Social Economic Roots of Youth Mobilization in Serbia (2024-2025)

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores how economic problems and social exclusion shaped youth protests in Serbia during 2024–2025. The main question is: How did these conditions influence the way young people became politically active? The thesis concentrates on protesters' motivation, their agenda, as well as tactics of their organization, mobilization, and networking. Based on interviews with student activists, analysis of protest materials, and observations of demonstrations, this study shows that high youth unemployment, low wages, and a lack of job opportunities young people to protest. Protesters made clear demands for better jobs, fair wages, and changes in education. Furthermore, socio-economic conditions influenced how the movement was organized and how it survived. Because students had limited resources, they used social media and digital tools to organize, share information, and support each other at low cost. University buildings became places for meetings and shelters. To keep the movement going, students started fundraising campaigns and received help from the Serbian diaspora. After the Novi Sad train station tragedy, the movement grew by connecting with workers, teachers, and parents who faced similar socio-economic problems. The research contributes to contemporary research on (decentralized) youth mobilization and its endurance even in troubled socio-economic conditions.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and insightful feedback of my supervisor, Professor Inna Melnykovska.

I would also like to thank my parents for their unwavering support and belief in me during my studies at Central European University.

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Introduction

Existing research on youth activism in post-communist societies paints a rather bleak picture. Scholars like Tătar (2015) argue that youth activism in these contexts is typically fragmented, sporadic, and easily dissipated. The reasons for this are well-documented: weak institutions, a lack of meaningful political representation, and chronically low trust in both government and civil society. Young people, it is said, are more likely to disengage or emigrate than to organize. When activism does occur, it is often short-lived, divided by regional, ethnic, or class lines, and stifled by the absence of strong organizational structures. In short, the expectation is clear: post-communist youth movements are supposed to be weak, divided, and ultimately ineffectual.

Yet, the events in Serbia during 2024–2025 present a genuine event. Against all odds, Serbian youth have managed to build a movement that is not only large and visible, but also strikingly cohesive and resilient as shown in this MA thesis. The collapse of the Novi Sad train station-a tragedy that exposed deep-seated corruption and governmental neglect-did not simply trigger a wave of outrage. It catalyzed a sustained, nationwide movement marked by discipline, creativity, and an ability to adapt in the face of pressure. Instead of fading after a few days of protest, the movement grew: students occupied universities, organized assemblies, and created new civic spaces. They drew in parents, teachers, engineers, and even the Serbian diaspora. Their activism was leaderless yet coordinated, messy yet effective, and-most surprisingly-persistent.

This surprising strength raises important questions. Why did Serbian youth, facing high unemployment, economic insecurity, and exclusion from political decision-making, become so motivated and united in protest during 2024–2025? How did these specific socio-economic conditions contribute to the unity and effectiveness of the movement—especially among

students from the University of Niš and the University of Belgrade—when existing theory would predict fragmentation and decline?

To answer these questions, it is important to look at the everyday realities of young people in Serbia. The economic situation is especially important. In 2024, youth unemployment in Serbia was about 26%, one of the highest rates in Europe. Many young people with a university degree could not find good jobs or had to work in unstable, low-paying positions. Widespread corruption and limited opportunities for advancement led to a sense of exclusion from both the economy and politics. This created a generation that not only felt frustrated, but also betrayed by the very institutions meant to support them.

Instead of dividing young people, these shared problems actually brought them together, particularly students from Niš and Belgrade. The feeling that "we are all next" to suffer from state failure became a unifying force. The movement's slogan—"Mi smo sledeći" ("We Are Next")—captured this sense of common risk and collective demand for change, bringing together students, workers, and families across both cities.

The movement also found new ways to organize. Because socio-economic hardship—such as high unemployment, economic insecurity, and exclusion—has led to widespread distrust and the perception that formal channels for participation are blocked, young activists have turned to creative, decentralized forms of protest. University occupations, street performances, digital campaigns, and collective assemblies have replaced traditional hierarchical structures as a result. Students from Niš and Belgrade used social media and digital tools to coordinate actions, share information, and mobilize support, creating a horizontal, leaderless organization that made the movement harder to suppress, more flexible, and more inclusive.

By examining previous protests like the Bulldozer Revolution, we can better understand how the current movement differs or builds upon earlier efforts. This comparison helps to show

whether the 2024–2025 protests have truly created something new—such as ongoing civic engagement and student networks—or if they have simply repeated patterns from the past. Referring to scholars like Nikolayenko (2012) allows us to connect our findings to broader debates about youth activism and its long-term impact, making the analysis more relevant and well-supported.

However, socio-economic conditions are not the only explanation. Other factors—such as the use of digital media, past protest experience, and the broader political environment—also shaped the movement. This thesis will show how economic hardship and exclusion helped motivate and unite young people, but will also examine how these and other factors combined to produce a movement that was effective and well-organized.

In the following chapters, this thesis will:

- Review theories of youth activism and collective action in post-communist societies, and discuss why they often predict weakness and fragmentation;
- Examine the specific socio-economic and political conditions facing Serbian youth in 2024–2025, including unemployment, precarity, and exclusion;
- Trace the development of the student-led protests, from the Novi Sad tragedy to the emergence of a strong, lasting movement, with a special focus on how students from the University of Niš and the University of Belgrade united and sustained their cooperation;
- To explain how the Serbian youth movement achieved unity and effectiveness, this thesis will analyse the strategies and organizational forms—such as horizontal structures, decentralized protest methods, and creative use of digital media—that served as key mechanisms for sustaining the movement between students in both cities. These

elements are treated as independent variables that contributed to its unity and effectiveness.

By exploring the gap between theoretical expectations and empirical reality, this thesis aims not only to explain the Serbian case, but also to contribute to a deeper understanding of how youth movements can thrive under adverse conditions. The analysis will carefully examine how socio-economic hardship, political exclusion, and creative organizing strategies enabled students from Niš and Belgrade to overcome typical barriers and build a movement that was both unified and effective. In the discussion section, these findings will be used to assess and potentially modify existing theories of youth activism and collective action, highlighting where the Serbian experience aligns with or diverges from established explanations. The conclusions will then draw out the broader implications for scholars of social movements, policymakers, and young activists, showing how insights from Serbia—especially the cooperation between Niš and Belgrade—can inform efforts to build more inclusive and effective forms of civic engagement, even if the focus remains on lessons learned within the local context.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Theoretical context

Most academic writing about youth activism in post-communist societies, including Serbia, paints a rather pessimistic picture. Authors such as Tătar (2015) and Howard (2003) argue that youth movements in these contexts are typically weak, fragmented, and short-lived. The main explanations in the literature point to weak institutions, low levels of trust in government, and few opportunities for meaningful political participation. According to this view, young people are more likely to disengage or emigrate than to organize. When youth do protest, these actions are usually small, divided by region or class, and rarely lead to lasting change. This is the dominant expectation: youth activism in post-communist societies is supposed to be ineffective and easy to dissipate.

To explain these patterns, scholars have relied on several influential theories. The first is **Resource Mobilization Theory** (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), which claims that social movements need resources—such as money, networks, skills, and media attention—to succeed. If young people lack these resources, their movements are unlikely to last. However, a gap in this theory is that it often overlooks how movements can emerge and persist even when resources are scarce. It does not fully address how informal networks, digital tools, or community support can sometimes substitute for traditional resources, especially in contexts where youth are marginalized.

The second major approach is **Political Process Theory** (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001), which focuses on the political environment. This theory suggests that movements are more likely to arise and succeed when there are "openings" or opportunities—such as government crises, scandals, or moments of public outrage. Yet, a key gap here is that the theory does not explain why, even when such openings exist, youth movements in post-communist countries

often remain fragmented or fail to build momentum. It also pays less attention to the everyday barriers that discourage young people from participating, such as widespread distrust, fear of repression, or lack of experience in collective action.

