Contemporary Southeastern Europe
2025, 12(1), 51-61
DOI 10.25364/02.12:2025.1.5
EVENT ANALYSIS

Contemporary Southeastern Europe
An Interdisciplinary Journal on Southeastern Europe

An Autoethnographic[1] Account of the Anti-Corruption Student Protests in Serbia 2024/25

Aleksandra Knežević, Research Associate, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade
aleksandra.knezevic@ifdt.bg.ac.rs

Abstract
This autoethnographic piece documents the 2024/25 anti-corruption student protests in Serbia, exploring the student movement's emergence, and its broader social implications. Through firsthand participation in plenums, protests, and blockades, I reflect on themes of resistance, alienation, and the creation of community. The piece situates the movement within Serbia's political landscape, revealing the intergenerational tensions, struggles for democracy, and the role of trust in collective action. By weaving personal reflections with political analysis, this work highlights how a new generation of students is reshaping political engagement in Serbia—challenging authority, reclaiming public space, and asserting their right to shape their own futures. The protests are not merely a demand for justice but a reawakening of civic agency.

Keywords: autoethnography, student protests in Serbia, student movement, student plenums, alienation, resistance, community

How the Story Begins … Resistance, Community, and a New Generation

It was Friday, the first of November 2024. After spending a week in Belgrade, I travelled to Zagreb, where I would transfer to a bus that would take me to my final stop, Vienna. The driver, Filip Balunović, my colleague, dear friend, and a passionate anti-nationalist, turned on the radio. As he was telling a story about the funeral in Kosovo of his beloved Muslim

[1] This autoethnographic piece authored by Aleksandra Knežević is a highly personal stream of consciousness account of participating in the Serbian student movement that developed following the deaths of 15 people caused by the collapse of the canopy in front of the newly renovated Novi Sad railway station on 1 November 2024. These needless deaths have rightly been deemed a direct consequence of the corruption of the regime of Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party. As both an insider (a PhD student and participant) and an outsider (someone who has been conducting empirical research within the protest movement) her autoethnography captures some of the heightened emotions and simultaneous discipline of the movement and is informed by her dual positionality.

grandmother, we heard the news that the newly reconstructed concrete canopy of the railway station in Novi Sad had collapsed. The news did not mention how many people had died, but it did mention that an unknown number of people were injured. I was in the backseat and did not catch any of that properly. Filip's reaction and that of the front-seat passenger were ones of complete confusion and pre-reflexive disbelief. They did not exchange any words; their only response was one of a deep exhale. I did not ask for any clarification. Almost instantly, we moved past it. (After all, we from the Balkans had to grow thick skin, to endure, to numb ourselves in the face of injustices and tragedies simply in order to survive.) We continued our conversation in the same light-hearted manner, amused by Filip's storytelling about family relationships in our Balkan multiethnic, multinational, and multireligious families, and, if I may add, something that male leftists often fail to acknowledge, thoroughly patriarchal.

I spent the weekend in Vienna packing my things from the apartment where I had spent the summer months with my now ex-partner. A week before the first of November, I abruptly ended my seven-year relationship; an unplanned, unscripted decision made almost in a day out of genuine love. Before the breakup, my plan was to remain in Vienna and start a new chapter, balancing my academic position in Belgrade with a life in a city that values me, that gives me space to be part of a community despite being an immigrant. Unlike Serbia, where I am not a foreigner, where, naturally, I should feel a sense of belonging. However, the sudden ending of the relationship forced me to return to Serbia. I was lucky enough to find an apartment quickly, only because my friend had just moved in with her partner, leaving behind her bachelorette pad. And so, after many moves in the past seven years and constant shifts between states, cities and sceneries, I found myself in Novi Sad: for the first time, truly living there. This is where the story begins to unfold.

November passed in stress and confusion, thinking only a day ahead, largely due to my personal situation. However, being in Novi Sad was, even given the circumstances, unexpectedly grueling. The city felt dark and depressing, making any sense of belonging even more elusive. My fellow citizens were agitated, tense, and aggressive, but their aggression was misdirected, turned against one another. Every attempt at small talk with passersby was met with hostility, as if anger were just waiting for an excuse to erupt. It saddened me and triggered that familiar feeling of alienation, but I understood them. They, too, were deeply shaken, burdened by a sadness that seemed to settle in their very core.

