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Abstract

This paper analyses the increasing threats to university autonomy and academic freedom in Serbia against the backdrop of democratic backsliding and growing authoritarianism. As one of the few remaining autonomous institutions, Serbian universities have become a target of government efforts to strengthen political control. The conflict intensified in late 2024 following proposed higher education reforms and the fatal collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy, which triggered mass student protests demanding accountability, rule of law, and action against systemic corruption.

Supported by professors, universities, and citizens, the student movement evolved into a broad civic mobilisation. In response, the government introduced measures perceived as punitive, including salary cuts, regulatory changes, legal pressures, and police interventions affecting the academic community. The paper argues that these developments represent a serious challenge to university autonomy and academic freedom, while also highlighting the emergence of students and universities as influential actors in Serbia's struggle for democratic change and institutional accountability.

Key words: University autonomy; academic freedom; Serbia; democratic backsliding; student protests; political control; institutional accountability; democratic change

1. Note on the current political context

Since the establishing of the Serbian government by the so-called Serbian Progressive Party in 2012, the authoritarian trends have been on agenda and attempts to take control over all state institutions and the society. Only a few public media are independent, and the regime is trying currently to extinguish them. Mechanisms of electoral frauds are perfected in order to keep-on a great majority from one to another parliamentary and local elections. The Constitutional Court is currently in the service of the regime, segments of the judiciary manage to keep autonomy. The President of Serbia has very narrow competences due to the Constitution (Art 112), but in reality decides on all major issues (takes over responsibilities of the government, even of the judiciary).

Backsliding of Serbia's democracy has been recorded especially since 2017. Serbia left the club of "free countries" in 2018 and has been considered a "partly free country" by Freedom House (FH) since then. *Nations in Transit*, FH's major publication for the countries of Eastern Europe and ex-USSR, sees Serbia as a hybrid or transitional state that slowly but persistently sinks towards the status of semi-consolidated autocracy. In December 2024, Amnesty International called Serbia "a digital prison" and accused Serbian authorities of deploying "surveillance technology and digital repression tactics as instruments of wider state control and repression directed against civil society". In the spring of 2024, V-Dem Institute from Sweden categorised Serbia as "electoral autocracy". Finally, the latest report of "Reporters without borders" ranks Serbia's situation with the media as "difficult" which is the second worst category, in this report.

2. Note on higher education

The higher education institutions are among the last islands of autonomy.

2a. According to the Global list by the Centre for World University Rankings, among 21000 higher education institutions assessed and 2000 top selected, in 2024 the University of Belgrade (UB) was ranked as 376th (among the top 1.8%), in 2025 - as 387th (University of Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Niš in top 5,4% to 8,3%)¹.

2b. Of course, the regime tries to restrict the autonomy of the higher education all the time, in order to control it.

There happened two huge clashes with the University at the end of 2024, one independent of and prior to students protests, and another one linked to these protests.

The first clash/attack: the Serbian government announced in October 2024 changes to the Law on Higher Education, and sent the proposal for changes to the parliament. The proposal was

¹ <https://www.bazaobrazovanja.rs>

created without consultations with the University, and the idea was to bring private universities from Europe and other universities from elsewhere (even maybe from China and Russia), without requiring their passing accreditation procedure, that has been extremely demanding for the Serbian universities. In addition, a paradoxical idea was proposed that Serbian students should be subsidized to study at these foreign universities. The justification was alleged advancing competitiveness and improving the quality of higher education. In the background was the neoliberal model of commercialization of the higher education (due to the Hungarian model), plus, an attempt to weaken the independent position of state universities.

The academic community reacted against this proposal promptly and strongly, and it was withdrawn, but the regime dropped out the proposal reluctantly with an idea to revive it.

So, this first event alarmed the academic staff of the state universities, but the second event triggered the students' mobilization.