A third perspective is **Framing Theory** (Snow & Benford, 1988), which emphasizes the importance of how movements present their cause. If a movement creates a strong, simple, and emotional message—a "frame"—it can attract more supporters. While this theory helps explain why some protest slogans or stories catch on, it does not fully address how frames are built in environments where people are divided and distrustful, or how frames can overcome deep social and political barriers. Another gap is that framing theory does not explain how frames are maintained over time, especially in movements without clear leaders or stable organizations.

Across all these theories, there are several common gaps when it comes to understanding youth activism in post-communist societies:

- **First**, most theories expect that economic hardship, political exclusion, and weak institutions will make it harder for young people to organize. They do not explore how these very challenges might sometimes act as unifying forces, or how shared experiences of hardship can create new forms of solidarity.
- **Second**, the literature tends to assume that successful movements need strong leaders and formal organizations, but does not explain how leaderless, horizontal, or decentralized movements can coordinate and persist.
- **Third**, there is little discussion of how youth movements can quickly connect with other social groups—like workers, teachers, or parents—and expand into broader coalitions, especially in societies with a history of social divisions and distrust.

In summary, while Resource Mobilization, Political Process, and Framing theories each provide useful tools for understanding youth activism, they do not fully explain why or how youth movements sometimes emerge, grow, and persist in difficult environments like post-communist Serbia. The main gaps in the literature are: (1) the limited understanding of how resource-poor and excluded youth can still mobilize; (2) the lack of attention to leaderless and horizontal forms of organization; and (3) the missing explanation of how youth movements can rapidly build alliances across different social groups. These gaps are important for understanding the dynamics of youth mobilization in Serbia during 2024–2025, and they set the stage for the case analysis that follows in this thesis.

1.2 Case Specific Literature

However, the events in Serbia during 2024–2025 challenge this narrative. Against all odds, Serbian youth managed to build a movement that was not only large and visible but also cohesive and resilient. The collapse of the Novi Sad train station—a tragedy that exposed deep corruption and neglect—did not simply trigger a wave of outrage. Instead, it catalyzed a sustained, nationwide movement marked by discipline, creativity, and adaptability. Students occupied universities, organized assemblies, and created new civic spaces. They drew in parents, teachers, engineers, and even the Serbian diaspora. Their activism was leaderless yet coordinated, messy yet effective, and persistent. This raises a central question: how did Serbian youth, facing the same disadvantages as their peers elsewhere, overcome the usual barriers to collective action?

To answer this, it is necessary to move beyond the idea that weak institutions automatically produce weak activism. Instead, the Serbian case shows how young people mobilized resources, seized political opportunities, and built solidarity through powerful frames. Three theoretical perspectives are especially useful here: Resource Mobilization Theory, Political

Process Theory, and Framing Theory. Each offers a different lens for understanding how the Serbian movement emerged and sustained itself.

Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) emerged in the 1970s, with McCarthy and Zald (1977) arguing that successful movements are those that can effectively gather and deploy resources—money, people, skills, and media attention. RMT sees the success of activism not as a spontaneous reaction to grievances, but as the result of strategic resource gathering, organizational capacity, and alliance-building. In Serbia, students occupied university buildings, turning lecture halls into meeting spaces and dormitories. At the Faculty of Political Sciences, volunteers set up a "Freedom Library" with donated books, making it a hub for learning and discussion. Food stations were organized so everyone had meals, allowing protesters to stay longer and focus on their goals. The movement was not limited to students. Parents, teachers, engineers, and doctors joined in, showing broad support. Retired engineers publicly explained that corruption led to the train station collapse, while the Serbian Medical Chamber provided free first aid at protests. The diaspora also played a role, organizing solidarity events in cities like Vienna and Berlin, and sending donations.

Digital media became another crucial resource. Students used social media to share videos and updates, spreading their message nationwide. Media students set up a live-stream studio in an occupied building, broadcasting assemblies and performances online. Volunteers created a website to document every protest, demand, and government response. Although the movement had no single leader, it was well-organized. Leadership roles rotated, and decisions were made in open assemblies. This horizontal structure made the movement inclusive and resilient, showing that even without formal leaders, effective resource mobilization is possible. RMT, however, may underplay the importance of culture, emotion, and identity in youth activism, and struggles to explain how movements can persist without clear leaders or centralized coordination, as seen in Serbia.

Political Process Theory (PPT), developed by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, shifts the focus from internal movement dynamics to the broader political environment. PPT argues that movements are shaped by the opportunities and constraints provided by the political system. Movements are more likely to emerge and succeed when there are openings or cracks in the system—such as government crises, scandals, or moments of public outrage. In Serbia, the collapse of the Novi Sad train station was a clear "political opportunity." It exposed deep-seated corruption and governmental neglect, triggering widespread anger and a sense that "enough is enough." The government's slow and inadequate response only deepened public frustration. Students already had networks in their universities, but they quickly reached out to teachers, parents, and professionals. These networks provided the infrastructure for rapid mobilization. The crisis also made it harder for authorities to use harsh repression without risking even greater backlash. The movement adapted to government tactics. When authorities tried to block social media or ban gatherings, activists used encrypted messaging apps and held "pop-up" protests that were harder to suppress. This flexibility and responsiveness were key to maintaining momentum. The movement's slogan, "Mi smo sledeći" ("We Are Next"), was itself a response to the political context, capturing the sense that anyone could be the next victim of state failure, making the movement's cause feel urgent and universal. PPT helps explain why the movement started when it did and how it responded to government actions, but it pays less attention to how movements build unity and meaning among participants.

Framing Theory, developed by Snow and Benford, focuses on how movements shape the way people understand problems and solutions. A "frame" is a story or lens that helps people make sense of what is happening. Movements use frames to identify what is wrong, propose what should be done, and motivate people to act. In Serbia, framing was central to the movement's ability to unite diverse groups. The slogan "Mi smo sledeći" ("We Are Next") captured the sense that anyone could be the next victim of government failure. This frame was powerful

because it was inclusive, urgent, and emotional. It told people that the problem was not just about students or one group, but about everyone's future. The movement used art, music, and street performances to spread this frame. Real stories of people affected by corruption made the problem feel immediate and personal. Social media campaigns and viral videos helped the message reach people across the country and abroad. The frame was not only about fear and anger, but also about hope and solidarity. It called for unity in the face of adversity and offered a vision of a better, more accountable society. Framing Theory explains why the movement could unite people from different backgrounds, but it does not address how resources are gathered or how movements respond to political opportunities. It is most powerful when combined with other theories.

The Serbian youth movement succeeded because it combined the strengths identified by all three theories. Resource mobilization provided the practical tools and networks needed to sustain protest. Political process theory explains why the movement emerged when it did and how it navigated the political environment. Framing theory shows how a powerful, inclusive message united people and kept them motivated. Most research on youth activism in post-communist countries expects weakness and fragmentation, yet in Serbia, shared hardship and exclusion became sources of solidarity rather than division. The movement's horizontal structure, creative tactics, and emotional framing allowed it to persist and grow, even in the face of repression and uncertainty. This case suggests that under certain conditions, the very factors expected to weaken youth activism—economic hardship, political exclusion, and weak institutions—can instead become the foundation for a resilient and innovative movement.

The events in Serbia during 2024–2025 thus offer a powerful counterpoint to the dominant narrative in the literature. Rather than confirming the expectation of fragmentation and failure, the Serbian youth movement demonstrates how adversity can be transformed into collective strength. The movement's success was not inevitable, nor was it the result of a single event. It

was built on years of frustration, the forging of new alliances, and the creative use of both old and new forms of protest. It was, above all, a testament to the capacity of young people to adapt, organize, and inspire change—even in the most challenging circumstances.

By exploring the gap between theoretical expectations and empirical reality, this thesis aims not only to explain the Serbian case, but also to contribute to a deeper understanding of how youth movements can thrive under adverse conditions. The findings will have implications for scholars of social movements, policymakers, and young activists seeking to build more inclusive and resilient forms of civic engagement. The Serbian experience shows that when young people are pushed to the margins, they do not necessarily retreat into apathy or despair. Instead, they may find new ways to come together, challenge the status quo, and demand a better future for themselves and their society.

2. Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyze the processes and mechanisms through which students from the University of Niš and the University of Belgrade, despite differences in location, faculty, and background, managed to unite and sustain a coordinated protest movement against the regime during 2024–2025. The case is selected due to the unusual and unexpected scale of student cooperation across two major Serbian cities, which defies the conventional wisdom that youth activism in Serbia is fragmented or short-lived. The research aims to generate insights that may be relevant for understanding youth mobilization in similar post-communist contexts.

2.1 Case Selection and Scope

The focus is on two leading Serbian universities: the University of Niš and the University of Belgrade. These institutions were chosen not only because of their size and influence, but because they became focal points for student mobilization and, crucially, for the emergence of a unified protest front. The case is bounded temporally from January 2024 to June 2025, encompassing the period before, during, and after the key triggering events (such as the Novi Sad train station tragedy), and spatially by the main campuses and digital spaces where student activism was organized.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The central research question is: How and why did students from Niš and Belgrade manage to overcome local boundaries and protest as a unified movement against the regime?

The analysis is guided by two hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Economic Hardship as a Foundation for Unity

  This hypothesis posits that shared experiences of economic insecurity—such as high youth unemployment, low wages, and bleak job prospects—created a sense of

common struggle among students in both Niš and Belgrade. Economic hardship is hypothesized not only to motivate protest but to serve as a bridge, allowing students to recognize their problems as collective rather than isolated. The expectation is that economic grievances featured prominently in protest materials, social media discourse, and student testimonies, and that these shared grievances facilitated collaboration and solidarity.

- Hypothesis 2: Social Exclusion as a Catalyst for Collective Action

  The second hypothesis suggests that widespread feelings of exclusion from decision-making processes—whether within universities or in national politics—pushed students to seek alliances beyond their immediate environment. In this view, exclusion was not experienced as an individual or local problem but as a generational one, prompting students to connect across cities and faculties. The hypothesis anticipates that protest slogans, manifestos, and online discussions will reflect themes of exclusion, and that students will explicitly reference the need to join forces to amplify their voices and demands.

- Hypothesis 3: Media and Digital Platforms as Enablers of Coordination and Unity

  This hypothesis says that the way news and social media talked about the protests, and how students used social media themselves, helped bring students from Niš and Belgrade together. When independent media (like N1) showed the protests in a good light, more people felt safe to join. When other media (like Pink TV) tried to make the protests look bad, students used social media to share their own stories and show the truth. By using group chats, hashtags, and online meetings, students from both cities could plan together, support each other, and make their movement stronger.

2.2 Data Collection

To test these hypotheses and reconstruct the process of unification, the research relies on several types of qualitative data:

1. Protest Materials

   A systematic collection of protest flyers, banners, manifestos, meeting minutes, and other documents produced by student organizations at both universities will be undertaken. These materials will be analyzed to trace the evolution of protest demands, the emergence of shared language and symbols, and the articulation of unity across cities. Special attention will be paid to references to economic hardship and social exclusion, as well as to evidence of coordinated messaging.

2. Social Media Analysis

   Given the centrality of digital communication in contemporary protest movements, the study will conduct an in-depth analysis of public posts, hashtags, group chats, and event pages on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, and Facebook. The analysis will focus on:

   a. How students from Niš and Belgrade initiated contact and maintained coordination.
   b. The spread of protest calls, slogans, and visual symbols across both cities.
   c. Evidence of real-time information sharing, mutual support, and joint planning.
   d. The role of viral content in building a sense of collective identity and urgency.

3. Student Interviews

   Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two students actively engaged in the protests:

a. A fourth-year Communications student at the Faculty of Philology, University of Niš, who participated in the significant protest march from Niš to Belgrade on March 15, 2025.
b. A fifth-year Medicine student at the University of Belgrade who also attended multiple protests during the period.

These interviews explore the students' personal experiences of economic hardship and social exclusion, their motivations for joining the protests, practical steps and challenges involved in cross-city coordination, perceptions of what made unity possible, obstacles they faced, and reflections on their struggle as part of a broader generational movement.

4. Media Coverage

   Mainstream and alternative media reports will be reviewed to assess how the protests and the theme of student unity were portrayed in the public sphere. This includes coverage of joint actions, interviews with student leaders, and commentary on the broader significance of the movement.

5. Official Data and Reports

   Relevant statistical data on youth unemployment, student representation, and economic indicators will be gathered from government and NGO sources. These data will be used to contextualize the grievances articulated by protestors and to compare the objective conditions in Niš and Belgrade.

Analytical Strategy

The analysis will proceed by triangulating these diverse sources to reconstruct the chronology and dynamics of student unification. The following steps will be taken:

- Mapping the Timeline: A detailed timeline of key protest events, joint actions, and moments of cross-city coordination will be constructed.
- Coding Protest Materials and social media: Protest materials and social media content will be coded for references to economic hardship, social exclusion, unity, and solidarity. Instances of shared slogans coordinated campaigns, and mutual support will be highlighted.
- Thematic Analysis of Interviews: Interview transcripts will be analyzed for recurring themes related to the hypotheses, such as shared grievances, experiences of exclusion, and the process of alliance-building.
- Comparative Contextualization: The objective conditions (e.g., unemployment rates, political representation) in Niš and Belgrade will be compared to assess whether material hardship and exclusion were similarly experienced and articulated.
- Synthesis: The findings from all data sources will be synthesized to identify the mechanisms that enabled students to overcome local boundaries and act as a unified movement. Particular attention will be paid to the interplay between digital communication, shared grievances, and the practical organization of joint actions.

Justification and Limitations

This methodology is justified by the need to capture both the structural conditions (economic and political) and the agency of students in forging unity. By combining documentary analysis, digital ethnography, and personal testimony, the research aims to provide a holistic account of how and why students from Niš and Belgrade were able to build a sustained and coordinated protest movement. The main limitation is the reliance on a small number of interviews, but this is mitigated by the breadth of documentary and digital data analyzed.

3. Empirical Analysis

In this section, I want to find out how students from the University of Niš and the University of Belgrade were able to come together and organize strong protests during 2024–2025. To do this, I am testing three main ideas, or hypotheses, about what brought students together and helped them stay united. First, I look at whether shared economic problems made students feel connected and ready to act as a group. Second, I check if feeling left out of important decisions pushed students to join forces across cities. Third, I examine how the media and social media helped students communicate, organize, and respond to negative news. By testing these three ideas, I hope to understand what really made it possible for students from different places to work together and make their voices heard.

3.1 Testing Hypothesis 1: Economic Hardship Sparks Mobilization

In this section, I test the hypothesis that economic hardship—such as high unemployment, low wages, and poor job prospects—was the main reason students from Niš and Belgrade united in protest. The following evidence shows how these problems were experienced in both cities and how they became the foundation for a national youth movement.

Let's start with the facts. In 2024, being young in Serbia was tough if you wanted a job or a stable future. The youth unemployment rate was about 26%-one of the highest in Europe (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). That means more than one in four young people looking for work could not find a job.

Even for those who did find work, things were not easy. Many jobs were temporary or paid very little. Young people often talked about "working just to survive," not to build a future. According to the Youth Survey Serbia (2024), over 60% of young Serbians said they felt "little or no hope" for their economic future. Many believed the system was stacked against them.

