Research Article

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“One out of Five Million”: Serbia’s 2018-19 Protests against Dictatorship, the Media, and the Government’s Response

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Abstract: Having fallen out of the scholarly and public spotlight after the cessation of the conflicts in the 1990s, Serbia nowadays seldom takes the central place in scholarly analysis. With the six-year rule of Aleksandar Vučić, nowadays the President of Serbia (in addition to being the former Prime Minister), however, we are of the opinion that his reign needs to be tackled from a scholarly perspective. With the diminishing of media freedoms, constant attacks on the free press, the suppression of almost all opposing political organizations, parties, and activists/politicians, Serbia is nowadays more and more often described as a “dictatorship” under the rule of one man, Aleksandar Vučić. In December 2018, a series of mass public protests started occurring regularly in several Serbian cities, all aimed against the rule of Aleksandar Vučić. Observing Serbia’s autocrat through the lens of elite theory, we tackle the protests against him, including the government’s official responses, as well as the smearing of the protests by the government-supporting media.

Keywords: Serbia; Aleksandar Vučić; autocracy; protests; media.

1 Introduction

Serbia is no stranger to anti-government protests. From the 1996-97 protests in Milošević’s Yugoslavia (Kalandadze and Orenstein 2009, Binnendijk and Marovic 2006), to the failed protests against the government in 2017, the citizenry of Serbia has had ample reasons to rise up to increasingly authoritarian governments. By late 2018, however, a new wave of protests swept through Serbia, aimed against the government and the authority-figure, the President

Aleksandar Vučić, dubbed by some “Europe’s favorite autocrat” (Eror 2018), and an “authoritarian” by others (RFE 2018). After more than six years in power, Vučić’s Serbia has seen a significant downslide in terms of media freedoms, an increase in violence, and worsening public finances; the Belgrade historian, Dubravka Stojanović, spoke how “all signs of a dictatorship are there” (Stojanović, in: Obrenović 2019). In this article, we are going to show a depiction of the 2018-19 protests, put them into a socio-political context, and analyze the media’s and government’s response to them. President Vučić’s regime will be initially confronted through the perspectives of elite theory and positionality, after which the protests themselves shall be tackled, including the government’s response to them. Special attention shall be devoted to the government-supporting media, who are continuously trying to paint the protesters in grim colours.

2 The Socio-Political Context and Elite Theory

Since their victory in the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections, the Serbian Progressive Party, formally and informally led by Aleksandar Vučić, has been in power in Serbia. Having initially taken the position of the First Vice-President of the Government in 2012 (Beta 2012), Vučić then took the position of Prime Minister after the 2014 elections (E-novine 2014), after which, in a Putinesque maneuver, got elected to the position of President in 2017. It has by now become largely accepted that the government of Serbia is essentially run by him, after his successful accumulation of personal and extra-institutional power (Pavićević, in: Drčelić 2013). During his now six-year reign, democracy has deteriorated significantly in Serbia, and the Freedomhouse report on Serbia from 2017 spoke about “repeated criticism for imposing various forms of political pressure on independent media and civil society organizations”

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(Freedomhouse 2017), as there is a “complete stranglehold on Serbia’s government, judiciary, and security services” (Eror 2018). Serbia is now deemed to have “very low stability in the economic and political as well as social senses” (Bujwid-Kurek 2016). Experts’ opinions on the 2017 elections were damning. Eric Gordy of the UCL stated that “the tight control that the governing party exercises over media, information, employment, and the distribution of benefits means that there is no level playing field and voters are not in a position to freely make an informed choice” (Gordy, in: Bechev et al. 2017), while Dimitar Bechev wrote that “Vučić’s election paves the way to the consolidation of a one-man regime in Serbia” (Bechev et al. 2017). Vučić’s regime was described as controlling and receiving massive support from the government-supporting media, painting a picture of him as both an “Übermensch” fighting for the good of his people, as well as a victim of numerous forces trying to hinder or even assassinate him (Jovanović 2018). Some scholars have called the media in Serbia “captured” (Kmezic 2018).

