressive decisions rarely met with meaningful institutional resistance.

The wider societal context was marked by rising disillusionment. According to the MNE Pulse, a survey conducted by the Centre for Civic Education (CCE/CGO) and the DAMAR Institute, citizens' optimism had sharply declined by early 2025. Only 35.8% of citizens believed the country was moving in the right direction - down from 51.4% the previous year. Nearly half (49.3%) described the national situation as negative or unstable, with "concern" emerging as the dominant sentiment, followed closely by despair and political apathy.

It was against this backdrop that the informal student initiative "Kamo śutra?" crystallized growing civic frustration, particularly among young people. While it emerged at the end of 2024, the initiative gained prominence in the first quarter of 2025, catalyzed by two emblematic events: the late 2024 revelation that the principal of the "Slobodan Škerović" Secondary School in Podgorica had covered up a case of sexual harassment, and the tragic mass shooting in Cetinje on 1 January 2025, which claimed 13 lives, including two children.

According to CCE/CGO and Damar Institute public opinion research from March 2025[1], 56.7% of respondents believed that someone must be held accountable for the events in Cetinje, revealing a strong and widespread demand for po-

1 Citizens Concerned About the Country's Direction, Protest Potential Growing, https://cgo-cce.org/en/2025/03/12/citizens-concerned-about-the-countrys-direction-protest-potential-growing/, and more on https://media.cgo-cce.org/2025/03/CG-Pulse-11.pdf

litical and institutional responsibility. This sentiment cut across demographic and political lines, indicating a deeper societal reckoning with institutional failure. Most of the blame was directed at state institutions, particularly the Police Administration and the Ministry of the Interior, framing the tragedy not as an isolated event, but as symptomatic of systemic dysfunction.

The "Kamo šutra?" movement emerged as a powerful civic response, positioning youth as critical actors confronting unaccountable governance, authoritarian drift, the callousness of decision-makers, and an aggressive wave of ideologically-driven revisionism. Students mobilized at the intersection of multiple crises: institutional capture, the spread of disinformation, and the rapid shrinking of civic space. Their protests were not merely reactive; they symbolized a refusal to accept the normalization of silence, absence of empathy, decay, and democratic retreat.

More than a movement, "Kamo šutra?" became a generational statement, a kind of declaration of the sort of society Montenegro's youth demand. It reaffirmed that the future belongs to those who are not content with waiting. In challenging both specific decisions and the broader culture of resignation, the movement served as a powerful reminder that democratic decline cannot be countered without civic resistance - even when that decline is masked by the rhetoric of reform and European integration.

Organizational Dynamics, Key Actors, and the Anatomy of Civic Demands

The "Kamo šutra?" protest movement did not emerge as an isolated entity out of nowhere. It was preceded by smaller, issue-based acts of civic dissatisfaction, but none, in last five years, matched its scale, resonance, or mobilizing potential. Initially organized spontaneously and without lofty ambitions, the movement quickly garnered support from civil society organizations, independent intellectuals, and segments of the media. Soon, public squares in several cities across Montenegro were transformed into stages for demonstrations that blended performative dissent with clear political articulation.

Although the group had previously voiced support for causes such as the fight against sexual violence in schools and regional solidarity protests, "Kamo šutra?" gained national prominence following the second mass shooting in Cetinje on 1 January 2025. The government's failure to implement meaningful reforms in the security sector after a similar tragedy in 2022, as well as its near total silence and callousness in the face of this new massacre, sparked outrage. In response, students demanded the resignations of the Minister of Interior, Danilo Šaranović, and Deputy Prime Minister for Security and Defense, Aleksa Bečić, holding them primarily accountable for institutional negligence that led to preventable deaths.

The movement's demands quickly expanded to include:

- *Resignations of top security officials* - Minister of Interior and Deputy Prime Minister for Security and Defence;
- *Effective institutional action on firearms* - including the collection and destruction of illegal weapons, and a revision of firearm licences;
- *Comprehensive police reform* - encompassing regular training, improved public communication, greater transparency in officer evaluations, fair distribution of police forces, and improved working conditions;
- *Reinstating civic education as a mandatory subject* in primary and secondary schools to foster critical thinking, democratic participation, and civic responsibility;
- *Improving mental health care and access* – as both a public health and security priority.
- *Transparency from the government* in publicly presenting all actions taken since the 1 January Cetinje tragedy, and reasons for fulfilling or rejecting the students' demands.