The second clash: The fall of the railway station building canopy in Novi Sad on November 1st 2024, with 16 persons smashed under the fallen roof, triggered the huge students' protests against the regime and have been still lasting, i.e. more than a year and a half. Mass students' protests supported by professors and universities, as well as by citizens across Serbia are focused against the systemic corruption and corrupted constructing business, require responsibility and legal sanctioning for the catastrophic event and deaths. In the eyes of the regime, these events literally transformed young population and the University into its enemies.²

As already said, the students' protests were provoked by the catastrophic fall of the canopy of the railway station building in Novi Sad. That railway station building roof was shortly before renovated

Students of a few faculties in Novi Sad and Belgrade took to the streets to protest, they asked for the responsibility of the constructing and political institutions for these deaths, they blamed the governments for the corruption and corrupting construction economy, they asked for re-establishing the devastated rule of law.³ First protests were met by the police violence and provoked the students' uprising and blocking the faculties' buildings very soon after the tragedy, and formal articulating the requirements happened very soon after, based on idea that institutions must do their job (police, prosecution, courts, experts, governments,...). The blockades of the faculties' buildings stopped in April/May 2025, but protests have still persisted in different modalities. When speaking about some kind of kept on blockades, just to mention

² Bojan Spaić, *Protest je ispit*, Biblioteka XX vek, 2025.

³ Timothy Snyder criticized calling these protests „the anti-governmental ones in the American media: Protests have to do with a basic concern with the rule of law. This is why it so annoying when photos in our media are tagged as “anti-government protests.” People in Serbia are protesting for good government!” (Th. Snyder, Youth Protest in Serbia. And some thoughts for America", <https://snyder.substack.com>, September 2025)

that in front of the Faculty of Law each day also currently students and professors and citizens gather at 11.52 a.m. – the time when the canopy fell down and stand at the crossroad 16 minutes for 16 victims in silence. Traffic is blocked each day in those 16 minutes.

Also just to mention that in previous years there had been organized in Serbia mass protests against lithium exploitation and against violence in schools, violence in general, but somehow students stayed then always silent and passive. They looked like disinterested and politically ignorant social group. However, the tragic event with the canopy fall provoked rather unexpectedly their real mobilization, and was an opportunity for them to demonstrate political wisdom and maturity.

3. The organization of students in blockades and the university response

Almost the whole academic year was frozen at universities, and because of solidarity also in many high and primary schools. Students have organized themselves in the forms of direct democracy –students` assemblies at each faculty, decisions are proposed on separate assemblies, but final decisions are made at the central assembly constructed by delegates of all faculties` assemblies. These assemblies/ plenums have been kept as the direct democracy decision-making mechanism until nowadays.

Students organized and still have been organizing many walking and cycling tours throughout Serbia in order to reach peasants, inhabitants of villages and small cities that have been mostly disinformed by the controlled media. There were also cycling and running tours across European cities and to European institutions. On November 1, 2025, the anniversary of the tragedy, the huge gathering took place in Novi Sad. Thousands of students and citizens from Belgrade, Niš, Kragujevac, and citizens from different cities and villages walked toward Novi Sad. On the way to Novi Sad were welcome by host inhabitants, who prepared food, water and other sources for them. Students from Novi Pazar (the part of Serbia with mostly Muslim population) were then walking 16 days for 16 victims, and distance from Novi Pazar to Novi Sad was 400 km. The warm welcome by the people standing everywhere along their long route, was emotionally, social-psychologically and politically extremely relevant. In those protests the prior ethnic distance (boosted by the nationalistic sentiments encouraged by the regime) was significantly erased. Students from Novi Pazar joined full-heartedly the protests, have been accepted full-heartedly by other segments of the student population; feeling of synergy, unity and solidarity prevailed and started building a common political power. That has meant a significant investment of young people into the common better future.

The popularity of the students and their actions has been rising constantly in spite of the still existent wide media control and misuse for the regime attempts to demonize, criminalize students, professors, the rector.

Mass gatherings initiated by students happened after each few months, citizens gradually and more and more massively joined the students and organized also themselves into citizens' assemblies within municipalities (zborovi).

Universities' and faculties' councils decided to support initial students' demands and to suspend teaching until those demands were met. Academic staff continued to come to their workplace but did not participate in teaching activities, with the exception of holding consultations, supervising master's theses and doctoral dissertations. Furthermore, academic staff did not suspend their scientific research activities and continued to participate in the work of faculty and university bodies.

The months March, April, May of 2025 were full of tensions:

a) By its Conclusion of 24 March 2025, the Government confirmed that faculties at which no lectures or examinations were being held in the frame of all accredited study programs attended by students financed from the state budget - would receive only a portion of the funds allocated for academic staff salaries, while administrative and technical staff were paid their full salaries.⁴ However, this reduction in budgetary funding was not carried out on the basis of predetermined, objective criteria, nor was it taken into account that during the blockades academic staff at a large number of faculties continued to hold all academic activities except holding lectures and exams. Furthermore, in adopting the Conclusion, no consideration was given to the fact that part of the academic staff participates in teaching only in one semester of the academic year, nor to the fact that a certain number of lecturers had already delivered all or a substantial portion of their lectures, as well as examinations in the autumn semester of the 2024, as required by the academic schedule for that academic year 2024/25.