December came. As I struggled to find stability in my own life, the ground was shifting beneath us all. The Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade made the first move. If I knew the names of chess openings, I would use as a metaphor the one where the black pieces—typically played from a defensive position—open with a risky, bold move that has potential to quickly turn into a radical and forceful offense. Other faculties in Belgrade and Novi Sad followed, soon joined by those in Niš and Kragujevac. And just as the faculties mobilized, so did the high schools. The first domino fell in "Jovan Jovanović Zmaj" Gymnasium in Novi Sad, setting off a wave of high school blockades that would soon spread across Serbia.

The December attack on students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts by members of the Serbian Progressive Party (Vučić's governing party), the first of many to come, triggered four student demands.[2] Their fulfilment is both a necessary and sufficient condition for ending the blockages. These demands are simple in content and, in principle, easy to fulfil. Yet their

[2] The students' demands include the following: 1. Publication of all documentation related to the Novi Sad railway station reconstruction; 2. Identification and prosecution of individuals responsible for attacks on students, professors, and citizens during peaceful vigils; 3. Dropping of criminal charges against students arrested or detained during the protests; 4. Increasing the budget for higher education by 20 per cent.

very simplicity—juxtaposed with the ruling party's refusal to meet them, as doing so would result in prison sentences for individuals at the highest levels of power—laid bare the corruption of Serbia's political system.

By the end of the month, my Institute (Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory) pressed its doctoral students (while, to be fair, also providing substantial institutional and mentor support) to brainstorm ways to research the faculty blockages in Serbia—to document the Event, which is proving to be a rupture in the established order in the true Badiouian sense of the word.[3] This is how I ended up at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad (henceforth: the Faculty), attending their plenums, walking the halls, and frantically making notes on what I observed—improvising, experimenting, collecting various kinds of information that might be relevant to me and my colleagues, other doctoral students in search of a research topic.[4]

When I first entered the Faculty, I remember it was an instant wave of emotions. I felt confused and immediately became shy because of my reaction. I turned to my friend and colleague Igor Išpanović (whose engagement made it possible for the two of us to attend plenums and conduct research) and told him, "I'm the kind of person who easily cries at things." He simply replied, "Let it all out."

When I got my act together, I started observing the space. The ground floor is the main site of events. The entrance to the Amphitheater, where plenums are held, is on the left side of the main entrance. In front of the Amphitheater's entrance is a long table that seats about twelve to fourteen people. The walls of the Amphitheater, as well as the surrounding walls, are lined with tables filled with various kinds of food, organized and labelled accordingly.

Across from the main entrance is the exit to the courtyard—this is where people go to smoke. On the door, a banner reads: "Ko baci opušak na pod, sedam godina lošeg seksa!" (*"Whoever throws a cigarette butt on the ground, seven years of bad sex!")*

To the right of the main entrance, a large staircase leads to the upper floors. The upper floors house the kitchen, beds, a table tennis setup, a table football, and more beds. This is also where the classrooms are located, that serve as workspaces for making banners, organizing events, and planning actions.

As I moved through the building, the space no longer felt overwhelming. The sight of students walking the halls in slippers seemed to shout: "This is our home. The Faculty belongs to us!" Every corner seemed to pulse with energy, calm and peaceful, yet prepared and ready. The space spoke for itself, much like the Kabyle house from Bourdieu's analysis.[5] It had absorbed the determination, organization, and seriousness of those inside. It exuded combativeness. However, what struck me most was the sheer amount of food: food on tables, food ready to use, more food stored in a conservatory, the coldest room in the Faculty.

The food is donated by people who stand with students, believing they have no other choice but to rely on them. Seeing the donations, it became clear to me that those who give see the students as their last hope for betterment, for change, for staying in Serbia. The sheer volume of food, I'm sad to believe, reflects the depth of people's (feeling of) powerlessness.

---

[3] Badiou, Alain. 2005 [1988]. *Being and event*. Translated by Feltham, Oliver. London & New York: Continuum.
[4] Note: This was my first time at this faculty. As a philosophy graduate from the University of Belgrade and Central European University, I had no prior experience with the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Novi Sad.
[5] Bourdieu, Pierre. 1970. The Berber house or the world reversed. *Social Science Information* 9(2), 151-170.