These demands were elementary - indeed, they represented the minimal threshold of accountability expected from democratic governance. They centred on dignity, civic subjectivity, and the democratic entitlement of youth to actively shape their own futures. The very name "Kamo šutra?" ("Where to Tomorrow?"), borrowed from an early-2000s song by Montenegrin musician Rade Rapido, whose artistic work often exposed social anomalies, encapsulated what youth studies literature has described as *generational precarity* (Standing, 2011; Furlong, 2013). It not only conveyed collective anxieties about an uncertain future but also articulated an emancipatory refusal to accept marginalisation. In this sense, the movement signified both a politics of refusal and an assertion of agency, reclaiming civic space amidst pervasive political and ethical disorientation.

A Decentralized Model of Resistance

"Kamo šutra?" operated through a deliberately horizontal, decentralized model, eschewing traditional leadership structures or partisan affiliation. Decision-making was conducted via student gatherings or Viber communication, modelled after regional protest examples such as the 2009 Zagreb University occupations and the 2024–2025 student plenums in Serbia. The movement emphasized participatory democracy, consensus-building, and inclusivity.

Its protest methods combined traditional street demonstrations with creative and symbolic forms of resistance: silent vigils, cultural performances, visual installations, and viral digital content. Among the most striking actions was "*Veži da se vidi*" ("Tie to be Seen"), when red ribbons were tied to the Millennium Bridge as a collective reminder of solidarity and connectedness in this struggle. During protests, students called on participants to "stop at the Millennium and mark those responsible in red." The group also staged a performance in front of the Government, placing two school desks and four chairs in memory of the four children who perished in the Cetinje tragedies. Another symbolic act was "*23 minutes of noise*" through road blockades, commemorating the 23 lives lost in two mass killings in Cetinje. Protest messages were also translated into different languages (including Japanese, as the Prime Minister speaks it), while deeply rooted Montenegrin references ensured resonance with wider audiences.

Despite its innovative tactics and widespread appeal, the movement's lack of formal leadership posed challenges. While decentralization ensured adaptability and reduced vulnerability to political targeting, it also hindered long-term strategic planning and left the movement more susceptible to media distortions. Sections of the press either vilified or attempted to co-opt the protests, framing them through partisan agendas, which ultimately curtailed their mobilizing potential and shortened the movement's lifespan.

Democratic Reimagination and Generational Reckoning

At its core, "Kamo šutra?" was an informal student network composed of young activists, some with prior experience in civic activism and artistic engagement. However, its influence and credibility were amplified by endorsements from university professors, civil society organizations, and professional associations.

This diverse coalition blurred the line between student protest and broader civil society engagement, reflecting a protest ecosystem increasingly defined by hybridity. As Vromen et al. (2016) suggest, this fusion of digital, cultural, and civic engagement is emblematic of a new generation of activism that transcends institutional boundaries.

Beyond the immediate demands, "Kamo šutra?" opened up a space for deeper social reflection: What does it mean to be Montenegrin in a state with contested identity narratives? How should educational institutions relate to faith, nationalism, and memory? In pushing back against imposed ideologies and authoritarian revisionism, the movement challenged both historical amnesia and political opportunism. It redefined patriotism not as ethnic loyalty but as democratic vigilance.

As theorists like Mouffe (2000) and Butler (2015) argue, protest can be a performative and agonistic act - an embodiment of democratic contestation. "Kamo šutra?" was precisely that: a living, generational demand for accountability, transparency, and the right to co-author Montenegro's future.

Public Reception and the Protest's Impact

Despite efforts to delegitimize the movement - through accusations of political manipulation or links to criminal elements - public opinion firmly supported the students. According to MNE Pulse data[2] from March 2025: 86% of citizens had heard of the "Kamo šutra?" protests, 17.4% reported participating in them in Podgorica or in related events in other cities, 61.1% supported the demands, especially improved mental health services, stricter gun control and police reform (around 60%). This is followed by the reintroduction of civic education as a mandatory subject in schools and calls for the prosecution and government to fully disclose all facts regarding the Cetinje crime (around 57-58%). Additionally, 48.2% of respondents supported the call for the resignation of the Minister of Interior and 46.7% the call for the Deputy Prime Minister for Security to step down. This all indicated that the protest potential was significantly higher than what was visible in street numbers, as well as the fact that the protest, though sparked by a specific tragedy, quickly evolved into a broader articulation of dissatisfaction with institutional failures and the urgent need for systemic change.

