Serbian students are beginning their test of government. An interview with Ana Milosavljević.

The day after the victory, students in Serbia began their test of governance. In this interview, journalist Ana Milosavljević lays out all the reasons why it's important to maintain a critical eye on her country's prospects.

The catastrophic collapse of the roof of the Novi Sad train station, which claimed the lives of 16 people, profoundly affected Serbia. The tragedy became the most visible symbol of the dysfunctionality of the country's political system, especially given the renovations the station had undergone just months earlier. Following the disaster, Serbian cities were gripped by a wave of mass protests, with students taking a leading role. The student demonstrations and the resulting harsh repression profoundly affected the last two years of Serbian political life, triggering a crisis that severely tested the government. In January 2025, Serbian student protests contributed to the political climate that preceded the resignation of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević. Student mobilization, however, continued, combining demands for justice and institutional reform with calls for early elections.

Under pressure, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced his intention to resign early. In September, he dissolved parliament, called early elections for October 25, and resigned to run for prime minister.

It was in this context that the student movement decided to transform the mobilization into an electoral campaign, presenting its own list: Studentska lista – Students pobeđuju! (Students' List – Students Win!). The list managed to establish itself as the leading political force, obtaining a clear 52.9% of the vote, compared to 39.2% for the United Serb alliance led by Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

The students' historic result was also aided by the support of most other opposition parties (except for the ethnic minority lists), which chose to step aside to focus the vote on the Students' List.

Over the past two years, the movement has chosen not to have a recognizable leader, adopting a strategy aimed at limiting the risk of smear campaigns by pro-government media and preserving the collective nature of the mobilization. Consistent with this approach, candidate selection and the definition of the electoral platform have also been entrusted to university assemblies, maintaining a participatory decision-making process. The platform places the fight against corruption and transparency at its core, identifying them as priorities for the country's political renewal. This approach has allowed the movement to tap into the cross-party discontent with Vučić's governments, garnering support well beyond the traditional boundaries between right and left.

The strategies that proved particularly effective during the demonstrations and the subsequent elections, however, risk revealing their limitations once in government, with the risk of inevitably disappointing a segment of the electorate. The transition from protest to institutions thus presents the most difficult test for a movement whose strength has thus far been precisely its ability to unite a diverse front around shared objectives.

To understand the internal dynamics and perspectives of the movement, we interviewed Ana Milosavljević, a freelance journalist based in Belgrade who has collaborated with several publications, including The Guardian and regional media. She is also an activist involved in the Balkan Solidarity Network , an organization that unites people from across the region in a commitment to overcoming nationalist divisions in a common struggle against capitalism and imperialism. She defines herself as a Marxist.

> **Is this truly the beginning of an overturning of the centers of power in Serbia, or are those structures (state apparatus, media, economic networks tied to the party) entrenched enough to survive even this vote? to give an example the protests against Rio Tinto's lithium mine in the Jadar valley mobilized thousands of people. Will the new government halt this project, and more broadly, will it have a development plan that doesn't contradict its nature as a movement born in opposition to corruption in large-scale investments?**

It's not that the existing structures are tied to the former ruling party as much as they are tied to the upholding of capitalism and subservience to foreign powers. In this regard, the students' program is contradictory in some ways.

For example, Zlatko Kokanović, a well-known farmer and a key figure in the fight against Rio Tinto's lithium mine, is on the Student List. He has stated that once in power they will pass a law that permanently bans research and mining of lithium in Serbia. But the Student List also says they will continue to foster good relations with the EU, the main sponsor of the lithium mine. So far, EU officials have widely welcomed the Student List's victory with open arms. In my opinion, if the EU's economic and geopolitical interests were really threatened in Serbia, it would not have reacted as happily. Thus, it remains to be seen whether this ban will actually take effect and whether the Rio Tinto mine will officially be halted given the contradictory aims at hand.

You also mentioned a development plan. For the past 30 years, the Serbian government has focused on attracting foreign investors with cheap labor, lax environmental regulations, and large government subsidies. The students say they wish to end this dynamic by being picky about which foreign investors come to Serbia. But the laws of profit and capitalism are quite constricting in this sense. Foreign investors from Germany and the EU do not have any other incentive to build factories in Serbia other than they achieve a higher rate of profit. If that is threatened, they will no longer bother coming to Serbia, but will instead move elsewhere.