In Search of My Academic Voice

While I was dedicating my time in the service of a bigger goal, putting on hold my doctoral research, my engagement with empirical bottom-up work, an experience I enjoyed immensely, made me think that philosophy and science are done properly when approached as playful activities. We should play with science, theory and data the way children play with their surroundings. The way students play with democracy. Do not get me wrong: I consider play a serious activity. It is only through play that children learn and experience the world for the first time. It is through trial and error that the youth learn politics. My sister, an apolitical, moody high school graduate, texted me passionately after attending two plenums at her Gymnasium in Sombor: "The law forbids the director to just announce online teaching the way he pleases!" The student movement is teaching us that the law *does* exist, that politics *does* belong to us, and that power *does* lie in our own hands.

Throughout our adult lives, we are being told that knowledge should be acquired through different, more 'mature' means. As a result, the voices of students, exceptionally brave, smart, intelligent, creative, and bold, are the voices of the youth who society fails to hear. Whose opinions we disregard, patronize, belittle, and misrepresent. The voices of students are the voices of our children, voices we do not listen to. These voices have been here all along, but we failed to acknowledge them because we wrongly believe that knowledge lies outside of play, creativity, and emotion—the very domains we associate with youth. Knowledge, we assume, does not have the face of a child. Rationality, the thing that is believed to matter for knowledge, belongs to detached, as they would like us to think, almost god-like authorities.

This reminds me of a banner at the Faculty, one of the first visible upon entering the building: "Nećemo gospodu, hoćemo slobodu" ("*Down with the gentlemen, long live freedom"*). The students remind us that there is no freedom without equality, and their democratic practice teaches us that there is no democracy without both.

I hope we will also learn how to nourish the child in ourselves. I hope we will learn how to play again.

January passed in my complete immersion in student plenums, protests, and the struggle to fit my fieldwork into the rigid conditions of post-positivist research ideology. I was fortunate to share my impressions and experience of the student movement with Rory Archer, who, after listening to me for less than ten minutes, suggested that I write an autoethnographic piece.

Autoethnography is a method of storytelling in which researchers use their lived experiences as an act of constructing the meaning of broader collective issues. Evocative autoethnography, the approach I take in this piece, goes a step further, engaging readers through raw, emotional, and intimate narratives that invite their reflection and connection as a means of understanding the social and political.[6]

Interestingly, while Rory was quick and confident in his suggestion —not because he knew me, or was familiar with my academic skills, but because he recognized the eagerness of a student (and, may I add, the only clay a good mentor truly needs)—I spent January fighting to be recognized as capable of conducting empirical research, despite lacking formal training in empirical methods. My bottom-up approach to selecting participants for a focus group—

[6] Bochner, Arthur P. 2012. On first-person narrative scholarship: Autoethnography as acts of meaning. *Narrative Inquiry* 22(1), 155-164; Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. 2016. *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. New York: Routledge.

based on observing aesthetics and behaviors, listening to conversations, participating in them, analyzing arguments in plenums, and playing table tennis—was deemed unscientific by my superiors because the decision to select certain people was not deduced from abstract, generalized criteria. Or perhaps the problem was that such criteria could not be induced from the way I approached selection. I do not know. "This is not science," I was told. My thoughts? "If that's the case, so be it. Science is the one that loses."

This episode reminded me of my doctoral research proposal defense, where anthropologists on the committee went to great lengths to convince me that my research was not anthropology. To which my former philosophy of science professor, who, to his credit, was more sympathetic to my approach, responded, "Where should she then conduct this research? This would never pass with the analytic philosophers in our department." So much for interdisciplinarity in a conservative academy.

I have spent my short academic career navigating the boundaries between disciplines. An analytic philosophy graduate with a master's in the same field, now conducting doctoral research at the anthropology department, I strive to be proficient in both the philosophy and anthropology of science while preserving my critical, feminist voice. My doctoral research philosophically and empirically examines the possibility of integration of disputed disciplines that explore human nature. Perhaps, at its unconscious core, my research is an attempt to prove to myself that what has been disintegrated can be reintegrated: my region, my family scattered across a fragmented homeland, and myself, my personal and academic, emotional and analytical, Serbian and Viennese selves.