While the government did not meet the students' core demands, the symbolic and political impact of the protests was clear. They elevated the discourse on institutional accountability, disrupted the dominant narratives of complacency, and exposed the fragility of public trust in state structures. As some civil society actors observed[3], the students "delegitimized unqualified officials who remained entrenched in their privileges while the system failed to protect its people."

Support for the movement transcended typical ideological or demographic divides. Nearly 1,400 professionals, across fields such as healthcare, engineering, law, the arts, and sport, publicly backed the protests. Notably, more than 100 faculty members and teaching associates from the Montenegrin universities publicly endorsed the initiative. Such heterogeneity reflected a broad-based protest potential, one that has largely been dormant in Montenegrin politics.

Challenges of Institutional Responsiveness and Protest Fatigue

As public support for the movement grew, so did efforts to suppress it. Government attacks coordinated smear campaigns, and mounting pressure on student organisers echoed patterns observed in Serbia (Spasojević & Lončar, 2023) and North Macedonia (Markovikj & Damjanovski, 2022), pointing to a regional trend of democratic resistance being met with systemic pushback.

"Kamo sutra?" failed to achieve immediate policy reversals and so they proclaimed the cessation of activities[4], but it did expose deeper structural barriers to democratic transformation. Institutions remained largely unresponsive to core civic demands, particularly thedepoliticization, educational reform, and increased institutional accountability. This stubborn inertia exemplifies what Wattenberg (2012) describes as a widening "disconnect between political elites and the younger electorate", a disaffection which, if left unaddressed, risks undermining both trust in democratic institutions and the viability of protest as a legitimate channel for political participation.

2 Citizens Concerned About the Country's Direction, Protest Potential Growing, https://cgo-cce.org/en/2025/03/12/citizens-concerned-about-the-countrys-direction-protest-potential-growing/, and more on https://media.cgo-cce.org/2025/03/CG-Pulse-11.pdf

3 Raičević i Gorjanc Prelević poručile: Protesti „Kamo šutra?" nisu bili uzaludni, Pobjeda, 6 April 2025, https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/raicevic-i-gorjanc-prelevic-porucile-protesti-kamo-sutra-nisu-bili-uzaludni

4 "Kamo šutra?" prestaje sa djelovanjem: Borba našeg kolektiva nije uspjela, Antena M, 5 April 2025, https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/361748-kamo-utra-prestaje-sa-djelovanjem-borba-naseg-kolektiva-nije-uspjela

The momentum of the movement was further hindered by a hostile environment on multiple fronts. Student organizers were subjected to direct and indirect pressure from ruling political actors, while the largely partisan media landscape offered little genuine support. Even influential outlets that appeared sympathetic frequently reduced the movement to party-political terms, stripping away its wider civic and generational significance and weakening its transformative potential.

Adding to these challenges was the absence of institutional support from formal student representative bodies, some of which were perceived as politically compromised or passive. For the mostly inexperienced core group behind "Kamo šutra?", this lack of structural backing made it more difficult to maintain both momentum and legitimacy in the public eye.

Comparative Lessons and Regional Echoes

When compared to Serbia's or North Macedonia's student plenums, "Kamo šutra?" reflects a shared grammar of resistance across the Western Balkans. These are not isolated expressions of protests but interconnected responses to democratic backsliding and identity politics. They testify to the emergence of youth as "critical citizens" (Quintelier, 2007; Sloam, 2014), capable of mobilizing both *offline* and *online* spheres. Moreover, the movement reinvigorated regional solidarity, pointing to the potential for expanded cross-border youth programmes and networks rooted in shared democratic values.

Reclaiming Tomorrow

"Kamo šutra?" marked a turning point in Montenegro's civic awakening, emerging as a symbol of hope and inspiration, proof that young people, often underestimated in our society, can, in fact, inspire and initiate meaningful change. Today, it stands as a reminder that bottom-up pressure has power, but also that it must be preserved, expanded, and not allowed to be suffocated by fear or apathy.