The theoretical-methodological question asked at this point concentrates on positioning Aleksandar Vučić’s rule within *elite theory*. Much is revealed when we put Serbia’s president through the lens of political elite theory, to be more exact, by using the positional method. According to Hoffman-Lange, there are three steps within the positional method of elite theory; the first being the decision of the number of elite members for analysis, the second being putting said members in the context of major socio-political sectors of power (Hoffmann-Lange 2018); the third goes into details about the institutions named in step two. She notes that there is a “broad scholarly agreement about the major sectors and bases of power in modern democratic societies” (Hoffmann-Lange 2018), through which we have put the figure of Aleksandar Vučić:

1. Politics. Aleksandar Vučić has constitutional power to make binding and relevant decisions.
2. Public administration. President Vučić controls the drafting and implementing of administrative policies.
3. Armed forces. Additionally, being in the position of President, he controls the country’s armed forces.
4. Private business. A number of critical journalists have noticed that the narrow clique of Vučić’s friends and family is in possession of a staggering amount of private property and finances (KRIK 2019).
5. Mass media. Vučić has by now become known as drawing power from the media, censorship of the press, and media control (Jovanović 2018, Drčelić 2013).
6. Academia and education. In 2017, 650 members of the academic, intellectual, and artistic elite made a public announcement supporting Aleksandar Vučić (B92 2017).
7. Voluntary associations. A number officially supports the President, such as the Coalition of the Workforce Disabled (Telegraf 2018).

In other words, if we choose to put *only and exclusively* Aleksandar Vučić through the lens of the positional method – i.e. checking his *position* within the elite – he checks all the seven boxes: from 1, 2, 3, and 5 completely, 4 by close proxy, and 6-7 to a certain extent, *alone*. This allows us to dub him as The Elite, with a capital T and E, in addition to being able to depict him as an authoritarian ruler, having in mind that he is one person with significant and all-pervasive intra-state power. From such a perspective, protests do not come as much of a surprise.

The 2018 protests were not the first time that a grassroots movement took place in Serbia against Aleksandar Vučić. But a year before, in April-May 2017, after the election of Aleksandar Vučić to the position of the President, the New York Times Editorial team wrote how Serbia was “edging closer to autocracy”, as “the election was marred by accusations of voter intimidation and a near total domination of Serbia’s media by Mr. Vučić and his party” (New York Times 2017). This was the reason for close to 20,000 people taking to the streets in what was later called the protest “Against dictatorship” (Nedugin 2017), with many students in the lead. Citing a number of affairs connected to the government, from the Belgrade Waterfront affair to the almost complete lack of opposition parties present in the pre-election campaign within the state television, the RTS (Radio-Television Serbia), the protesters were recorded holding banners that read “Vučić, you thief” (BIRN 2017). Vučić’s reaction was to try to connect the protests to the opposition leaders, saying that there was “a Macedonian scenario in preparation by some presidential candidates, which they will use to violently achieve what they could not through the will of the people and in election booths” (RTS 2017). At the same time, he made his disinterest in the protests known, claiming that “as long as they are peaceful, they can walk for the next ten years”. Due to the lack of organization and poor to non-existent coverage by the media, by late April 2017, the protests fizzled out. According to the long-time journalist, Teofil Pančić, the lack of political organization was both positive and negative, and lead to their failure (Pančić, in: Petrović 2017).

3 The Protests

In early September 2018, the Coalition for Serbia was formed (RTS 2018), a major congregation of nine opposition parties in Serbia that campaign against the government, one that includes parties from all sides of the political spectrum. The Coalition started campaigning in various cities in inner Serbia, among others, in Kruševac. In November 2018, the leader of a minor opposition party, the Serbian Left, Borko Stefanović, as well as one of the founders of the Coalition, Boban Jovanović, and activist Marko Dimić, were attacked by a group of hooded men and beaten up before the Kruševac gathering. Stefanović was hit at the back of the head with a metal crowbar, and was consequently hospitalized (N1 2018a). This has led to a somewhat unexpected series of protest dubbed “Stop to Bloody Shirts”, referring to the bloodied white shirt that Borko Stefanović showed to the press after the attack. Members of the opposition, together with the students from the 2017 protests, assembled for regular Saturday gatherings (Valtner 2018). Aleksandar Vučić was indirectly blamed for the incident, as the initiator of the Coalition, the opposition leader Dragan Đilas, spoke: “You, Vučić, are much more to blame than the thugs who attacked Borko and the people who lead criminal activities in Kruševac, who are very close to criminals from the North of Kosovo. You are the one who called us traitors, criminals, losers, thugs. We cannot speak our opinions freely today, we cannot walk freely, the only thing remaining is for a curfew to be ordered” (A.A. 2018).

The first meeting was not held in the form of a protest. On November 28, a public gathering was organized by the Coalition for Serbia in the hall of the Stari Grad municipality of Belgrade. Already from its inception, it had gone beyond a simple political opposition organization, with the actor Sergej Trifunović and the playwright and Art Academy professor, Siniša Kovačević, calling for the general public to rise up and protest. The first outdoors public gathering was set for 30 November in Kruševac, the place where of the incident had first been instigated (Miljković 2018b), with around a thousand people protesting with the slogan “United against dictatorship” (Božović 2018). The next gathering was announced for 8 December, on a Saturday, launching what can be seen as the first of a series of massive *public* protests (not only by political parties in the opposition).