On the other hand, the Regulation governing the workload of teaching staff was amended⁵: instead of the previous model of 20 hours of teaching and 20 hours of research, the new rules require 35 hours of teaching and only five hours of research. This has jeopardized the development of science and the quality of the transmission of academic knowledge. Moreover, the new arrangements, which remain in force to this day, also undermine the development of early-career researchers, as teaching assistants will find it difficult to meet, within the legally prescribed timeframe, their obligations related to the preparation of master's theses and doctoral dissertations, given that they may devote only 12.5% of their working time to such activities.⁶

⁴ Government of the Republic of Serbia Conclusion No. 05 121-2842/2025 of 24 March 2025.

⁵ Decree amending the Decree on norms and standards of working conditions of universities and faculties for activities financed from the budget (*Official Journal of the RS*, No. 27/25).

⁶ Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, "Zahtev Vladi Srbije u ostavci za stavljanje van snage Uredbe o izmeni Uredbe o normativima i standardima uslova rada univerziteta i fakulteta za delatnosti koje se finansiraju iz budžeta", <https://www.sanu.ac.rs/zahtev-vladi-srbije-u-ostavci-za-stavljanje-van-snage-uredbe-o-izmeni-uredbe-o-normativima-i-standardima-uslova-rada-univerziteta-i-fakulteta-za-delatnosti-koje-se-finsansiraju-iz-budzeta/>, 17.3.2026.

Finally, the amendment of the Regulation has seriously undermined the economic security of academic staff during the blockades, as employees received only the portion of their salary corresponding to scientific research work, which is valued at only 1/8 of the total salary. Furthermore, the dignity and safety of teaching staff were jeopardized by malicious proceedings initiated against deans for failing to organize classes, even though it was objectively impossible to do so under the circumstances.

The Government first reduced salaries for 50% and then for 87.5%, and even demanded (the ministry of education announced that) that deans should call the police to intervene against the students who blocked the faculties which under the law only the deans may request. The Government also targeted secondary school teachers for their solidarity with their pupils who also organised their own strike. To them the government reduced salaries for 95%.

The idea of the government was that professors, devoid of their salaries, would then themselves be forced to put pressure on students to stop the students' protests because the state said it would give all the salaries back once the teaching activities have been resumed. However, this serious financial attack did not accomplish its aims; financial solidarity network for secondary schools' professors had been firstly organized and soon after was extended also for university professors. IT sector gave a crucial organizational/technical assistance and a significant financial support.

b) The Government established the Working Group with the task to prepare a draft of the new Law on Higher Education, that gives to the government control over financial issues, and again with an aim legally to undermine autonomy of university.

It provoked 3-weeks-lasting blockade of the huge crossroad in front of the main Government's building by the university professors organized in different universities' rebellious initiatives, in collaboration with students and citizens' assemblies. It was called "Faculties at the Crossroad". The demands were – abandoning of the Working Group, then, repeal of the mentioned Regulation that reduces the salaries to 12,5%, proposed for the research, and some others relevant requirements for saving the academic year.

c) That was a period when the danger of losing the academic year had become very serious. The Collegium of the rectors made efforts to find a compromise, and a combination of online lectures and exams in multiplied terms were finally agreed with the Ministry of Education as the solution. Lecturing process and examination terms were held during the whole summer period (instead of the vacation). The academic year was saved. Students' protests and activities changed modalities, but stayed strong and still have been strongly present.

Very important is to say that whichever modalities used by students in their struggle, they have always been very peaceful. The biggest gathering of students and citizens from the whole Serbia happened in Belgrade on March 15, 2025. Again, the huge political rally happened on June 28, 2025 and, as said, they were without any incidents provoked by students and citizens.

4. Violent attacks

Attacks from the regime side have been, however, constant and ever more violent. Immediately after the huge students' and citizens' gathering at the mentioned (Vidovdan) protest on June 28th, an unprecedented hunt of students, professors, intellectuals, artist, and citizens started and went on. On July 2, 2025 the police brutality reached its climax. The police began arresting secondary school pupils, students and citizens in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš, and other cities. The police also tried to penetrate into the building of the Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade.