As Montenegro continues its precarious EU path, movements like "Kamo šutra?" serve as both conscience and catalyst. They remind political structure in power that legitimacy is not inherited but earned and that the youth are not passive recipients of tomorrow but could and should be its architects. Furthermore, it reminded the public that European integration is not merely a bureaucratic process, but a societal transformation requiring participatory vigilance.

At the same time, broader civic resistance continues beyond the framework of this student movement. Since 5 February 2025, a group of residents from Cetinje have been persistently blocking the intersection at Kruševo Ždrijelo, demanding institutional accountability for the two mass killings that claimed a total of 23 lives, including four children. Their perseverance underscores the depth of citizens' frustration and the growing demand for justice, transparency, and state responsibility. Together with "Kamo šutra?", this civic action reveals a society that refuses to normalize impunity and silence, and instead insists on dignity, truth, empathy and democratic consilidation.

THE POLITICS OF BROKEN EXPECTATIONS IN NORTH MACEDONIA'S PROTEST MOVEMENTS

Recently, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have experienced a wave of protests sparked by national tragedies. Though differing in scale and context, each of these mobilizations emerged from a similar affective landscape merging grief, frustration, and a profound sense of institutional betrayal. In North Macedonia, the catalyst came on 29 January 2025, when Frosina Kulakova, a young woman, was killed in a car accident in Skopje. The driver, who was intoxicated and speeding, was already facing multiple criminal charges and should have been in custody. When media reports exposed this fact, the incident became emblematic of entrenched corruption and the selective protection afforded to well-connected individuals. The public outrage that followed coalesced into protests under the slogan "Justice for Frosina," signaling a resurgence of civic discontent and demands for accountability.

Just over a month later the catastrophic fire in Kočani happened. Namely, on the night of 16 March 2025, a terrible fire broke out during a concert at Puls nightclub in the town of Kočani. The venue was packed with several hundred young people, many under the age of 25, attending a performance by a popular Macedonian band. The fire spread rapidly through the building, and the single available exit was insufficient for evacuation. In total, 63 people lost their lives (62 concertgoers and one emergency services driver), while dozens more were injured. In the aftermath, media reports revealed that the nightclub had been operating without a valid permit and had failed basic safety inspections yet was allowed to continue functioning due to apparent institutional negligence and corruption. The government responded in a typically populist fashion, ordering a wave of arrests[5] (at least 15 people, including club staff, municipal officials, and inspectors) seemingly to create the impression that it was decisively addressing systemic corruption. While some officials offered condolences, political leaders overall were slow to respond substantively, offering little more than vague promises of future investigations. The combination of a preventable tragedy, young victims, and visible state failure sparked widespread grief and outrage, becoming the catalyst for the protests examined in this study.

The collective grief and unresolved anger that had gathered around Frosina's death intensified and expanded in the wake of this new tragedy. Once again, citizens took to the streets to mourn the victims, but also to denounce the conditions of negligence, impunity, and institutional dysfunction that allowed such a disaster to occur. In both cases, what began as spontaneous, emotionally charged mobilizations gradually revealed broader frustrations with the political system and public institutions.

These protests did not occur in isolation. Instead, they resonated with similar mobilizations in the region, especially Serbia and Montenegro, forming a kind of emotional and political continuum across the region. The imagery, slogans, and tone of the protests mirrored each other, as if grief itself had become a shared language of dissent. In Serbia, critics of the protests described them as a continuation of North Macedonia's earlier Colour Revolution, suggesting a kind of regional déjà vu. At the same time, North Macedonian pro-governmental media and government figures invoked the fear of a "Serbian scenario" unfolding domestically, using this frame to cast suspicion on the protests and their organizers. Such reactions point to the contagious nature of protest in the region, where mobilizations not only spread across borders, but also trigger defensive mechanisms within ruling elites.

Still, protests in North Macedonia have remained fragmented and limited in political impact. Several factors contribute to this. First, the newly elected government, while facing criticism, retains enough public legitimacy[6] to complicate narratives of institutional antagonism. Second, the emotional and political exhaustion after the unfulfilled promises of the Colour Revolution (Markovikj, & Damjanovski 2022) has produced civic fatigue, dampening momentum for more sustained political articulation. Third, from the outset, pro-government media sought to discredit the protests by linking organizers with political opposition figures (mostly the Social Democratic Union) or LGBTQI+ activists, tapping into widespread homophobia and political polarization[7]. While such tactics had mixed success, they contributed to an atmosphere of suspicion and demobilization.

