

What Lessons Can Western Balkans Youth Learn from the Serbian Student Movement?

For almost a year now, Serbian students have fearlessly been protesting state corruption which has led to innocent deaths, police brutality and an increasingly autocratic regime that is more concerned with profit and party favoritism than respecting human rights. Since the protests began and the students decided to barricade themselves within their faculty buildings, exercising their right to protest while protected under university autonomy, they have faced a large amount of attacks, including slander, harassment, intimidation and discrimination – both offline and online. Offline, they have been targeted, threatened and even physically attacked – first by ruling party officials and subsequently by party sympathizers, in a seemingly more organic way. However, these attacks have proven to be counterproductive on two key points – first, the attacks are usually very vile and hostile, drawing in more support for the student cause and second, they seem to be operating from a different perspective which makes it easier for new generations to outsmart the government.

For years, the Western Balkans has carried a reputation for political apathy among its young people. Surveys repeatedly show that large numbers of youth are more eager to pack their bags and leave than to stay and fight for change at home. Politics have often been viewed as corrupt, stagnant and irrelevant to their daily lives. Yet, in Serbia over the past ten months, something inspirational has happened – students have taken center stage in nationwide protests, using digital tools to organize, mobilize and reimagine what youth engagement in democracy can look like.

The Serbian students' story is a wider lesson in how young people, armed with determination, courage, solidarity and smartphones can make their voices heard even in hostile political systems.

A New Movement

In illiberal contexts, public participation is often stagnant, if nonexistent. Usually, those who are primarily excluded from debates are marginalized groups, including young people. While younger populations are usually more technologically savvy, they are less likely to take part in debates surrounding governance of any kind. In Serbia and other countries of the Western Balkans, up until recently the view was that young people were less interested in politics and more interested in securing employment and leaving. However, given the tragic events of November 2024, when a train station canopy collapsed and killed 16 people in Novi Sad and the subsequent outrage surrounding the state's disregard and lack of accountability, a new air of resistance was born. After students were physically attacked while holding a vigil for the victims of the collapse, this prompted them to barricade themselves inside their faculty. In the days following, other faculties followed suit until all four universities, the majority of faculties and even some elementary and high schools ceased to work, supporting a specific list of demands, including a complete investigation into the fall of the canopy and arresting and processing of those who attacked the students.

The students did not wait for instructions on how to operate from politicians, activists, civil society members or other organized groups. Instead, they took to the streets and to their screens. In a matter of days each faculty had their own designated social media profiles on all networks. Instagram became the place for sharing information on upcoming protests, Twitter became the place for articulating their demands and their actions and providing real-time updates, TikTok turned into a somewhat more lighthearted way to attract even younger generations. Encrypted messaging apps like Telegram and Signal became the backbone of logistics.

The image of students livestreaming marches, sharing protest maps and important points and countering the governments' spins was powerful. For many across the region, it was a reminder that even in a climate of censorship and intimidation, young people can still shape the political conversation. Their rhetoric was so distinctly different from the governments' usual hateful, aggressive and exclusionary one that the majority of the population had gotten used to and this allowed them to present a defence against it that was actually successful. Their engagement with hateful speech online was limited, and when it did happen, the students responded with augmented facts, information and humour. This also motivated other parts of the population to get engaged both in the protests but also in the online discourses – influencers, activists and other members of the public started forming digital alliances and protecting each other, but also recording and posting information on what was happening on the streets, identifying attackers on protesters and raising awareness.

Digital Tools as Protest Weapons

What made the Serbian students' mobilization stand out was not only their determination, but also their ability to wield digital tools with fluency. On social media, they documented everything – peaceful marches, police interventions, creative slogans. When state-controlled media attempted to downplay or distort the events, students' smartphones served as fact-checkers, offering unfiltered evidence in real-time. Short videos and memes, infused with humor and irony, spread quickly across borders, resonating with young people, but also broader publics outside the country.

After the horrific fires in Kočani, North Macedonia, Serbian students immediately expressed their condolences by expanding their usual 15 minute silence, to honor those who died in Novi Sad, to 74 minutes of complete silence in front of the Embassy of North Macedonia. After this, the subsequent protests that took place in North Macedonia were in part modeled by what was taking place in Serbia. All this was possible mostly through social media, where images and videos were circulating at an amazing speed and frequency.