December 8 brought the #stopkrvavimkosuljama tag to the fore (“Stop to Bloody Shirts”). Around 10,000 people took to the streets, prompting some analysts to notice that even the opposition did not expect such a response (Stojanović 2018). Protests were now set to happen every Saturday, and the number of people joining them gradually increased. Already at the second protest, there were reports of between 20,000 and 25,000 people (Popović and Miljković 2018), while some reports from later protests going with the number up to 45,000 (Maričić 2019). Very soon after the initiation of the protests, Aleksandar Vučić brushed them off: “You can walk as much as you want, I will not fulfil a single demand of yours, even if there were five million of you” (Beta 2018). This has led the main protest slogan to add “One out of five million”, with the same hashtag on Twitter, #1od5miliona.

The protests then took the weekly form of Belgrade gatherings every Saturday, with a number of public figures – none related to opposition parties – taking the podium to speak. Branislav Trifunović (brother to Sergej Trifunović), at the moment of the writing of this article, was the only one to speak regularly, with other public figures appearing as well, such as scientist Dušan Todorović, the famous actor Nikola Kojo, caricaturist Dušan Petričić, journalist Srđan Škoro, and many others, including journalist Milan Jovanović, whose house was burned to the ground in an action similar to the beating of Borko Stefanović (Ozonpress 2018). Belgrade was not the only city protesting just a couple of weeks after the initiation of the protests. By early January 2019, protests were held statewide, including in major cities such as Niš and Novi Sad, including Kragujevac and Požega in Central Serbia (N1 2019), soon to spread – already the following week – to Čačak, Bor, Prokuplje, and Zaječar (Valtner 2019).

What were the main complaints put forth by the speakers? As we shall see, almost all of them directly or indirectly point towards The Elite, that is, Aleksandar Vučić. The academic, Dušan Teodorović, spoke that there will be no fair elections while Vučić was on all the television channels five hours per day; additionally, he stressed that political affiliation, be it left or right, is of no importance at the moment, asking the public to join (Popović and Miljković 2018). Srđan Škoro accused Vučić of “taking over all institutions within the country”, addressing him directly when saying that “you put Vulin in command of the army, even though he was not competent enough to even serve in it. Our officers now salute this creature. Let them tell me if there is any other country in the world whose Minister of Health is called ‘Doctor Death’” (Miljković 2018a). The reference to Aleksandar Vulin regards the Minister of Defense, in charge of the Army, who never ever served in the army, yet had been put in the position of its minister by President Vučić himself.

The Minister of Health, Zlatibor Lončar, has held the nickname “Doctor Death” after his liaising with Serbia’s criminal underground came to light (Popović 2017) – it had nothing to do with Jack Kevorkian. Actor Nikola Kojo arguably made the most impressive and damning speech, soon to be reported by all independent media, however few in number they were:

“Aleksandar Vučić, this is the end. You have conducted your blitzkrieg, the attack on the capital and resources and wisdom of this people. You have succeeded, one has to admit, you have done this job professionally. You have used our money, our lack of courage and readiness to resist your brigandry and carelessness. You have raped and blackmailed the entire population. You have raped with your press conferences, regular ones and special ones, threatening ones, denigrating ones ... you have suspended justice and law and closed all institutions. You decided to be the institution, the law, and the justice ... you have put a stop to our life and promoted suffering and torture as the period between the cradle and the grave ... This is why we call upon you to abdicate, you king of everything you think of. Abdicate, you self-crowned one ... Aleksandar, you will be forever written in history as a dictator”. (P.D. 2019)

By January 2019, the political parties within the opposition have been almost completely removed from the protests, which have turned into a full grassroots movement that was now giving “pointers” to the opposition in order for it to get the protester’s support in the battle against the autocrat (Kovačević 2019). In late January, 105 members of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade, published an official letter of support for the protests. The undersigned have written that they, as scientists, have noticed “numerous signs of a dictatorship”. They wrote about the citizens having their freedoms stomped upon, that the institutions have been demolished, that public interests have taken second place to personal and party ones, that the tabloid press was hounding its political opponents, and that “Serbia is being systemically destroyed by this government” (Faculty of Philosophy 2019). But a couple of days afterwards, the Faculty of Political Science added its voice to the public sphere, publishing its own support for the protests, saying that the “citizens of Serbia have risen their voices against violence, injustice, the stifling of freedoms, the crumbling of institutions, the devaluation of democratic practices, and media hounding” (Faculty of Political Science 2019), followed by the Faculty of Law, and the Faculty of Theatric Arts (Talas 2019), as well as a gross of professors from a number of institutions throughout the country, including the University of Niš, University of Novi Sad, and University of Kragujevac (Danas 2019a).