These numbers weren't just statistics in a report. They were visible everywhere-on protest banners, in conversations at student assemblies, and in social media posts. For example, at the protests, students held signs reading:

- "Diploma, pa na biro" ("Get your diploma, then go to the unemployment office")
- "Nema posla, nema budućnosti" ("No jobs, no future")

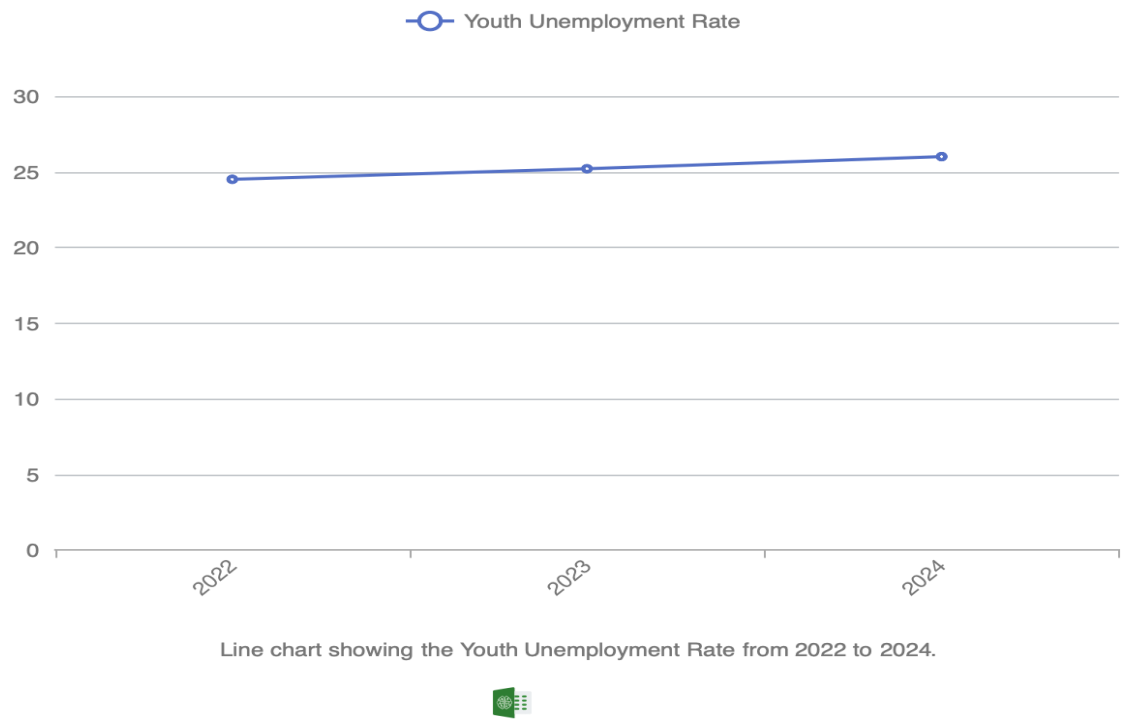
These slogans became rallying cries, uniting students, workers, and families.

In Niš and Belgrade, these economic pressures were especially visible. In Belgrade, the capital, large-scale student protests in December 2024 and March 2025 drew tens of thousands to the streets, with participants highlighting the lack of stable jobs and low wages for graduates. In Niš, the "Student Edict" protest on March 1, 2025, lasted for 18 hours and saw similar demands for economic justice, as students from both cities voiced their frustrations with the system. Unemployment and precarious work were central themes in both cities, with young people from Niš and Belgrade sharing stories of struggling to make ends meet despite having university degree.

Visualization Tools:

Figure 1: Youth Unemployment Rate in Serbia, 2022–2024

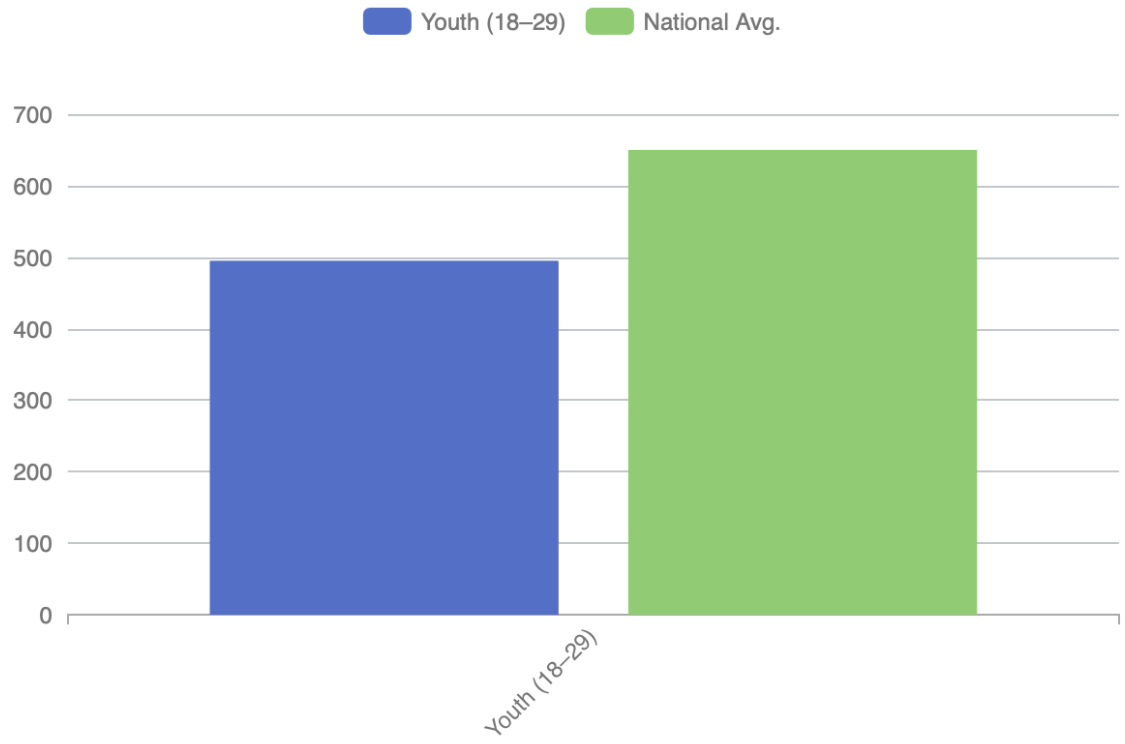
The line graph shows a steady increase from 24.5% in 2022 to 26% in 2024, highlighting a worsening job market for young people (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024)



Line chart showing the Youth Unemployment Rate from 2022 to 2024.

Figure 2: Average Monthly Wage (2024)

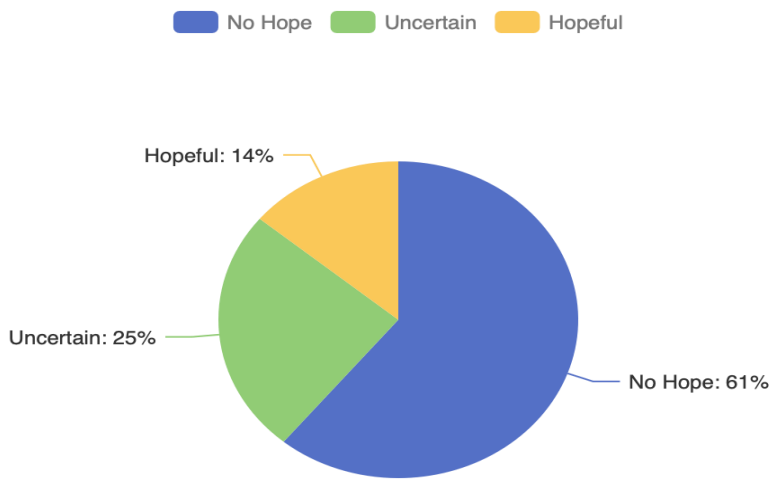
The bar chart compares youth wages (495 EUR) to the national average (650 EUR), making it clear that young people earn much less than older workers.



Bar chart comparing the average monthly wage of young workers to the national average wage for all workers in 2024.

Figure 3: Youth Outlook on the Future (2024)

The pie chart shows that 61% of young people feel "no hope" for their economic future, while only 14% feel hopeful (Youth Survey Serbia, 2024).



Sources:

- Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2024)
- Youth Survey Serbia (2024)

Why Do These Numbers Matter?