My struggles with constraints in search of my academic voice could be depicted by the following lines of the Croatian music collective *Detour*:

> *Nemoj ići daleko, tako su rekli joj (Don't go far, so they told her)*
> *Nemoj ići nigdje gdje te moje oči ne vide (Don't go anywhere where my eyes can't see you)*
> *Zašto je to opasno, to niko nije reko joj (Why that was dangerous, no one told her)*
> *…*
> *A što ak' ja, što ak' ja (And what if I, what if I)*
> *Što ak' ja želim ići daleko? (What if I want to go far?)*
> *Nježan cvijet nije nježan zauvijek (A delicate flower is not delicate forever)*
> *Ni ova noć neće trajat zauvijek (This night won't last forever either)*
> *Ne talasaj valove, tako joj rekoše (Don't raise the waves, so they told her)*
> *Ne diraj lava, sve dok spava u redu je (Don't touch the lion, as long as it's sleeping, it's fine)*
> *A zašto je to opasno, to niko nije reko joj (Why that was dangerous, no one told her)*
> *Kad se dignu bure, svi se sakriju da ne vide (When the storm is raised, everyone hides so they don't see)*
> *A što ak' ja, što ak' ja (And what if I, what if I)*
> *Što ak' ja želim dizat valove? (What if I want to raise the waves?)*
> *…*
> *Što ak' ja, što ak' ja (And what if I, what if I)*
> *Što ak' ja želim ići daleko? (What if I want to go far?)*[7]

This song is not only about personal resistance; it sings of personal resistance in contrast to a collective emotion, one that suffocates. While individuals resist, a pervasive sense of pessimism lingers in our region. This pessimism is not without reason, it is a response to the painful history of our Balkan experiences. It is the consequence of that thick skin, the same skin that shields us, yet makes us passive, unwilling to resist, unwilling to fight back, or to simply try anything out of the ordinary: *When the storm is raised, everyone hides so they don't see.* Pessimism lingers even now, during the student protests, as we anxiously try to convince

[7] Lyrics in Croatian are available here: tekstovi.net. *Detour: Daleko* (accessed: 7 March 2025).

ourselves that change is around the corner, yet deep down (or perhaps not so deep down), we do not believe it.

And yet, against all odds and our fears, the student movement continues to blossom, proclaiming: *This night won't last forever either.* The students are showing the light to all of us who aspire to go far. In plenums, in occupied halls, in the streets, they debate, argue, and shape the future, not waiting for permission, not waiting for an explanation of "why that is dangerous," but seizing the moment without looking back. They do not flinch at the lion's roar. They are raising the waves.

We Live a Historic Moment

"It's not so bad to be in Belgrade," I thought as a sea of people, of which I was a part, moved down Kralja Milana Street from Slavija, where more than 100,000 had gathered in support of the rising student movement. We walked unusually quickly, as if propelled by an unseen force, something pushing us forward. I felt that we were all moving toward the same destination, yet to be known. For the first time, I saw faces I had never seen before. "Where had these people been? Where had I been? Could it be that, after all, I am not alone?" The force, the strength, the power of a united people was tangible.

From Belgrade, the student movement moved to Novi Sad. Incidentally, as Belgrade students arrived—having walked for two days, crossing 80 kilometers and sleeping under the open sky in the freezing February night—I was also arriving from Belgrade. I took the train, which now only goes as far as Petrovaradin since Novi Sad station remains closed.

As I approached the Duga Bridge (*duga* means rainbow), which connects Petrovaradin and Novi Sad, I found myself at the heart of the reception for the Belgrade students, welcomed by the citizens of Novi Sad. The bridge, which had always brought to mind memories of crossing it at dawn, heading home after long nights at the Exit Festival, now stood as a symbol of unification. The unification of Belgrade and Novi Sad. The unification of Serbia.

The atmosphere was beautiful, sincere, and warm. People were joyful, cherishing the present moment. Just for now, let's not think about what is waiting for us tomorrow.

I pushed through the crowd but did not get caught in the procession. I kept my distance, emotionally and mentally. I was afraid of what would happen if we lost this battle. Pessimism held me on a tight leash. I went home.