Yet the limitations of these protests should not be mistaken for insignificance. Their emotional intensity, symbolic force, and cross-border resonance suggest that something is shifting, perhaps not yet in formal political structures, but in the register through which people understand and express political agency. These are not simply outbursts of grief, they are fragmented yet powerful signals of a society struggling to name its discontent, to mourn publicly, and to demand a different relationship to power and accountability.

In what follows, there are four theses on the recent protests in North Macedonia, examining their core characteristics and the possibilities they carry for announcing new political alignments, affects, and imaginaries.

5 By 13 April 2025, the investigation had covered 52 individuals and three legal entities (companies). On May 7, 2025, the public prosecutor announced that the number of suspects had increased to 70 individuals.

6 Public opinion pool 2025 available at https://shorturl.at/2Fs4S

7 In the month following the Kočani tragedy, more than 30 articles were published through official channels of anti-gender organizations, attempting to link LGBTQI activists to the protest organizers. These narratives claimed that supporting the protests was equivalent to endorsing "transgender ideology" and same-sex marriage. At the same time, the civic initiative "Who's Next?" was subjected to near-daily accusations in the public media, alleging connections between its members and opposition politicians or parties. The group was eventually compelled to issue a public denial and gave several interviews to refute these politically motivated and false claims.

Thesis 1: Political Generation Shift

Amid global political contradictions and crises, a quieter but profound transformation is unfolding: a generational shift in politics. This shift is not merely about the appearance of young people in protests, it signals the emergence of a new political generation with distinct sensibilities, strategies, and values.

On one side of the existing debate on youth participation in politics is the conventional perspective, which portrays young people as politically alienated, disengaged from institutions, and passive in the face of democratic decline (Quintelier 2007; Wattenberg 2012; Blais & Rubenson 2013). On the other is a more hopeful view, which sees youth as politically active, though primarily through non-traditional, horizontal, and issue-based forms of engagement (O'Toole et al. 2003; Sloam 2014; Vromen, Loader & Xenos 2016).

However, both perspectives remain limited in their assumptions about what counts as politics and what constitutes a political event. Drawing on Jacques Rancière, this article proposes an alternative approach. For Rancière, politics is not the management of power or institutions, but a rare and disruptive event that interrupts the existing order (Rancière, 1999). Politics begins when those who have "no part" in the established order assert their equality and claim visibility as political subjects. This moment is not procedural or continuous, but interruptive. A political event, then, occurs when an excluded group speaks or acts in the name of equality, claiming a subjectivity that was previously denied. It is not necessarily violent, but it ruptures the dominant logic of who is allowed to speak, to act, and to be recognized. It brings about a reconfiguration of the sensible, a shift in what and who is seen, heard, and counted in the political field (Rancière, 2004).

The recent protest waves in North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro can be understood through this lens as moments that disrupted the existing order by giving voice to those rendered politically invisible. In North Macedonia, however, unlike in Serbia, the resistance remained largely confined to the independent media and digital sphere. While social media was flooded with anger, despair, and demands for accountability, this digital activism struggled to materialize into a sustained, embodied, and affective presence in the streets. The fact remains that each successive protest drew fewer participants than the last. As of today, the only ongoing protests are those led by the parents of the young people who died in Kočani (*March of the Angels* protest), supported by the civic initiative "*Who's Next*?".

This does not mean that the protests should be dismissed as unsuccessful. Rather, it prompts us to reconsider what constitutes success in protest movements and to recognize that protest waves in North Macedonia have taken on diverse forms, languages, and repertoires of resistance. What distinguishes these most recent mobilizations from earlier ones is not only their content, but their form. We are witnessing the emergence of a generation that no longer speaks in ideological terms familiar to older cohorts. Instead of structured doctrines or party affiliations, their political expression is shaped by immediacy, emotional clarity, and a strong stance on justice and accountability.

In other words, the central question is not only *what* the youth are protesting, but *how* and *why* their mode of protest reflects a broader transformation in the very meaning of political engagement today.