> **Now that they have a majority, the students will have to put into practice the plan they announced: a transitional caretaker government that will reform the institutions and lead the country to new free elections within twelve to eighteen months. Isn't there**

a contradiction, for a movement born out of plenums and direct democracy, in handing the government over to technocrats whom no one chose in an assembly?

As far as I'm aware, the Student List has not committed to holding new parliamentary elections within 12–18 months. They won an absolute majority of parliamentary seats and are going to form a new government in the next 30 days.

The contradiction you highlighted is an important one. Even the student's 250 candidates were chosen exclusively through student plenums, without participation from the rest of the population. Serbian citizens broadly supported this as they see students as a mystical segment of society that is "clean" so to speak, meaning they have not yet been tainted by the dirty political forces that do exist.

Of course, there is a long history of new politicians and political parties emerging that claim to be different, yet once they are in power, they oversee more of the status quo. That is in fact how Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party came to power as well. He also criticized corruption in the government and claimed to be ushering in a new era in Serbian politics.

Whether or not that happens this time remains to be seen, but I have my reservations.

And how do they plan to maintain grassroots control over that government once they are inside the institutions?

The Student List has not announced any plans or mechanisms to empower the populace to exert control over its new representatives. There have been vague statements about how they will remain "vigilant" of the new government, ready to "call out any mistake," but no concrete ways that students, or citizens as a whole, will have the ability to exert their own will. For example, students and the citizens will not have the power to recall a representative if they feel they are acting out of their interests. So, it remains to be seen how this will play out.

Also, do you think the movement will turn itself into a party and field its own candidate in the elections for the new head of state, scheduled for later this year?

I think the Student List is in essence a political party already, just in a new form, and do believe they will field their own candidate for presidential elections. Given how the parliamentary elections this past Sunday went, I think whoever they put forward has a good chance of winning.

Since the 1990s, after the Yugoslav wars, the genocides and the 1999 NATO bombing, Serbia has changed radically: privatization, which had already begun under Milošević, transformed the country.

Yet the structures of power have largely remained the same. Vučić, who served as Milošević's information minister in the 1990s, is perhaps the most visible symbol of this continuity: everything changed so that nothing would change. Today, some polls show the Studentska lista as the frontrunner. For the first time in decades, is there a real chance of a radical overhaul of Serbia's centers of power?

I am quite skeptical that the newly elected Student List will be able to fundamentally change the system in Serbia. For example, if they were actually going to be able to charge and prosecute all the corrupt politicians of the ruling party, including Vučić, I think that those leaders would have escaped and left the country. Vučić in his concession speech stated that the Serbian Progressive Party will act as an opposition in the parliament, indicating he and SNS will continue to play an active role in political life.

There is also something quite interesting that happened on Sunday worth investigating. In the hours leading up to the results and Vučić's speech, there were squadrons of police and gendarmerie surrounding key institutions in Belgrade: the National Assembly, Radio Television of Serbia, Belgrade City Hall, and the Republican Electoral Commission, where the votes were to be counted. Masked men were roaming the streets and flooding the park where the government-backed counter encampment that was filled with criminals, Ćacilend, was being resurrected.

All these facts point to a potentially violent crackdown by Vučić to remain in power. Yet, he all of a sudden did a 180 and conceded in a very unfamiliar fashion. It is worth investigating what exactly happened between 7pm and 9pm, because clearly something quite significant made Vučić have a very atypical change of heart.

The other factor to consider is ideological heterogeneity of the Student List. Similar to the overthrow of Milošević, everyone from left to right was united in one umbrella movement. But once such movements take power, they have a hard time making decisions because their once uniting principle, opposing this or that leader, dissipates.

The main reason I do not think the Student List is capable to changing the system in Serbia is because they themselves have not broken with key pillars of the existing order. They have stayed completely consistent with Serbian nationalist-chauvinism positions concerning Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Furthermore, they have no intention of changing the capitalist economic system that created and sustained Vučić: capitalism. While their main priority is addressing corruption, that corruption only applies to the wealth that the ruling elite have accumulated through "illegal means." So, if you are a capitalist who legally profits

off of workers who earned 600 euros a month, you are not a target of this new government.

What's more, the Student List ran on this idea that "experts" need to run society, and that "they will show us the way." While experts are necessary in a society, that society cannot run without the labor of millions of workers who have immense knowledge and power to oversee change in society. So, for me the Student List's attitude is paternalistic and condescending towards this class of people who don't have PhDs like the majority of the Student List.