As the protests went on, several demands of the protester were slowly formulated, moving beyond the initial and fairly broad “Stop to Bloody Shirts”. The resignation of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Nebojša Stefanović, was one of them (Stevanović 2018). The protesters furthermore asked that the murder of the pacifist North Kosovo Serbian politician, Oliver Ivanović, be solved, as well as for the attackers on Borko Stefanović to be found, including the giving back of the unconstitutionally lowered pensions and salaries and the cancellation of plagiarized and false diplomas (Janković 2018). By January 2019, the main demand of the protests was clear, and it was the resignation by the President Vučić himself (RFE 2019). How did he react?

4 Governmental response and the pro-government media

An interesting and revealing issue is the early timing of Vučić’s initial response, mentioned in the paragraphs above – that even if five million people took to the streets, he would not give in to their demands. This was, however, *before* any particular demands were formulated by the protesters. The essentially only tangible demand was visible in the initial tag of the protests, which was an insistence on putting a stop to “bloody shirts”; Vučić’s response was a resounding, dismissive negative. One of Vučić’s often used yes-men, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Nebojša Stefanović, took to a press conference to try to convince the public of a minimal, irrelevant number of protesters after the third round of protests, where non-governmental estimates spoke about 35,000-40,000 people. According to him, there was only 5,000 protesters. His “methodology” consisted of capturing a single shot of the protest, ignoring the massive lines of people behind and in front of it, and calling it a “realistic estimate” (Radio Free Europe 2018). He additionally tried to convince his audience that “when the line is moving, an optical illusion is being created that there is much more people than when they are standing” (Mastilović Jasnić 2018). The Vice-President of the Progressive Party, one Milenko Jovanov, spoke that the protests against violence was “organized by violent people” (Informer 2018a).

Special attention, however, needs to be given to the media, which have seen significant scholarly interest in view of their not uncommon support of totalitarian regimes (Zimmermann 2018, Wolin 2017). In light of the heavy reliance and control of the media by Aleksandar Vučić (Jovanović 2018, Eror 2018, Drčelić 2013), the Vučić-supporting media have gone to great lengths in trying to misinform their audiences about the protests, especially the most vocal among them, the daily *Informer*. The *Informer*, known for its content's severe lack of connection with reality, fake news, and character assassination pieces, wrote about one of the informal protest leaders, Sergej Trifunović. He was presented as an "errand boy" for the opposition, who has "advanced on the ladder of the opposition's madness" by presenting the "first demand of the protesters", which is "what the opposition really wants". According to the *Informer*, Trifunović wants to "give cocaine to the people" (*Informer* 2018b). Even though, as we have mentioned, the protests got significantly removed from the political leaders and parties of the opposition, the *Informer* kept trying to paint the protesters and their informal leaders as being controlled by the opposition leadership-figures. Trifunović was described as a "political poltroon of Dragan Đilas", the latter of which has an "evil plan" to "storm into the Radio-Television Serbia's premises" (*Informer* 2018d). When a journalist from the independent weekly NIN made a special report about the informal student leaders of the protest, his article was described by the *Informer* as "total madness", saying that a "reporter from NIN organizes the protests to topple Vučić with Đilas!" (*Informer* 2019). Trying to pin the protests on the opposition was a continuous running theme, as the *Informer* kept repeating that "the organizers of the protests are actually Dragan Đilas and Boško Obradović" (*Informer* 2018c). The exact same modus operandi was seen in the daily *Alo!*, that, together with the *Informer*, stands at the frontline of Vučić-supporting media (Jovanović 2018). It claimed that "the protest is organized by the Coalition for Serbia's leader Dragan Đilas", and that "its goal is the violent takeover of governmental power in Serbia" (*Alo!* 2018a); another article compared the protesters to the Ku Klux Klan, claiming they reminded of the "evil fascist organization" (*Alo!* 2018b). The similarity of the character assassination pieces was incidentally – and finally – uncovered by the *Južne Vesti* independent portal on 23 January 2019, when, as the daily *Danas* wrote, it was confirmed for the first time that there is a standing order to several media to attack specific protesters (*Danas* 2019b). In this case, Dragan Đilas and Sergej Trifunović were seen to be a target in an order to compare them with Hitler by Nebojša Siljanović, who sent the email to several media owned by one Radoica Milosavljević, who owns eight media, and is known to be connected to the high-ranking member of the Progressive Party, Bratislav Gašić, who was put in the position of the Head of the Intelligence Agency by Aleksandar Vučić himself (Radojević 2018). In a bizarre turn of events, in late January 2019, Vučić spoke in Davos about the freedom of the press, claiming that his political opponents want to "tie his tongue and prohibit him from speaking" (*Beta* 2019).