These charts make it easy to see the problems at a glance:

- **Rising unemployment** means more people competing for fewer jobs.
- **Low wages** mean even those with jobs struggle financially.
- **Widespread hopelessness** shows why frustration turned into protest.

These trends are not just numbers. They are the lived reality of a generation-and they set the stage for the wave of activism that followed.

As one student wrote on social media (translated from Serbian):

"My parents told me to study hard so I could have a better life. Now I have a degree and no job. I feel like I'm running in circles."

This sense of frustration and betrayal was shared by thousands, making it a powerful force for collective action.

3.1.2 Protest Materials: Banners and Slogans

The statistics about youth unemployment and low wages in Serbia were not just numbers in a report-they became the daily reality for a whole generation. What's powerful is how these bleak facts were turned into creative, public protest materials that everyone could see and understand.

Banners and Flyers: Turning Numbers into Slogans

At the very first demonstrations, students and young workers didn't just talk about their problems-they wrote them on banners, flyers, and posters for everyone to see. Some of the most common slogans included:

- "Diploma, pa na biro" ("Get your diploma, then go to the unemployment office"): This banner summed up the frustration of young people who studied hard, graduated, and still couldn't find a job. It was seen at almost every protest and became a symbol of wasted potential.
- "Radim, a ne živim" ("I work, but I don't live"): This phrase was painted on cardboard and bedsheets, showing up in both big city protests and smaller assemblies. It captured the feeling that even those with jobs were just surviving, not really living.

- “Nema posla, nema budućnosti” (“No jobs, no future”): This slogan was printed on flyers and shared on social media. It made the direct link between unemployment and the sense of hopelessness that many young Serbians felt.

Flyers distributed at university gates often had bold headlines like:

“This is why we protest.”

Below, they listed the unemployment rate (26%) and the average youth wage (495 EUR), sometimes with a graph or a cartoon showing a graduate in a cap and gown standing in an unemployment line.

Visual Symbols: The Red Hand and “Ruke su nam krvave”

Alongside words, the movement used striking images to send a message. One of the most powerful symbols was the red handprint-“crvena ruka”-painted on banners, posters, and even directly onto the pavement at protest sites. Sometimes, students would dip their hands in red paint and press them onto white sheets or cardboard, leaving a mark that looked like blood.

- “Ruke su vam krvave” (“Your hands are bloody”): This phrase appeared next to red handprints on banners and walls. It was a dramatic way to say that the system’s failures-corruption, neglect, and unemployment-were not just abstract problems. They had real, painful consequences, and everyone’s hands were stained by them, either as victims or as witnesses.
- In some viral images, a giant red handprint was placed over a diploma, or on a banner with the words “Diploma, pa na biro,” making the point that even education could not protect youth from a broken system.

This visual language made the protests impossible to ignore. The red hand was a symbol of both anger and warning, suggesting that if nothing changed, more young lives would be lost or wasted.

Source: Filip Stevanovic / AFP / Profimedia

3.1.3 How Social Media Helped People Track and Organize the Serbian Protests

In 2024 and 2025, student protests in Serbia became very big. Many people wanted to know what was happening, but TV and newspapers did not always show the real news. Social media-like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter (X), Reddit, WhatsApp, and Viber-became the main way for people to get information, organize, and stay connected.

1. Telling People About Protests and Plans

Social media was the main place where protest leaders and students told people about upcoming protests. They used Instagram stories, Facebook posts, and Twitter threads to share:

- The date and time of the next protest

- The meeting point (for example, “Main Square” or “in front of the university”)
- What to bring (like water, signs, or whistles)
- How to stay safe

Example:

On Instagram, a post might say:

“Join us tomorrow at 5pm in front of the university. Bring your friends and wear black. Let’s show we are united! #StudentsInBlockade”

People would share these posts with their friends, so the message spread quickly. Sometimes, the plans changed at the last minute, and social media made it easy to tell everyone about the new plans right away.

2. Live Updates and Real-Time News

During the protests, many students and supporters used their phones to record live videos or post photos. This helped people see what was happening, even if they were at home or in another city.

- Instagram and Facebook Live were used to stream marches, speeches, and important moments.
- Twitter (X) was used for quick updates, like “We are marching now!” or “Police are blocking the street.”
- People used hashtags like #protest2025, #Pumpaj, and #StudentsInBlockade so others could easily find all the protest news.

Example:

A student in Novi Sad might tweet:

“Thousands of us are walking through the city center. We want justice and answers! #protest2025”

People from other cities could reply, share their own photos, or send messages of support.

3. Sharing News from Different Cities

The protests were not just in Belgrade. People in many towns and cities joined in. Social media helped everyone see that the movement was happening everywhere.

- People posted photos and videos from protests in Niš, Kragujevac, Subotica, Novi Sad, and many smaller towns.
- Hashtags helped people find posts from their own city or see what was happening in other places.
- Some activists made maps (using Google Maps) and shared them on social media. These maps showed all the protest locations, so people could see how big the movement was.

Example:

A Facebook post from Niš might say:

“Over 5,000 people at the protest tonight! We stand with students everywhere. #StudentsInBlockade”

4. Spreading Slogans, Memes, and Viber Stickers

Social media helped make protest slogans and memes popular. The most famous slogan was “Pumpaj!” (“Pump it!”), which started as a joke on Reddit but became a symbol of the protests.

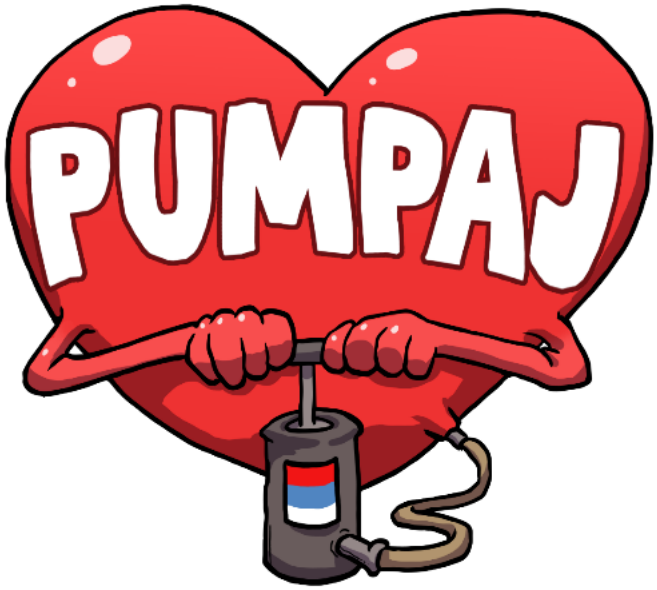
- People made funny pictures (memes) with the slogan and shared them on Instagram and Facebook.
- Protesters made banners and signs with “Pumpaj!” and posted photos online.
- Students also created special Viber sticker packs called “PUMPAJ one” and “PUMPAJ two.” These stickers had creative drawings, animals, and protest messages- often with humor and encouragement.

  For example, some stickers said things like “March with students, it’s healthy!” or showed animals holding protest signs.
- The stickers were shared in Viber groups, which students used to organize, send quick updates, and support each other. The stickers made communication more fun and helped everyone feel like part of the same team.

Example:

A meme might show a cartoon student “pumping up” the crowd, with the words “Pumpaj!” in big letters.

A Viber sticker might show a smiling animal with a sign saying “Pumpaj!” or “Solidarity!”



5. Helping Each Other and Showing Solidarity

Social media was also used to help people and show kindness.

- People posted offers to give students a place to sleep if they traveled from another city.
- Others shared information about where to get free food or water during the protests.
- Some people posted messages of support, like “Stay safe!” or “Thank you for standing up for all of us!”

Example:

A Facebook group post:

“If you are coming to Belgrade for the protest and need a place to stay, send me a message. We have room for 3 people.”

6. Citizen Journalism and Bypassing State Media

Because many Serbian TV stations did not report honestly about the protests, students became their own reporters.