> **In their foreign policy platform, the students said that Serbia would continue not to impose sanctions on Russia. Many in Europe expected a more pro-Western movement. How do you explain this choice? And do you think that the movement's lack of a pro-Western orientation, unlike the protests in Georgia, influenced the European Union's decision not to support the protests, turning a blind eye to the rights violations committed by Vučić?**

Serbia is almost entirely dependent on Russian gas for its energy needs. To commit to sanctions at this present moment would be suicide for the general population. The idea that Serbia should impose sanctions on Russia but not on the US and Israel for their genocidal wars around the world is quite hypocritical.

Instead of allying with one imperialist power against another, Serbia should nationalize its state oil company, NIS, which Russia's Gazprom still controls, and get to work at becoming self-sufficient for its own energy needs.

It is not true that the movement is entirely anti-EU, students walked and biked all the way to EU centers of power to appeal to the EU for help. The EU ignored them, and has instead been focused on propping Vučić up so that EU powers like Germany can maintain their access to cheap labor and the Rio Tinto lithium mine so that the EU can compete with China.

> **The process of rapprochement with the European Union for countries such as Serbia and Albania has often involved deep economic and judicial reforms. In your view, has this process made these reforms more "technical" and less politicised in public debate, or has it instead opened up new political conflicts?**

I actually don't think the EU accession process is at all about reforms, I believe that is a smoke-screen and a farce. What the EU really cares about is subservience and serving their imperialist interests. For example, we see very clearly how the EU has no problem with the violation of basic democratic rights in Serbia and Albania

precisely because both of these rulers have opened up their countries to be plundered and exploited by the EU.

I'll give you another example, in 2021 in the backdrop of mass protests against the opening of the EU-backed lithium mine, the EU opened up the environment cluster for Serbia! [1] The absurdity speaks for itself here.

The so-called economic and judicial reforms are ones that are always with the aim of better serving EU capitalists. Economic reforms are about "market reforms" and "liberalizing" the economy and judicial reforms are just a facade via which the EU can pay lip service to its claim that it "advances democracy" even while they themselves operate legal systems that above all else, prioritize the interests of the rich.

In Serbia, people are pretty clear that the EU only engages to advance its own interests. I don't believe people have any illusions about that, but the question is what is the alternative? That's why it's imperative that we clarify to people the irreconcilable interests they have with their compatriot oppressors and that only socialist revolution can lead us out of the morass!

[1] *This refers to Cluster 4, "Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity", one of the groups of chapters into which EU accession negotiations are organised. It was opened for Serbia in December 2021, at the height of the protests against the Jadar lithium mining project run by the Anglo-Australian multinational Rio Tinto.*

> **In recent years, Israel has strengthened its ties with several Balkan countries, but it is with Serbia that cooperation has become closest, both militarily and in the security sphere. In September, a drone factory 51% owned by the Israeli company[2] Elbit Systems was inaugurated near Belgrade. At the same time, Amnesty International has documented the use of Israeli technologies, such as Pegasus spyware and Cellebrite tools, to surveil Serbian activists and journalists. With the October 25 vote just days away, if the Studentska lista were to come to power, would relations with Israel change? And is this an issue being discussed in the election campaign?**

Studentska Lista has not released any united statement to communicate their position on relations with Israel. Even when their own activists and students were hacked by Israeli spyware Pegasus, they did not name Israel in their email communication with supporters.

However, Jovo Bakić, professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade and one of the students' handpicked candidates, said that should the student list win power, they will end all diplomatic ties with Israel. He did not mention closing the Elbit drone factory. Ending diplomatic ties can be symbolic if not enforced in economic and military spheres, which are frequently maintained through intermediaries. We already see this with the many states that have not officially diplomatically recognized Israel who still conduct economic trade and military cooperation with them.

