

Keeping Focus: Reporting developments in Serbia

Crisis in Serbia Deepens as Government Escalates Violence Against the Protestors

Key points:

- ⊕ Police brutality and attacks by pro-government loyalists led to an escalation of violence in insofar peaceful citizens' and students' protests
- ⊕ Actions by pro-government loyalists provoked ethnic tensions in some of Serbia's multiethnic regions
- ⊕ Two former ministers, Goran Vesić and Tomislav Momirović, were arrested on suspicion of corruption concerning the Serbia-Hungary railway line

Protests spiral into violence and police brutality

Following nine months of overwhelmingly peaceful protests which first demanded responsibility after the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station and then snap elections, the week of 11-17 August saw an escalation of violent incidents between protesters and the supporters of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), coupled with instances of police brutality.

During the week of 11-17 August, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) decided to respond to the continuing citizens' protests through gatherings in front of its party offices. People who gathered are believed to belong to the group of SNS "loyalists", which the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić had previously announced would be ready to physically defend the party. Among them, the media later identified some individuals from the criminal milieu.

These gatherings of SNS members, simultaneously with the protesters, resulted in violent incidents in two northern towns on 12 August, Bačka Palanka and Vrbas. Police fired tear gas, smoke grenades, and stun grenades at demonstrators, while fireworks and other pyrotechnics were launched at crowds [by SNS "loyalists"](#).

The perceived inadequate response of the police in Bačka Palanka and Vrbas, who arrested protesters instead of SNS

supporters, triggered mass nationwide protests beginning on 13 August.

That night, the city of Novi Sad became the scene of serious incidents: SNS members once again used various pyrotechnics against protesters, who proceeded to vandalise SNS offices. At one point, officer in the Serbian Army's special unit, who was supposedly at the scene protecting former Prime Minister and current SNS President Miloš Vučević, fired a gun in the air. In the days following the incident, security experts emphasized that this Army unit has no mandate to guard political leaders who are not public officials.

On 14 August, massive anti-government demonstrations took place in Belgrade. Two students later claimed they were subjected to abuse and mistreatment by police, alleging that they were beaten by Marko Kričak, commander of the Unit for the Security of Certain Persons and Facilities (JZO). One of them, Nikolina Sinđelić, [stated](#) that Kričak assaulted her inside a government building and threatened to rape her. The Ministry of Interior has denied these allegations, but protests of support for Sinđelić continued in the following days.

During the protests in Belgrade, the Secretary General of a pro-European opposition Freedom and Justice Party (SSP), Peđa Mitrović, was [also injured](#) by, according to his claims, a masked SNS supporter.

Police brutality was also recorded during the protest on 14 August in the western city of Valjevo, where social media circulated numerous videos showing officers beating citizens who offered no resistance. On 16 August, citizens from different cities across Serbia gathered in Valjevo to show support for demonstrators who had been beaten the previous week. Toward the end of the protest, a group of masked demonstrators vandalized the offices of the SNS, the city administration, and the prosecutor's office building in Valjevo.

In his address on 17 August, President Vučić said that in the coming days the state will implement "surprising" decisions as a response to the anti-government protests, though he ruled out enforcing a state of emergency. In the following days, multiple people suspected of breaking the law during the protests were arrested, though a wave of new repressive measures that many commentators expected following Vučić's speech did not materialize.

Instead, SNS organized a counter-protests "against the blockades" in 49 cities and towns across Serbia, though the numbers of people gathering in many areas were described as modest.

The new developments during the protests, especially police brutality, attracted attention of international media, which for the first time in months reported extensively on the Serbian protests. Editorials of [Le Monde](#) and [Financial](#)

[Times](#) criticized the European Union's lack of reaction to the authoritarianism of Vučić's rule.

Vučić then appeared to suddenly have soften his stance towards the protests and invited student representatives to a public dialogue about the future of the country. The students, however, largely refused the invitation, believing it insincere due to recent violence and rhetoric labelling them terrorists. They stated they will accept the invitation once elections are scheduled.