On the other hand, when large protests were taking place, the students' use of encrypted messaging apps gave them a strategic edge. By decentralizing coordination and avoiding visible leaders, the movement reduced the risk of crackdowns. Decisions were made collectively, logistics shared securely and everyone – from Belgrade to Novi Pazar, Zaječar, Čačak or Suborica – could feel part of the action. This blend of transparency through public social media channels and privacy through secure messaging apps became one of the main formulas for survival and visibility.

Why It Mattered

For Serbian students, digital mobilization was more than a tactical choice in these times – it was a democratic act. By amplifying their demands online, they forced authorities to acknowledge grievances that might otherwise have been brushed aside. By engaging peers in both urban and rural areas, they bridged divides that often fragmented the country and made it impossible to bridge geographical divides. This way everybody could feel equally involved in the resistance because they were. Information was travelling at immense speeds and everybody was getting the same information at the same time.

Perhaps most importantly, their activism became an entry point for political participation. Many students who had never before been particularly interested in community organizing or political life found themselves chanting in the streets and reaching out to acquaintances or family members that were either politically neutral or differently oriented, encouraged by the sense of safety and solidarity fostered through the blockades but also online. For a generation often



described as apathetic, this was a turning point after which it would be impossible to label them as such anymore.

The protests also made students acquire skills they can carry forward such as media literacy, digital security, organizing experience and the confidence that comes with realizing they can challenge entrenched power. A free exchange of useful information and tips and tricks was also fostered online and even allowed for a broader array of people to gain some new skills and insights which would prove useful both during and after the protests.

Given all of this, what are some of the key takeaways from the ongoing students' movement in Serbia?

First, digital tools can be democratic equalizers. Even when access to traditional media is restricted, youth can carve out their own public space online. Aside from straightforward and to the point information dissemination, students have also taken to more artistic expressions through their online channels – reels, memes, student radio stations and maps depicting a list of planned protests as well as checklists for citizen donations to universities and professors affected by government retaliation. These have all been ways in which students have used the wide possibilities of the Internet to organize. Their messages were easily digestible when they needed to be, and were able to make politics accessible by presenting complex issues as relatable messages with mobilizing potential.

Second, solidarity transcends borders. Just as Serbian students inspired their neighbors, youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia can build networks of support, amplifying each other's struggles. The key is realizing that these issues are not national, they transcend borders and governments. The real issues are set up within political systems that aim to oppress their citizens through corruption, draconian laws, censorship and the denial of human rights. Spreading these messages online allows people to contextualize these issues and look for solutions, with the help of those who are fighting similar battles.

And fourth, resilience requires strategy. It is not enough to want to bring about change. The use of encrypted apps, decentralized organization and anonymity managed to protect students in certain cases from harassment and repression. These are lessons that can be applied across contexts where governments may monitor or intimidate activists. It is important to spread awareness on how governments may try to attack those who choose to protest as well as share this information to as many people as possible in order to make sure everybody is protected.

What's Next?

While what is happening in Serbia presents only one piece of the equation, the example of Serbian students should not be underestimated. At a time when democracy feels fragile in the Western Balkans, their mobilization is a reminder that youth are not passive observers. They are active agents, capable of redefining politics through digital creativity and courage. They have managed to wake up a society that has been plagued by bad actors and was possibly losing hope and have managed to show that change can be brought about when there is significant will and determination. They have managed to usher in new strategies of communicating and organizing and have reworked their messages for a new audience.

For their peers across the region, the lesson is clear – do not wait for permission to participate. Use the tools at your disposal. Organize and reach out in order to learn. Build networks that cross borders. And above all, recognize that democracy is not an inheritance, it is something

each generation must claim and protect. In societies where youth participation is not a given and is not always feasible through direct democratic action, there are always alternative avenues that are waiting to be explored.

DISCLAIMER: This article is part of [Youth Participation in Digital Democracy: From Digital Skills to Digital Rights of Youth with Fewer Opportunities \(EYDR\)](#) project, aimed to strengthen the capacities of Albanian and Montenegrin youth to meaningfully engage in digital activism through an approach that balances protection and digital participation.

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