Also, just a note, it appears that in the end the drone factory is not 50:50 ownership between Elbit and the Serbian state. Here's an excerpt from an N1 report:

> *BIRN's research shows that the drone assembly facility is located in the Belgrade neighborhood Makiš, while the owner of SDS Technologies is the London company CUPA Limited, reports Nova.rs.*
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> *It is interesting that the name SDS Technologies appeared in the business register of Serbia only a few hours after the opening of the factory. However, it is not about a newly founded company, but about the new name of the company CUPA Enterprises, which was registered last year for the activity of "satellite telecommunications".*
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> *Although Vučić previously announced that Serbia and Israel would share ownership in the project in a half-half ratio, the current ownership structure of SDS Technologies does not show this. The owner of SDS Technologies is the London company CUPA Limited, which is majority owned by the Greek citizen Athanasios Ramos, a person almost unknown to the general public. On the very day of the opening of the SDS Technologies factory, he received two new directors. One of them is Zion Amir, a well-known Israeli lawyer who also represents Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu before the Supreme Court of Israel.*

[2]*According to documents obtained by BIRN and Haaretz, the project envisaged a 51% stake for Elbit and 49% for Yugoimport-SDPR, while Vučić had publicly spoken of a 50-50 split. In the business register, however, the company running the factory is listed as owned by the London-based CUPA Limited*

Serbia's contemporary foreign policy choices are often described as pragmatic and multilateral, balancing relations with the European Union, China, and Russia. What role have these dynamics played in the protesters' discourse? Are they a subject of criticism, or do they not rank among their priorities?

There has not been so much elaborated discussion about what the foreign policy would be should the Studentska Lista come to power. In an interview with BBC

Serbian, Ilija Srdanović, the leader of the student list, remarked that questions of EU membership and relations with Russia would be resolved “once Serbia becomes a free and democratic country with the rule of law and free media.” He claimed that in such an environment, the public will have the opportunity to debate what is in the "best interests of Serbian citizens" when it comes to foreign policy and relations.

What this vague articulation fails to grasp is that the interests of “Serbian citizens” are very much divided and unequal. For example, this so-called “multilateralism” has primarily been orchestrated to the benefit of the Serbian bourgeoisie through both legal and illegal corruption. The Serbian working class has gained nothing by being cheap labor for EU and US multinational corporations, by producing weapons for Israel, by ceding control of our oil and gas to Russia, or by having Chinese mining companies pollute our communities and wheel off our mineral wealth to be processed and used elsewhere.

You have extensively studied the protest movements of the 1960s, both in Belgrade and Prishtina. In your view, what are the main similarities and the most significant differences compared to the mobilisations we are seeing today?

In 1968, students in Belgrade rebelled against the decadence of the “red bourgeoisie” and the deepening inequality in the so-called socialist society. In Kosovo, students called for equal national and language rights, and for an end to the colonial subjugation of the Albanian people in Kosovo.

Both in 1968 and today, protests continue to stem from anger at corruption of the ruling elite, inequality in the society, and the repression of people’s most basic democratic rights. In both Belgrade and Prishtina in 1968, protests were brutally suppressed by the police. In Prishtina, the police even killed a teenager protestor, Murat Mehmeti, for which no one was held accountable. We have seen similar levels of repression in Serbia and Albania in particular over the last few years.

Another parallel with today is the fact that the protest movements in Serbia and Kosovo in the 1960s were not at all in dialogue with one another. They had an opportunity to coordinate and unite their struggles, as they were mobilizing against the same oppressive system. Unfortunately, primarily due to Serbian chauvinism, there was no such collaboration or solidarity between the movements.

However, Lazar Stojanović, a prominent participant in the 1968 Belgrade student revolt, recounted in an interview that it was only after his own imprisonment by the Yugoslav state that he was confronted with the oppression Albanians were experiencing. It was not the detention in and of itself, but who he met in prison: Albanians themselves, and the most well-known of them. Only after meeting Adem

Demaçi and other Albanian political prisoners did he understand “how big, how long-lasting and how serious the problem with Albanians in Yugoslavia was.”

The biggest difference between then and now is the political consciousness about the larger system and class dynamics at play. For example, Belgrade students made it clear in their speeches and publications that they were not “against socialism, but for its full and consistent implementation.” They also used slogans that indicated they did not view their struggle as one for the narrow, material interest of students at universities but was indeed for the development of a society controlled by the workers. “Workers, our struggle is your struggle,” “Students in misery and workers in need,” and “We are the sons of the working people” were some slogans that could be heard at protests in Belgrade in 1968.