Riot police move in as clashes erupt during anti-government protests in Belgrade, Photo Gavrilović Andrić

Fears of ethnic tensions rise

Before the week of 11-17 August, the tensest atmosphere over the summer was in the majority-Bosniak city of Novi Pazar. On the morning of 29 July, masked men in black uniforms [stormed](#) the State University in Novi Pazar. The masked men physically confronted the students who had been occupying the building for months. The assailants were later identified as private security guards from the town of Kraljevo.

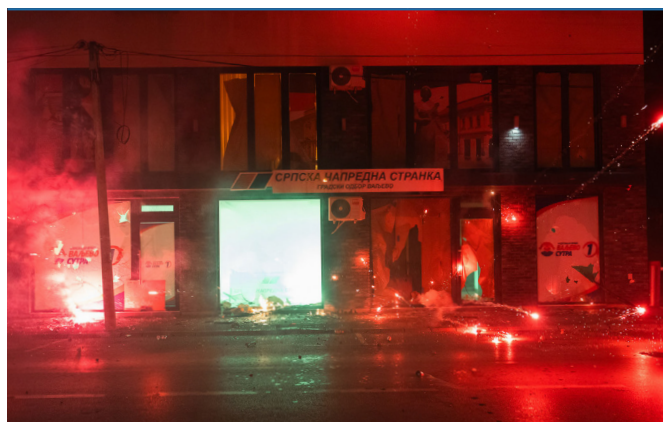
A nationwide reaction of solidarity other universities in the blockade and citizens contributed to a relatively quick de-escalation, and the students were able to return to the premises of the University.

The protesters in Novi Pazar were smeared by the media close to the ruling party, which used nationalist and chauvinist slurs towards Bosniak students. The incident is believed to have put a strain on the relationship between SNS and its coalition partners among ethnic Bosniak parties.

Tensions also rose in the majority Slovak municipality of Bački Petrovac in northern Serbia, where an exhibition of photos of student protests was interrupted by members of SNS who, [according](#) to citizens' assemblies from Novi Sad, tore up the photos and attacked the citizens. This has led to several gatherings in Bački Petrovac, one of which was

marked by heavy police presence and was cancelled due to the presence of “SNS thugs” [according](#) to the organizers.

Prime Minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, an ally of the Serbian ruling party, failed to condemn the incidents, [calling it](#) “an internal issue of Serbia” and a reflection of political divisions in the society.



Local office of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in Valjevo set on fire during protests, Photo Gavrilović Andrić

Two former ministers arrested in a potential judicial turning point

On 1 August, 11 people, among them former Serbian state officials including ministers Goran Vesić and Tomislav Momirović, were arrested on charges of abuse of office and are suspected of damaging the budget of Serbia by at least 115 million US dollars related to the project of the reconstruction of the Serbia-Hungary railway line. A part of the project in question involved the reconstruction of the now collapsed main railway station in the city of Novi Sad.

Due to the high level of distrust in the judiciary, the public has remained divided over whether the arrests represent a genuine turning point. Sceptics [pointed out](#) that Mladen Nenadić, chief public prosecutor for organized crime who ordered the arrests, was appointed in 2016, during the rule of SNS, and that he failed to act on many previous occasions where serious allegations were made against the ruling party. Another reason for caution was the habit of the ruling party to feign accountability when it suits them.

Nevertheless, the reactions of the ruling party to the arrests of 1 August were quite different to these earlier cases, suggesting that something more serious might be happening. In fact, Informer television, a mouthpiece of SNS, accused the prosecution of carrying out a “coup”. In the weeks prior to the arrests, pro-government media had already started vilifying Nenadić.

An apparently increasing rift between the ruling party and the Supreme Public Prosecutor, Zagorka Dolovac, who was earlier seen as SNS ally, also became visible in recent months. It was Dolovac who ordered the

Public Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime to start investigating potential corruption in the railway project in February.

On 15 August, former ministers Vesić and Momirović were released from prison and ordered house arrest by a Court, with the judge described as being close to the ruling party by [investigative journalists](#). Goran Vesić, who is regarded as influential member of SNS and who resigned as Minister of Transport in the days after the Novi Sad tragedy last November, never went to prison this time, as he was reportedly hospitalized for an unspecified illness.

The future course of the process will demonstrate how far the judiciary will go in probing the potentially first high-level corruption case since SNS came to power in 2012.

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