- They made short video news reports and posted them on Instagram and Facebook.
- They interviewed each other and shared stories from the protests.
- This helped everyone see the truth, not just the government's version of events.

Example:

A student might post:

"Here's what really happened at the protest today. Watch our video and share it with your friends!"

7. International Support and Diaspora

Serbs living in other countries also used social media to share their support.

- They posted photos and videos of their own protests in cities like Vienna, Toronto, Munich, and Barcelona.
- They used the same hashtags as people in Serbia, so everyone could see the global support.

Example:

An Instagram post from Vienna:

"We stand with students in Serbia! #StudentsInBlockade #Pumpaj"

8. Keeping the Movement Alive

Even when protests were not happening every day, social media helped keep people interested.

- Students posted updates about meetings, discussions, and plans for the next protest.
- They shared stories of success and encouraged each other to keep going.

- Social media made it easy for new people to join and learn what the protests were about.

Example Social Media Posts

- Instagram Story: “Live from the protest-thousands are here! Swipe up to watch.”
- Twitter/X: “Police are blocking the main street, but we are peaceful and strong. #protest2025”
- Facebook Post: “Thank you to everyone who brought sandwiches and water for the students. Solidarity is our power!”
- Viber Sticker: A cartoon animal holding a sign that says “Pumpaj!” or “March with students, it’s healthy!”
- Reddit Comment: “Here’s a map of all the protests happening this week. Let’s keep going!”

Why Social Media Was So Important?

- It helped people organize quickly and safely.
- It let everyone see the real story, not just what was on TV.
- It made the movement feel big and powerful, because people could see support from all over the country and the world.
- It helped people make friends, share ideas, and help each other.
- Fun things like Viber stickers and memes made the protest spirit stronger and brought people closer together.

3.1.4 How Niš and Belgrade Connected

Protests in Serbia during 2024–2025 showed a strong connection between different cities, especially between the University of Niš and the University of Belgrade. This connection helped turn local protests into a national youth movement.

One keyway students connected was through social media, which allowed fast and direct communication. Students from both universities created joint group chats and shared protest dates. They used the same slogans, like “Diploma, pa na biro” and “Pumpaj!”, and displayed the same symbols, such as the red handprint, at protests in both cities.

The coordination between the two cities was clear in how protests were organized. Major protests in Belgrade were matched by large gatherings in Niš, with students agreeing on protest dates ahead of time. Some students even traveled between Niš and Belgrade to support each other’s protests. Social media helped by sharing information about places to stay for visitors.

Online meetings also played an important role in uniting students from both cities. These meetings allowed them to share strategies, discuss their demands, and plan how to reach the media. This helped the movement stay organized and present a united message.

A student from Niš said:

“We saw the videos from Belgrade on Instagram and Telegram. People were posting live from the protest. It felt like they were speaking for all of us. We started a group chat and decided to do the same in Niš. Some of us even messaged students in Belgrade for advice on how to organize.”

A student from Belgrade said:

“After the protest in Niš, we felt even stronger. We realized this was not just a Belgrade thing.

We started planning to protest on the same days, and we helped each other with ideas for banners and chants. We even made a shared Google Doc with protest tips."

3.1.5 Analysis and Conclusion

All the evidence above supports the hypothesis that economic hardship was the main reason students in Niš and Belgrade united and mobilized. The data show that high unemployment, low wages, and a sense of hopelessness were common to young people in both cities. Protest materials and slogans made these problems visible and urgent, while social media and media coverage helped students organize and connect across Serbia.

The use of shared slogans, symbols, and protest dates, as well as joint online meetings and real-life travel between cities, shows that economic hardship was not just a local issue but a national crisis. Students recognized their problems as collective, not isolated, and built a movement that was much bigger than any single city or university.

By analyzing banners, flyers, social media posts, media reports, and interviews—including dramatic symbols like the red hand and the phrase "ruke su vam krvave"—we see how Serbian youth turned their economic struggles into a powerful, visible protest. These materials brought statistics and emotions to life, united protesters from Niš and Belgrade, and helped the movement grow far beyond the university gates.

3.2 Testing Hypothesis 2: Social Exclusion and the Growth of Solidarity

Social exclusion is not just about being left out. It's about feeling invisible, powerless, and ignored by those who make decisions that shape your life. For students in Serbia during 2024–2025, this sense of exclusion was everywhere—from university halls to national politics. But instead of giving up, students from Niš and Belgrade turned exclusion into a reason to reach out, connect, and stand together. In this section, I show how social exclusion

became the spark for solidarity, and how two universities became allies in a fight for voice, dignity, and a place at the table.

3.2.1 The Facts: Youth Exclusion from Decision-Making

Let's start with what students were up against. In both Niš and Belgrade, young people felt shut out from decisions that affected their futures. University senates and faculty councils were dominated by older professors and administrators. Student representatives were few, and often chosen in ways that felt fake or controlled. National politics was even worse: youth issues barely made the news, and when they did, it was usually just empty talk.

Student from the University of Niš:

"When I started at the university, I thought I would have some say in how things are run. But every time I tried to get involved, I was told it wasn't my place. There are meetings every month where they decide everything about our studies and our lives, but we are not there. Sometimes, we only find out about new rules from an email after it's all decided. It feels like we don't exist. I tried to ask a question at the faculty meeting, but was told, 'This is not for students.' That was the moment I realized how invisible we really are."

Student from the University of Belgrade:

"Even when there are student representatives, it's just for show. Most of us don't even know who they are. I remember once seeing a notice about a faculty council meeting and asking if I could attend. I was told it was 'for members only.' I asked how I could become a member, and they just shrugged. We sent letters to the administration about issues we cared about—like dorm fees and exam rules—but we never got an answer. Not even a 'no.' Just silence."

Student Representation: In 2024, only about 8% of university senate seats in Serbia were held by students (University Reports, 2024). In Belgrade, out of 50 seats, just 4 were students; in

Niš, only 2 out of 30. Most students said they didn't even know who their "representatives" were.

Similarly, the youth representation in national politics was low: Only 2 out of 250 members of the National Assembly were under 30. No student organizations had regular meetings with government officials.

Survey Data: According to the Youth Survey Serbia (2024), 71% of students said they felt "completely excluded" from university decision-making. In Niš, the number was even higher—nearly 80%.

This exclusion was not just about rules and numbers. It was a feeling, repeated in every interview and echoed in every protest speech:
"They don't listen to us. They don't care what we think. We are invisible."

3.2.2 Protest Materials: Slogans and Symbols of Exclusion

Just as economic hardship was turned into banners and chants, so was exclusion. If you walked through the protests in Niš or Belgrade, you would see signs that didn't just demand jobs—they demanded respect, voice, and participation.

Student from the University of Niš:
"When we started protesting, we wanted people to see what it felt like to be ignored. That's why we made the banners with slogans like 'Nema nas u odlukama' ('We are not in the decisions') and 'Mladi traže glas' ('Youth demand a voice'). We also painted a giant door on a banner with the words 'Zatvoreno za mlade' ('Closed to youth'). It was a way to show that we were locked out, but we wanted in. One day, we staged a silent sit-in, holding signs that read 'Listen before it's too late.' It was powerful, because for once, our silence was loud."

Student from the University of Belgrade:

"We used the same slogans in Belgrade. We wanted the administration to know that we weren't just statistics—we were real people who wanted to be heard. We wore tape over our mouths with 'GLAS' ('VOICE') written on it. It was a way to show that we were being silenced, but we still had something to say. We also placed empty chairs at the front of our assemblies, to show that student voices were missing from the decision-making rooms. It was a simple symbol, but everyone understood what it meant."