Saturday arrived, the first day of a two-day protest. On that day, Novi Sad's three main bridges were blocked for three hours each, except for the Freedom Bridge, which would remain blocked for the next 24 hours. Around two o'clock in the afternoon on Saturday, I went to the Duga Bridge with my friends to welcome the procession of students who had begun their march from the university campus.

First came the farmers, in their tractors, clearing the way for the students. That sight was something. Amazingly powerful. Being from the countryside, I have seen tractors all my life, symbols of the rural working class from my beloved Vojvodina flatland, where the open horizon sets the spirit free. But seeing them roll through the urban streets of one of Serbia's largest cities... Resistance had taken material form.

The students arrived in waves. The sun lit up their banners, proving my point: students are playing. The banners were colorful, witty, pacifist, visceral. A woman approached me and offered me a snack. As I ate, I gazed into the distance, my eyes catching a banner that read: "Idite da bih ja ostala" ("*Go away so I could stay"),* which expresses the frustration of those

who are forced to leave Serbia in search of a better life. I shuddered as my eyes filled, more and more, with tears. But I stood firmly, feet planted, thighs spread. I had not noticed the man beside me watching. I only heard him say: "Svaka čast!" (*"Kudos to you!"*) When I looked at him, he raised his hand for a high five. I returned it. I knew right away he was welcoming my emotion, recognizing and appreciating it, responding to the humanity in me. "I'm not alone!" Writing this text is a cathartic experience. I am crying as I write. I am not alone.

From the Duga Bridge, we headed to the Freedom Bridge. Novi Sad has never been more beautiful. It reminds me of Vienna. After a few hours at the foothill of the Freedom Bridge, I went to my friend's apartment. I ate and drank rakija to warm myself up. The apartment is in a socialist-era building, the kind you would see in a meme about Eastern Europe. The housing block is green, spacious, humane, nothing like the soulless capitalist ruins being built day by day. As the alcohol settled in, I took over the YouTube playlist and started playing Serbian punk: "Biti ružan, pametan i mlad!" (*"To be ugly, smart, and young!"*). I felt proud of my origin.

As I headed home close to midnight, I saw a boy holding a banner: "Kad porastem, biću student" (*"When I grow up, I'll be a student"*). "The past two days will be a formative experience for so many children," I thought. But then, an obvious truth struck me: this is formative for all of us, in ways we do not yet fully grasp. We are living through a historic moment. The realisation is overwhelming.

Sunday. I will never forget the feeling. I arrived at the Freedom Bridge just as the 15 minutes of silence began, held at every protest in honor of the 15 lives lost when the canopy collapsed. The day was bitterly cold, yet unusually sunny for February. Thousands stood before me, heads bowed, eyes fixed on the ground. Children, adults, the elderly—all frozen in place. Time had stopped. They looked like figures in a theatre scene, unmoving, solemn, while life continued to trickle past them: a boy weaving through the crowd on his bicycle, a few passersby heading home, sunrays slipping through the spaces between their almost statue-like bodies. Time stood still as their silence roared: *We remember everything. We forgive nothing.*

****

The only other time I attended the 15-minute commemoration was early December, in my hometown of Sombor. About thirty of us blocked the one-way street. A column of five or six cars appeared, honking aggressively, their drivers yelling that we were abusing the working people by not letting them pass. (The reader should not be fooled: this was orchestrated. Later, members of Vučić's party would drive into crowds gathered to commemorate the victims, running people over.[8]) Then, seven or eight men emerged, dressed in black, hoods pulled low over their faces, scarves masking their mouths. They looked to be between 17 and 25 years old. No one was afraid of them. I felt like I alone I could take them all. That's how angry I was.

As if sensing their own impotence, they let a woman fight their battle for them. A Roma woman, doubly oppressed in our society, stepped forward, shouting words I cannot even recall now, pushing deeper into our crowd. The protesters turned their backs on her — an act of

[8] Not only did Vučić's supporters and party members run over gathered people in Novi Sad, New Belgrade, Belgrade, Novi Pazar, and Ivanjica, but they also physically attacked two students in front of the Serbian Progressive Party premises in Novi Sad, severely injuring one of them.

pacifism—leaving only their banners to face her. A blood-red handprint and the words "Ruke su vam krvave." ("*Your hands are stained with blood*.") The symbol of these protests.