Similarly, the slogans used by students in Prishtina in 1968 were also militant and of a high level of political consciousness. Given the centrality of national rights (or lack thereof) to Albanians in Yugoslavia, protestors carried posters which said “We want self-Determination until secession” and “Colonial policy towards Kosovo.” Other slogans chanted at the protests included: “In one hand the pickaxe – in the other the rifle,” “Better death than captivity,” “Long live the working class and peasantry,” and “For our rights, even blood, we're going to spill.”

If we look at today's bourgeois-liberal democratic movement in Serbia or even the militantly violent protests being waged in Albania, we would struggle to find similar political articulations.

> **Within the mobilisations, ethnonationalist groups have also found space, and at times very hardline positions on the Kosovo issue have emerged, including a statement by university students. How significant have these elements been within the movement? Have they remained marginal, or have they shaped the political identity of the protests?**

At this point, these ethnonationalist forces are leading the student movement. Just the other day we saw another student statement about Serbia’s inherent right to Kosovo, showing that their chauvinist irredentist position does not differ from Vučić’s.

In the beginning of the grassroots movement in late 2024, there was not so much of this right-wing nationalist posturing. In January 2025, the students even explicitly distanced themselves from “extremist” flags, seemingly referencing the “no surrender” flag, amongst others, that were showing up at protests.

But in June 2025, at the students' Vidovdan protest (Vidovdan is a very nationalist holiday celebrating the 1389 Battle of Kosovo), when they announced their new demand of emergency parliamentary elections, things started to go downhill.

Now, after the students' goal shifted from changing Serbian society to winning votes and becoming its new rulers, the nationalist-chauvinist politics towards Bosnia and Kosovo have come out in full force. When genocidaire Ratko Mladić was given a state-sponsored funeral with military honors, the students were silent. The rationale is that by staying silent, they can possibly win over some of the hardline right-wing voters who support Vučić. Though I think that behind that veiled excuse is also the fact that many students too support and valorize Mladić.

> **During some demonstrations, slogans were heard directed at police officers in which they were called "Albanians," using a derogatory term in Serbian. At the same time, public debate in Serbia remains highly sensitive both on Kosovo and on the situation of the Albanian minority in the Preševo Valley. How do you explain the persistence of these attitudes even within circles that define themselves as progressive? What obstacles prevent a more critical discussion of these issues?**

It's very unfortunate that even without progressive circles in Serbia, there is an unwillingness to acknowledge, deal with, and overcome the deep racism against Albanians in Serbian society. This is a product of decades of dehumanization of Albanians in Serbian political and cultural arenas. The so-called left in Serbia refuses to acknowledge the history of Serbian colonialism in Kosovo and its oppression of Albanians more generally. This is part of a largely trend I like to call "progressive except Kosovo", a variation of a similar trend in the US in regards to Palestine ("progressive except Palestine"). For example, the pro-Palestine movement in Serbia does not see the irony in advocating for Palestinian self-determination while negating Kosovo's right to self-determination.

Another obstacle to such a reckoning is Western imperialism and the Western imposed collective guilt, which tends to demonize Serbians as a whole instead of differentiating between the war criminals who orchestrated the genocides in Bosnia and Kosovo and the working people of Serbia who did not in any way gain anything from that slaughter and plunder. In doing so, the nationalist bourgeoisie in Serbian has seized on the opportunity to conflate themselves (the rich and powerful) with the impoverished and exploited working people of Serbia, therein avoiding accountability and masking the nature of class society in Serbia.

> **In recent years, from Kosovo to Serbia and through Albania, we have seen protests emerging from common issues such as corruption, the concentration of power, privatisations, and social**

conditions. Do you think these experiences could lay the foundations for transnational or internationalist movements in the Balkans, or do national questions shaped by recent historical traumas remain an insurmountable obstacle?

I absolutely do think we can unite our movements but first and foremost there has to be a reckoning with the historical oppression you mentioned. Without Serbians recognizing Kosovo's right to self-determination and acknowledging its history of colonial rule against Albanians, there can be no united struggle between Serb and Albanians. Negation of such structures of oppression only pushes Albanians and others in the region into the arms of imperialist powers, who deceivingly promise Albanians protection in exchange for subservience. Unfortunately, US security guarantees aren't worth much, as we see in the Middle East where the US has not been able to prevent Iranian strikes on Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, etc. So, I would also encourage Albanians and others in the Balkans who have hitched their wagons to the US to be more realistic about what is the long-term value and viability of US dominance over your country.