Due to the mentioned unprecedented violence, the students announced at the end of June 2025 the requirement for early elections. They finally switched the requirements to the political ones.

The verbal and institutional attacks against the University of Belgrade and the Rector were intensified, Rector Djokic was invited for the police interrogation on April 18, 2025, during the mentioned "Universities at the Crossroad" action. It happened also to the dean of the Faculty of Economics. The phantom organizations and initiatives were created to submit lawsuits against state universities and faculties in Serbia (37 submitted in April 2025), with possibilities to fine faculties with up to 17.000 EUR and individuals with up to 300 EUR.

Cases of retaliation against university professors for supporting the student and civil protest are present, a few of them lost the job, or the higher positions, or promotion opportunity. High school professors lost even more often jobs.

Recently, the Faculty of Philosophy University of Niš was attacked by the regime's decision to establish the new University of Serbian studies from three departments, without any consent of the University of Niš and the mentioned departments. Segmentation will be tried most probably also at other universities.

End of March this year brought a new opportunity for the regime to attack Belgrade University and its Rector. On March 26 morning, the body of the female student was found at the sidewalk in front of the Faculty of Philosophy. The death of a student happened under unexplained circumstances and the dean of the Faculty and the rector of the University of Belgrade called immediately for an independent investigation. However, the police used this situation to enter without the dean's invitation the building of the Faculty of Philosophy and a few days later the police penetrated the rectorate (allegedly because of being interconnected with the Faculty of Philosophy, and allegedly for further investigation of the student's death). However, the main target of the police interrogation was the students' protests documentation, left there after the students' blockade of the Rectorate.

The police raids into the institutions of higher educations – has started being normalized. One more raid of the police happened on April 18, 2026, when police entered the building of the Medical School of UB, with an excuse that there happened unrests during the students' elections

for getting the mandate to be the leading students' organization. Just to mention, which students' association wins the leading position has been important to the Serbia Progressive Party and its Government, because the students' representatives in the faculties' bodies have been used for impacts, the control of any relevant decision-making.

Police raid of the Rectorate provoked the huge protests of the academic community and citizens in front of the Rectorate, the protests lasted for many hours until late in the evening when Rector Vladan Djokić gave the great (implicitly political) speech from the Rectorate terrace.

The mentioned speech indicated a rising political prestige of the Rector, his becoming most probably the counter-candidate to Vučić at the forthcoming early elections during 2026, or regular elections in 2027.

5. Conclusion

Autonomy of the University is seriously violated, and academic freedom is under a severe threat. Students, professors, deans, rector are under constant attacks – media demonization, losing jobs, exposure to judicial processes, experiencing police and paramilitary forces violence and so forth.

There is a deep political crisis, the regime has been weakened significantly but tries even further to keep the power and provide to win with any means the future elections.

At the same time happens a constant empowering and rising popularity of the ideas of the protesting students and citizens. Students are insisting on the early elections and have been preparing their own electoral list, with the rector as the first on the list and many other university professors, prestigious and uncompromised artists, intellectuals. Students have become a promising political power, and relevant polls indicate that their list might be capable of victorious results. The hope for political change is placed in young people, educated and politically matured-through-the-mentioned activism. I would say that it is the best thing which could happen to Serbia, or that could happen to any other country.⁷

⁷ Timothy Snyder remarks assumes similarly: "Serbia is a country without the rule of law, and its young people have been taking risks for the better part of a year in the hopes of creating a future where they can live normally in their own country. They and those who support them are subjected, now, to arbitrary arrests. Those who care about the future of democracy should know about them, and should act in Europe and elsewhere.

Americans should know about these impressive political actions.... I am not going to claim that the conditions in Serbia and in the United States are the same. Serbs are not protesting so that we can learn lessons. But there are some realities of Serbian achievement which, regardless of what now happens in Serbia, are worth considering. We will not get far without protesting, and we will not get far protesting without young people." (Th. Snyder, Youth Protest in Serbia. And some thoughts for America", <https://snyder.substack.com>, September 2025)

In addition, the role of the EU in the case of Serbia as the country in accession process is relevant. European Commission and especially European parliament become more and more critical towards the regime, and probably will crucially help in preventing a total media occupation, electoral fraud, further attacks towards the university.