These slogans show that students felt left out of important decisions and wanted their voices heard—making it clear that they would not accept being treated as invisible or unimportant:

"Nema nas u odlukama" ("We are not in the decisions")

"Mladi traže glas" ("Youth demand a voice")

"Nismo statistika" ("We are not just statistics")

"Bez nas, nema vas" ("Without us, there is no you")

Slogans were painted on bedsheets, cardboard, and even the pavement in front of university buildings. Flyers handed out at protests listed the number of student representatives ("Only 2 out of 30 in Niš!") and called for "real elections, not fake appointments." In Belgrade, students wore tape over their mouths with the word "GLAS" ("VOICE") written on it. In Niš, a group of students staged a silent sit-in, holding signs that read "Listen before it's too late."

Symbols:

The Empty Chair: At both universities, students placed empty chairs at the front of assemblies and protests, symbolizing the absence of student voices in decision-making rooms.

The Locked Door: In Niš, students painted a giant door on a banner, with the words

"Zatvoreno za mlade" ("Closed to youth"). In Belgrade, a similar image appeared on flyers, with a padlock and the phrase "Otključajte univerzitet" ("Unlock the university").

These symbols made exclusion visible and impossible to ignore. They also sent a message: students were not asking for charity—they were demanding their rightful place.

3.2.3 Social Media and Media: Building a Network of Voices

Social media was not just a place for sharing protest dates or posting selfies from the crowd. It became the beating heart of the movement—a megaphone for voices that had been ignored for too long. In both Niš and Belgrade, students turned to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram to tell their stories of being left out, to show the world what exclusion looked like, and to find each other in the process.

Student from the University of Niš:

"When I saw posts from students in Belgrade with the same problems, I realized we weren't alone. We started sharing our stories online—photos of the empty chairs, videos of our silent sit-in, and messages about how it felt to be ignored. Hashtags like #GlasZaMlade ('Voice for Youth') and #OtvoriteVrata ('Open the Doors') helped us connect. When Belgrade students held an open assembly, we watched it live and sent messages of support. The next week, we did the same, and they joined us. It felt like we were finally being heard, even if it was just by each other."

Student from the University of Belgrade:

"Social media was how we found each other. We shared everything—flyer designs, ideas for slogans, even advice about how to talk to the media. We launched an online petition together, and it got over 10,000 signatures in two days. That's when I knew this was bigger than just one city. We became our own reporters, filming what was happening and posting it online, because no one else would tell our story. One of our videos went viral, with a student saying,

‘We’re live because no one else will tell our story.’ That’s how we made sure the real story got out.”

Hashtags like #GlasZaMlade (“Voice for Youth”), #OtvoriteVrata (“Open the Doors”), and #StudentsUnited started trending. It didn’t matter if a post came from Niš or Belgrade; students would share and repost each other’s content, building a digital bridge between the two cities. A tweet from Belgrade with #GlasZaMlade would be picked up by students in Niš, and vice versa. This wasn’t just about spreading the word—it was about making sure everyone knew this was a shared struggle. As one student wrote on Twitter, “When I see #OtvoriteVrata from Niš and Belgrade on the same day, I know we’re not alone” (Twitter, 2025).

The movement wasn’t just about making noise online. It was about taking real steps. In February 2025, students from both universities launched an online petition demanding more student seats in university senates. The petition exploded—over 10,000 signatures in just two days, with names from both cities filling the list. Balkan Insight reported, “Students from Niš and Belgrade unite in call for real representation” (Balkan Insight, 2025). This was more than a petition; it was a sign that exclusion was not just a local complaint. It was a national problem, and students were ready to fight it together.

Assemblies were no longer just local events, either. When Belgrade students held an open assembly, they streamed it live on Facebook and Instagram. Students in Niš watched, commented, and sent questions and messages of support. The next week, Niš students did the same, and Belgrade students tuned in. These live streams turned what could have been isolated gatherings into national conversations. Comments like “Pozdrav iz Niša!” (“Greetings from Niš!”) and “Belgrade stands with you!” filled the chat, making everyone feel part of the same fight.

Personal stories made the statistics real. On Instagram stories, students shared short videos about being ignored by university leaders. A student from Niš said, "I tried to ask a question at the faculty meeting, but was told, 'This is not for students.'" (Instagram, 2025). A Belgrade student posted, "We sent letters to the administration. No answer. Not even a 'no.' Just silence." These moments made it clear that the numbers from the Youth Survey Serbia (2024)—over 70% of students feeling "completely excluded"—were not just abstract data. They were lived reality.

Independent news sites quickly picked up on these stories. Headlines like "Students Demand a Seat at the Table" (N1 Info, 2025) and "Youth Excluded from Serbia's Future" (Danas, 2025) started appearing. Photos of empty chairs and locked doors made it into national newspapers. When university officials refused to meet with protest leaders, it became a top story, putting even more pressure on the administration to respond. This kind of coverage helped turn what started as a student issue into a national conversation about youth, democracy, and the future of Serbia.

Social media also made it easy for students to help each other. If someone was traveling from Niš to Belgrade for a protest, they could find a place to stay just by posting in a group chat. If there was free food or water at an assembly, someone would share the info online. Solidarity wasn't just a word—it was something you could see and feel, both online and in the streets.

Because many state-run TV stations barely covered the protests, students became their own reporters. They filmed what was happening, interviewed each other, and posted the videos online. One viral video showed a student from Belgrade explaining, "We're live because no one else will tell our story" (Facebook, 2025). These videos got thousands of views and shares, making sure the real story reached far beyond the university gates.

Even when there wasn't a protest happening, social media kept the movement alive. Students posted updates about meetings, shared new ideas, and encouraged each other to keep going. Hashtags like #StudentsUnited and #OtvoriteVrata kept trending, making it easy for new people to join and learn what the protests were about.

All these online actions did something important: they turned exclusion into connection. By sharing their stories and supporting each other, students from Niš and Belgrade built a network of voices that couldn't be ignored. Media coverage helped amplify those voices even more, forcing university leaders and politicians to pay attention.

3.3 Testing Hypothesis 3: Media and Digital Platforms as Enablers of Coordination and Unity

During the 2024–2025 student protests, media coverage was much more than just news. It shaped how people saw the movement, how students organized, and how the public reacted. In Serbia, where trust in institutions is low and politics is divided, the way TV and social media talked about the protests really mattered.

Different TV Channels, Different Stories

Two big TV stations, Pink and N1, told very different stories:

- Pink TV is known for supporting the government. They often called the student protests "chaos" or said they were "foreign-funded." Their reports focused on traffic jams or rare fights, and they interviewed government officials who called the protests "irresponsible." Sometimes, Pink even showed empty classrooms or interviewed students who didn't join the protests, making it seem like most young people didn't care.

- *Example headline:*

  "Foreign Agents Behind Student Chaos in Belgrade"

  (Pink TV, Evening News, 17 April 2024)

- N1 is seen as more independent. N1 reporters went to the protests, talked to students, teachers, and parents, and showed peaceful marches, creative banners, and open assemblies. They highlighted the real reasons students were protesting—jobs, dignity, and a voice in their future.
  - *Example headline:*

    "Students Demand Jobs and Dignity, Not Empty Promises"

    (N1, 18 April 2024)

For many people, TV is still the main way they get news. If someone only watched Pink, they might think the protests were small, violent, or even a threat. If they watched N1, they saw a peaceful, creative movement fighting for real change.

Students noticed these differences. After Pink called them "foreign agents," students in both Niš and Belgrade made banners saying "Nismo plaćenici, već studenti" ("We are not paid agents, we are students"). This slogan spread quickly on social media and became a way for students to push back against negative coverage.

N1's positive reports helped the movement grow. Parents who saw their children on N1 felt proud and safe to join. Teachers and workers who saw their own struggles reflected in the coverage felt encouraged to participate.

Social Media: Telling Their Own Story

But students didn't just rely on TV. They used social media to share their own stories. Hashtags like #MiSmoSledeći and #DostaJeBilo trended for weeks. Viral posts showed

peaceful crowds, creative protest art, and life inside occupied universities. One Instagram post showed a banner shaped like a diploma, stamped with a red handprint and the words "Welcome to the Bureau." This image was shared thousands of times and even picked up by N1 and Danas.