People in Sombor tried to stand strong. But as I watched them, I was overcome by a familiar feeling, one I had experienced so many times during my short tennis career. That moment when you step onto the court, your parents cheer, but you already know you are going to lose. Not because you lack skill. But because you do not believe you can win. We do not believe that we can be the catalyst of change.

****

On Monday, I woke up broken. "Oh, how the people will be crushed if change doesn't come." Pessimism crept in again. I went online to see how the last two days had been covered in the media. When asked, "Why are you protesting?" a man replied, "I am here because five minutes made the difference. My child and my wife might have been under that canopy." My heart sank as I once again remembered that someone's child, someone's wife, someone's brother, sister, grandfather *was* under that canopy.

It was the Thursday plenum at the Faculty, one day before the general strike and nine days before the big protest in Novi Sad. The Amphitheater was packed with students, buzzing with positive, uplifting energy. The moderators of the plenum discussion, both women, cheerfully listed all collectives who would support and join the general strike. With each name read aloud, the students erupted in applause, whistles, and cheers. I felt like a part of a football team at halftime—our side had taken a significant lead in the first half, and now, during the break, the coach was rallying the team, lifting their spirits before they headed back onto the field. Victory was within reach, but the battle ahead remained difficult and uncertain.

Luckily, the critical, rebellious voices never rest, never conform. When someone in the crowd announced that farmers had joined the students in solidarity—or, as the farmers put it, "the kids"—a young woman, no older than 21 or 22, spoke up with bold defiance. "Every time they call us children, they place us in an inferior position. We are not children. We are adult citizens, and we should be addressed as such." Although she was in the top rows and I in the lowest, positioned to observe faces and interactions, our eyes met. She caught my meaningful gaze and held it. I took the opportunity to bow my head in a silent gesture of deep respect. I hope she is proud of herself.

I attended the first plenum after the big protest in Novi Sad, held on Monday—the day after. I expected the same cheerful energy. However, it was nowhere to be found, not even in traces. Tension filled the air. Within minutes, I realized the reason: exhaustion. After all, the students are biological creatures—though we often see them as possessing supernatural powers—whose emotions are inevitably affected by a lack of basic resources: sleep and food. The plenum discussion partly revolved around the successes and failures in the organization of the protest that had just taken place. They did not stop, did not rest, did not allow themselves to lose focus. I cannot share the details of their discussions, but I can say this: I had no idea just how much labor went into organizing this protest. Some student street guards had been on duty for 17 consecutive hours!

It is about time we take the youth seriously!

Rounding the Story Up: "Ни Вучић, ни жути, студенти су љути!"

Who are these students? They are everything I am not. I shy away from my culture, from the parts of my identity shaped by it. I dislike the Serbian flag. I dislike our national anthem. I

dislike ћирилица (*Cyrillic*). To me, these are the symbols of war, orthodoxy, nationalism, patriarchal oppression, homophobia, and a conservative, limiting, exclusionary tradition—one that has historically oppressed my Croatian, Hungarian, Catholic, Roma, Šokci, and Bunjevci neighbors, who quite literally live next door in Bački Breg and Bezdan, my parents' home villages in the northernmost part of Vojvodina. And they are not the only minorities who water Serbia's ground.

I, a millennial, have internalized the Western perception of Serbian (and, in general, Balkan) cultural identity, much like my parents, and much like Todorova describes: as something less civilized than the West.[9] That is to say, as epistemologically, ethically, and aesthetically inferior to it. While my gestalt therapy urges me to focus on my childhood to trace the roots of my feeling of inadequacy, I believe this feeling is also embedded in our collective unconscious. On the map of the world, we from the Balkans are never 'good enough.' That is why our workers can be exploited. That is why, when we demand democracy—the so-called Western invention—European support is absent. Moreover, it is on Vučić's side. That is why our rivers can be drained and our land ravaged for mining lithium, needed to protect Western Europe's clean air oases while they sell us their outdated, pollution-spewing cars. If we are deemed not good enough, our lives are worth less. But, as both gestalt therapy and Kantian deontology remind us, every person holds inherent value simply by being. No life should ever be reduced to a mere means; every life is an end in itself.