Thesis 2: Public Mourning as a Key Figure in Political Gatherings

The protests that followed the Kočani tragedy were deeply shaped by the emotional grammar and visual language of the protests in Serbia after the death of 16 people due to the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station roof. In both cases, the dominant mode of protest was public mourning. Gatherings in North Macedonia were not loud or performative in the traditional sense. They were quiet, somber, and marked by silence, black clothing, candles, and symbolic gestures of grief. They did not mobilize around clear demands or hope of transformation, as was the case with the Colour Revolution. Instead, they assembled bodies in public space to mourn together, to share sadness, and to grieve lives lost, not only to a specific tragedy, but to a system that repeatedly fails to protect.

Unlike the hopeful and creative energy that characterized the Colour Revolution, these protests are heavy with despair. Yet this despair is not apolitical. On the contrary, public mourning in this context becomes a political act, it enacts a collective refusal to normalize death caused by systemic negligence. In the face of state silence, denial, or technocratic management of tragedy, mourning becomes a form of resistance. It insists that these deaths are not accidents but the outcome of a broader social and political failure. It transforms grief into visibility, and visibility into a slow, affective kind of accountability.

Drawing again on Rancière, we might say that these protests reconfigure the sensible by making grief visible where it is often hidden or depoliticized. Public recognition of grief is inherently political: the lives we mourn, and those we do not, reveal the workings of power. To grieve publicly is to assert that these lives are grievable, that their loss matters, and must not be forgotten (Butler, 2004). Silent protests thus become a powerful articulation of shared vulnerability and abandonment. Mourning here is a politics of presence, a way of insisting who is present in public space, whose pain is recognized, and whose lives count as politically meaningful. It makes visible not only the bodies that gather, but also the histories, losses, and injustices that those bodies carry with them.

In the North Macedonian case, public mourning has also functioned as a force of unexpected unity. In contrast to many past protest movements, the Kočani protests momentarily suspended ethnic divisions and nationalist narratives. The Albanian community, historically treated as the internal "other" in Macedonian nationalism, joined the public mourn-

ing. One Albanian school even staged a public performance with pupils the day after the tragedy. In a similar gesture of solidarity, Bulgaria not only expressed condolences but also sent medical assistance and mobilized humanitarian efforts to collect donations for the victims and their families.

What these responses reveal is that mourning, as a political practice, can produce moments of collective identification that transcend ethnic and national lines. In grief, the categories that used to divide us, such as ethnicity, language and nation, momentarily dissolve. What emerges is a shared experience of abandonment and systemic neglect, a recognition that all bodies are equally exposed to the failures of the state. In this sense, the public mourning following the Kočani tragedy enacted not only resistance to institutional failure but also a fragile, deeply political collectivity: a gathering of bodies that have been divided in life but united in loss.

What made these protests particularly striking was not only their emotional tone, but the way they framed their discontent. Even without loud demands or clear leadership, the message that the problem ran deeper than a single institution or political figure was present. The mourning gathered people, but it was the shared sense of systemic failure that began to shape the narrative.

Thesis 3: Protesting against the System, not the Government

While previous protests in North Macedonia often targeted specific political figures or parties, the Kočani protests appear to be signalling a shift, at least in how protesters themselves frame their actions. The dissatisfaction expressed in the streets is not presented as a demand for the replacement of those in power, but as a call to expose and confront a system that consistently fails its citizens. What is being publicly stated is not a plea for leadership change, but a broader demand for systemic transformation, for a fundamental change in how the state functions, and for whom.

One of the most striking features of the Kočani protests, echoing, to a certain degree, the tone of the student mobilizations in Serbia, is the repeated insistence that these gatherings are not aimed at toppling a particular government, but at confronting a system that produces tragedy through neglect and corruption. This is clearly visible in the statements, speeches, and visual messages that have shaped the protests. One message frequently seen on protest banners - "There would not have been blood if everything had been according to the law" - borrows a line from a song by Serbian singer Đorđe Balašević and was previously used in Serbian protests. It captures a shared sense that these deaths were not isolated incidents, but systemic outcomes. Organizers have consistently framed the protests as a struggle against structural corruption rather than a reaction to the current ruling party. As they often declared: "The corrupted system is our enemy, not this particular government." Likewise, the civic initiative "Who's Next?", which has played a central role in sustaining public mourning and protest, has anchored every action with the repeated message: "The system is next."