The arguably best known instance of extremely biased reporting was that of one young reporter from the Studio B television, known to show extreme support for the President and his government, Barbara Životić. We will present the report here in its entirety, for reasons of clarity:

"We are here at the Plateau in front of the Faculty of Philosophy, a very small number of people has gathered, much smaller than expected. Actually, everything was peaceful, except for that incident where people were pushing each other and hitting each other with umbrellas. As you said, this was, of course, expected, on such a protest. It was allegedly supposed to be a spontaneous, peaceful protest of rioting citizens against violence. Of course, the leader and main financier of the opposition, Dragan Đilas, is behind the protest, he financed and organized it alone, he gathered allegedly non-party related people in order to summon the largest possible number of people. Far too few people took part in the protest. Before that, pensioners from Stari Grad were complaining that they had been receiving messages exactly from Dragan Đilas in order for them to take part in the protest. They complained that they were being disturbed in the late hours and wondered where they got their numbers, since they never left their information anywhere. As I mentioned, the protest was organized against violence, under the slogan "Stop to Bloody Shirts", which is a great, great hypocrisy, because precisely those people who organized the protests are calling for lynching, rape, violence, coup d'état, and we consider this to be very, very hypocritical. Especially in this situation where our state needs peace and stability due to all the happenings in Kosovo, of course they are organizing protests" (Đorđević 2018).

The KRIK investigative journalist network portal analyzed the report in detail, finding numerous faults within it. As presented by Jelena Đorđević of the KRIK group, Barbara Životić has manipulated facts and reported with bias (Đorđević 2018). As it turned out, nobody was "hitting each other with umbrellas", there were no reports of Dragan Đilas messaging anybody; note that there *were* reports in 2018 – a significant number of them – of Aleksandar Vučić sending unsolicited propaganda to pensioners in November 2018 instead (Jeremić 2018). There was furthermore no proof whatsoever – having in mind that it never happened – that any of the peaceful protesters called for "lynching, rape, violence, coup d'état". Note that scholarship has already described Vučić's proclivity to invent potential coups

and unknown threats to him when he tries to present himself as a victim working for the benefit of the country and its people (Jovanović 2018). The musician Milan Stanković, known also under the stage name SevdahBABY, turned her report, via autotune, into an instant hit, dubbing the piece “Barbara, the Singing Bot” (N1 2018b), quickly to be played each Saturday during the protests.

On the note of music and the audio background of the protests, the internationally known antifascist songs such as *Bella, ciao* and *Ay, Carmela* (in a local version) are played every Saturday, including the *Ulični hodač* (Street walker) by the known rock band *Partibrejkers*, the *Goblini*’s song *Ima nas gomila* (There is a lot of us), and the song *Živeti slobodno* (To live freely) by Đorđe Balašević, author and songwriter known throughout former Yugoslavia.

5 Conclusion

On the pages above, we have presented the ongoing protests against the increasingly autocratic regime of the Republic of Serbia’s President, Aleksandar Vučić. Unlike the 2017 protests, the 2018/19 instance has shown no signs of abating, and has even increased in intensity, from the number of people protesting, via the number of cities joining, to having received support from a number of public figures and several hundred university-based scholars, most of which have so far kept silent. Having initially put President Vučić alone through the lens of positionality within elite theory, and having seen that he alone controls most-to-all instances of sociopolitical power, the protest were seen as a natural consequence of a six-year rule of one authoritarian.

It is difficult to predict the future success of the anti-Vučić protests or lack thereof. From what has been seen, the 2018/19 protests show more potential than the similar ones from 2017 by sheer size and vigor. It is furthermore difficult to predict the erratic behavior of President Vučić. He has mentioned that organizing a new round of elections (the fourth since his coming into power) would be a solution to the protesters’ demands, yet this remains to be seen. Recent history tells us that Aleksandar Vučić takes to the polls extremely often in order to cement his reign and cash in on his popularity; he might be tempted to do that yet again, before the protests spread even more into rural Serbia, where the only information about them is given by the Vučić-supporting television and press.

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