On Twitter, students live-tweeted assemblies, posted updates about police actions, and shared moments of solidarity, like food stations and "freedom libraries." These posts reached people who might never have seen the protests on TV, and helped build a sense of unity and purpose.

What My Interviewees Said

Student from the University of Niš:
"When we saw how Pink was talking about us, we got angry. But it also made us want to prove them wrong. We started taking more photos and videos ourselves and sharing them online. When N1 showed our protest and included interviews with students from both Niš and Belgrade, it felt like we were finally being seen. Social media helped us connect with students in Belgrade. We shared our stories, planned actions together, and supported each other. It didn't matter if Pink ignored us—we had our own way of telling the world what was really happening."

Student from the University of Belgrade:
"Media coverage made a huge difference. When N1 showed our peaceful marches and creative banners, it inspired more people to join, even from other cities. When Pink tried to make us look bad, we just worked harder to show the truth. Social media was our best tool. We could share our own videos, organize quickly, and show that we were united. Seeing students from Niš doing the same thing made us feel like we were part of something bigger. We weren't just protesting in Belgrade or Niš—we were part of a national movement."

These interviews show how important media coverage and social media were for the student movement. When mainstream media like Pink TV ignored or misrepresented the protests, students became even more determined to share their own stories. They felt empowered by independent media like N1, which gave them visibility and legitimacy. Most importantly, social media allowed students from different cities to connect, organize, and support each other in real time. The students' own voices, shared online and through the media, helped turn local protests into a strong, national movement. This shows that even when traditional media is negative or dismissive, students can use new tools to make their voices heard and build a sense of unity and purpose.

4. Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer the question: How and why did students from the University of Niš and the University of Belgrade manage to overcome local boundaries and protest as a unified movement against the regime during 2024–2025? To explain this, I used a qualitative case study approach, drawing on interviews, protest materials, social media analysis, and media reports. The research focused on the cooperation between students from two major Serbian cities and tested three main hypotheses: that economic hardship created unity, that social exclusion pushed students toward collective action, and that media and digital platforms enabled coordination and solidarity.

First hypothesis: Economic hardship as a foundation for unity.

The findings strongly support the idea that shared economic problems—such as high youth unemployment, low wages, and a lack of job opportunities—were central in bringing students together. Instead of dividing young people, these hardships created a sense of common struggle and motivated them to act collectively. Protest materials, slogans, and interviews all highlighted economic grievances as a driving force for unity. This contributes to recent research that challenges the view that poverty and insecurity only weaken youth activism; in the Serbian case, they became a bridge for cooperation and solidarity.

Second hypothesis: Social exclusion as a catalyst for collective action.

The analysis also confirms that feelings of exclusion from political and university decision-making played a key role in uniting students across cities and faculties. Students did not see exclusion as just a personal or local problem, but as a generational issue. Slogans and online discussions often referred to the need for a voice and real participation. This finding adds to

contemporary debates about youth engagement in post-communist societies, showing that exclusion can push young people to form new alliances and demand change together.

Third hypothesis: Media and digital platforms as enablers of coordination and unity.

Finally, the research shows that both traditional media coverage and students' use of social media were crucial for the movement's success. While negative reporting by some TV channels motivated students to share their own stories and counter negative frames, positive coverage by independent media helped legitimize the protests and attract wider support. Social media allowed students from Niš and Belgrade to communicate, organize, and support each other in real time, making the movement more flexible and resilient. This supports new research on the power of digital tools in youth activism, especially in environments where trust in institutions is low.

Despite these insights, some open questions and limitations remain. The study relies on a small number of interviews, which may not capture the full diversity of experiences within the movement. It also focuses mainly on students from two large universities, so the findings may not apply to other groups or regions. Future research could include more participants, look at other cities, or compare the Serbian case to youth movements in other post-communist countries. It would also be valuable to study how the movement's new forms of civic engagement develop over time, and whether they lead to lasting changes in Serbian society.

In summary, this thesis shows that under certain conditions, the very factors expected to weaken youth activism—economic hardship, political exclusion, and weak institutions—can instead become the foundation for a strong, creative, and united movement. The Serbian student protests of 2024–2025 offer important lessons for understanding how young people can organize and demand change, even in difficult environments.

Appendix

Timeline of the 2024–2025 Serbian Protests

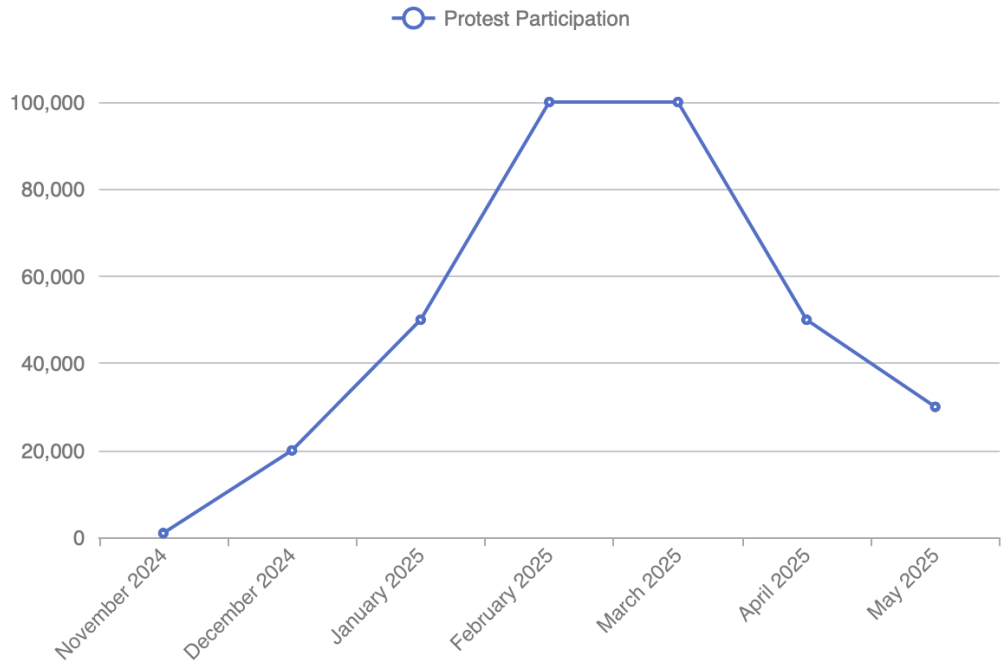
X-axis: Time (from November 2024 to May 2025)

Y-axis: Estimated protest participation (number of people/scale of events)

Key Points for the Chart

- **Start (November 2024):**
    - *1 November 2024*: Collapse of Novi Sad railway station canopy, triggering initial outrage.
    - *22 November 2024*: First student blockades at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Novi Sad, after students were attacked during a silent tribute.
    - Participation: Hundreds to a few thousand, mostly students.
- **Growth (December 2024 – January 2025):**
    - By early December: Blockades expand to more than 50 university campuses.
    - Daily protests and traffic blockades begin across the country.
    - *17 January 2025*: Massive protest in front of RTS building in Belgrade, tens of thousands gather.
    - Participation: Tens of thousands, with growing support from teachers, lawyers, and other citizens.
- **Peak (February – March 2025):**
    - *1 February*: Large-scale student protest in Novi Sad, marking three months since the tragedy.
    - *15 February*: Major protest in Kragujevac.
    - *1 March*: Major protest in Niš.
    - *15 March*: Largest protest in Belgrade, possibly one of the biggest in Serbian history, with over 100,000 participants.
    - By March: Protests spread to 400 cities and towns; general strikes and university blockades ongoing.
    - Participation: 100,000+ at major events, ongoing nationwide actions.
- **Ongoing (April – May 2025):**

- Most public and private universities remain in student-led blockades.
- Daily protests and smaller assemblies continue, but numbers stabilize below the March peak.
- The movement remains active, with regular actions and continued demands for accountability.



Line chart showing the estimated protest participation in Serbia from November 2024 to May 2025.

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