We might say that these expressions reflect a growing refusal to be appeased by symbolic resignations or superficial reforms. The demands are not directed at individual accountability alone, but at a deeper transformation of institutions and political culture. The framing that the protests are "against the system, not the government" raises an important paradox. Protesters demand systemic change, yet at the same time, they place their hopes in the very institutions they denounce as rotten. The judiciary, the police, state inspectorates, and local governance are all seen as broken, yet the call is not to dismantle them, but to return them to some imagined state of functionality. This reveals a fundamental tension, a deep distrust in the system as it exists, paired with a lingering faith that it could still work, if only freed from corruption and political interference.

Rather than dismiss this as a contradiction, it may be more productive to see it as politically relevant and even subversive. In a context where revolution feels impossible and electoral politics uninspiring, this form of protest expresses neither utopian imagination nor institutional nihilism, but a refusal to let go of the idea that the state should, and could, serve the people (Mouffe, 2000). It is a politics of broken expectations. What makes it powerful is not its clarity, but its persistence. The insistence that even in disappointment, the demand for justice remains legitimate and must be made visible. In this sense, the protests are not calling for abandoning the system, but for reoccupying it.

This paradox may also reflect a deeper shift in the very nature of protest demands. Earlier movements often mobilized around tangible goals—resignations, leadership changes and elections. These were clear, immediate, and easier to express. By contrast, the Kočani protests voice deeper, more structural demands. They are not asking for a quick fix but confronting something much harder to define: the exhaustion of trust, the erosion of institutional legitimacy, and the uncertainty of what political transformation could even look like. In this sense, the protests reflect a political horizon that is both broader and more fragile, a demand for something more fundamental, without clear tools or language to name it. And perhaps that difficulty in articulation is itself political, a sign that we have entered a space where old demands no longer suffice, but new ones are not yet born (Butler, 2015).

What begins to emerge from these contradictions is not only a transformation in how people protest, but in what political imagination is still possible. As protests move away from demand-based, leader-focused, or policy-specific logics, they begin to signal the collapse of a broader political framework, the beginning of the end of the neoliberal consensus that has dominated post-socialist governance for decades. The exhaustion of institutions is not just technical or moral, but ideological. It is this deeper shift that the final thesis below seeks to explore.

Thesis 4: The End of Neoliberal Political Logic

The protests in Kočani suggest that protest politics in North Macedonia has entered a radically new terrain, one that still lacks a clear repertoire of signs, demands, or ideologies to fully name or define itself. In this unfamiliar space, where disappointment with the system coexists with the refusal to abandon it, political action is unfolding in the absence of traditional scripts. What we are witnessing may not be the continuation of past movements, but the early contours of something yet unnamed: a protest form that emerges from exhaustion with institutional failure, but gestures toward a different political horizon.

This terrain is shaped by the slow unravelling of neoliberal political logic, especially in post-socialist societies like North Macedonia. Built on promises of efficiency, technocratic governance, privatization, and individual responsibility, neoliberalism presented itself as the only viable system. But the Kočani tragedy, like others across the region, revealed the consequences of decades of institutional hollowing-out, the gutted public services, normalized precarity, and a profound erosion of trust in the state. Protesters are not only mourning specific failures, but they are also confronting a political rationality that can no longer guarantee safety, care, or a livable future.

Crucially, this unravelling is not limited to North Macedonia or the Western Balkans. Around the world, from the United States to the UK, France, and Latin America, citizens are increasingly vocal about the failures of neoliberalism to address rising poverty, unaffordable housing, collapsing infrastructure, and a growing sense of abandonment. Soaring inflation and widening inequality have turned everyday survival into a source of political tension. What was once justified as economic reform now appears as systemic neglect. The Kočani protests, though locally rooted, resonate with this global mood: a deepening disillusionment with market-based governance and an urgent, if still inarticulate, search for alternatives.

Of course, one might argue that Kočani is too small a case to speak of the end of a global political order. And that may be true. What this moment offers is not a full account of neoliberalism's collapse, but a contour, a fragment, a signal of the crisis this order is passing through. It does not yet provide a clear vision of what comes next, but it adds to the growing uncertainty that defines our present, and to the difficulty, and necessity, of imagining a new political horizon. This notion, however, deserves further development in another study, one that would examine more systematically the regional and global implications of this shift and the new political forms it may produce. For now, the Kočani protests offer not a resolution, but a rupture, an affective signal of political possibility amid widespread exhaustion.

An Unfinished Political Horizon

Despite the intensity of public grief and outrage, the Kočani protests have produced no direct political consequences. The government responded with largely symbolic gestures, such as ordering numerous arrests in what many saw as a populist attempt to project decisive action against corruption. Parliament's initial response drew public criticism as it took a two-week recess in the immediate aftermath, appearing disengaged at a critical moment. Upon returning, debates were contentious: some opposition MPs, especially from the Social Democratic Union (SDSM), demanded public hearings to investigate institutional failures and allow victims' families and experts to testify, while members of the ruling party (VMRO DPMNE) resisted and accused them of politicizing the tragedy. No hearings have been convened and promises from officials that this marks the "end of the corruption era" remain merely rhetorical. Beyond the arrests, no substantive reforms or institutional shifts have occurred, deepening public cynicism.

Progressive and social democratic actors have failed to grasp the deeper significance of these protests and the political opening they represent. While the protests reflect profound disillusionment with systemic neglect and the exhaustion of neoliberal governance, these actors have shown little awareness of the opportunity to offer voters new models of social cohesion, care, and solidarity. Their responses have remained narrowly procedural, focused on resignations and oversight, without engaging the broader political fatigue and desire for structural change underpinning public discontent. In doing so, they continue to operate within an outdated political framework, missing the chance to articulate a vision that speaks to citizens' eroding trust in institutions and the fragility of the social contract exposed by this crisis.

The four theses explored in this text - the political generational shift, the centrality of public mourning, the move from partisan critique to systemic refusal, and the erosion of neoliberal political logic - trace a protest landscape that is fragmented yet resonant. These are not movements with clear demands or charismatic leaders, but rather expressions of broken expectations: spontaneous, affective refusals to remain silent in the face of loss, neglect, and institutional failure - and they are unfolding at a time when the old languages of transformation no longer suffice, and new ones have yet to emerge.

CONCLUSION

Across Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia, a persistent and troubling pattern is emerging: young people remain deeply disconnected from formal political processes and largely dissatisfied with how their interests are represented in national politics, as consistently shown by a series of FES youth studies. In Montenegro, nearly half (48.8%) report being completely or mostly uninterested in politics, with only one-fifth (20.1%) expressing significant interest. The figures in Serbia are equally discouraging, with more than half (52.6%) showing political disinterest and just over one-fifth (18.6%) reporting genuine engagement. In North Macedonia, political interest has been stagnating at around 17% for more than six years.

This lack of formal political engagement has extended into broader civic activism. In Montenegro, 69.1% have never signed a political petition and 44% have never attended a protest; in Serbia, more than half are not members of any organization or association. In North Macedonia, activism is often expressed through low-intensity actions such as selective consumerism, with limited sustained involvement. These trends reflect a wider global decline in youth participation, documented also by UNDP, and underscore the paradox of Generation Z: while enjoying unprecedented access to technology, information, and mobility, they are simultaneously exposed to new risks - from digital violence to political disinformation - which deepen distrust in institutions.

Yet, the FES youth studies also reveal untapped potential, with notable portions of youth expressing a willingness to join protests, volunteer in civil society initiatives, or assume leadership roles when given the opportunity and trust.

And this is exactly what has recently been witnessed in the region through different yet interconnected waves of protest, largely inspired by the ongoing mobilization in Serbia, which continues and was marked by violent clashes in August, once again exposing the misuse of state apparatus and ushering in a new phase of the crisis. If nurtured, such momentum could serve as a catalyst for reversing democratic disengagement. Change is never sudden – the civic awakening in these countries has been building up through years of accumulated discontent, expressed through multiple forms of civic action and protest, alongside the work of numerous actors fostering critical thinking, encouraging civic and political participation, and investing in youth capacity building.

A deeper regional shift may be underway as the recent mobilizations have demonstrated that citizens across the Western Balkans are displaying greater political maturity, solidarity, and responsibility than their leaders. Hence, the current examples of activism reflect a region unwilling to relinquish its democratic aspirations, proving that even in moments of political fatigue, the demand for accountability, justice, and a fairer future endures.

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