The students, the Gen Z generation, own their culture. They claim their identity, actively construing it day by day. When I ask them what they see as the greatest achievement and ultimate goal of the movement, they answer: the student movement is teaching us not to think in dichotomies. This lesson is best captured in one of the graffities from Novi Sad: "Ни Вучић" ("*Neither Vučić*"), "Ни жути" ("*Nor the Yellows*," a nod to our, at best, incompetent opposition parties), "Студенти су љути" ("*Students are furious*"). Every government is replaceable, no leader is untouchable, power is decentralized, democracy is the rule of the people. In doing so, the student movement is shaking our deeply ingrained, conservative, communist-era deference to authority. *Tito.—Who?* (Do not raise your eyebrows, my fellow comrade. While one might be quick to argue that, in contrast to a liberal Western European understanding of communism in Yugoslavia, social egalitarianism reached its peak during this period—particularly with respect to women's rights—and when compared to what came before (the Kingdom) and what followed (Milošević), I want to highlight a recurring pattern among the older generation: Tito-Milošević-Vučić. This is the kind of deference to authority I am referring to, which I think, at its core, fails to grasp the essence of democratic governance. Although I am certain many will soon argue and describe how the student plenum has its origins in the most democratic form of organization—that, even in today's Western Europe, remains avant-garde: Yugoslav worker's self-management.)

I believe, however, that an equally significant contribution of this movement is its lesson that our identities are not a binary choice between Serbian regression and European progressivism. These are false dichotomies—not derived from the Platonic world of ideas, existing as atoms, giraffes, or hydrogen, as some would have us believe—but constructed daily, solely to oppress.

That this is the greatest contribution of the student movement became evident to me during a heated discussion that broke out at the entrance to the Amphitheater, where one of the regular plenums was about to begin. A question was raised as to whether the upcoming

[9] Todorova, Maria. 2009 [1997]. *Imagining the Balkans*. Updated ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

plenum should address the online fuss triggered by a banner that read something like "Faith, Family, Serbian Tradition." The banner had been displayed by a group of students from another occupied faculty during the protest commemorating the 100th day since the canopy collapsed. The mere mention of the banner was met with hostility. For the rest of the students, no further debate was necessary, as the online condemnation of the banner was deemed justified. Nonetheless, two young men stood tall to proclaim that Serbia is not inhabited solely by Serbs—"Our Vojvodina is multiethnic, and we cherish her as such"—and that invoking "family" in this context was unmistakably "sexist and homophobic."[10] "These are not the values that unite the student movement." The students' criticism of the banner's message was unapologetic, their judgment uncompromising, dismissive, perhaps even borderline rude. But rebellion sometimes demands rudeness.

And all of this unfolded in front of the Serbian flag, the one I dislike, hanging solemnly from the central cathedra of the Amphitheater.

As a response to my opening question, I paraphrase the words of my friend and colleague, Vukan Marković: this generation is *terra incognita*. We have yet to learn who these students are. But one is obvious: this is the generation that will not be led.

My presence at plenums taught me that democracy requires a leap of faith. It demands that we trust the process, and that, at times, we are willing to set aside our own opinions, however convinced we are of their truth, if they differ from the collective decision. Crucially, the collective has made up its mind through deliberation, through discussion, the only tool we have for building our communities. And it is noble and powerful, yet fragile. After all, we have evolved to argue, to persuade, and to digest counterarguments.[11] But beware! Our reasoning, finely tuned for argumentation, malfunctions when left unchecked. When we reason alone or within echo chambers of like-minded people, confirmation bias takes hold.[12]

This is also why democracy cannot function alongside a narcissistic ego. Narcissistic ego aggressively demands to be heard, insists that its opinion must be valued, that it must be listened to, otherwise, its very existence feels threatened. But the narcissistic ego is not innate; it is nurtured in childhood, in an environment where a child was not heard, not appreciated simply for being. So, parents, learn how to love your children. Don't be fooled into thinking that parental love is purely instinctual or that it comes naturally. As bell hooks beautifully reminds us, love is a verb, something we must train and practice daily. Parents, let your children be.[13] Listen to them. Learn from them. Only then can we build and sustain our communities and democracies. Our freedom in equality.

The long road is ahead of us, but at least we know our next stops. Kragujevac. Then, Niš.

Notes on author
Aleksandra Knežević is a Research Associate and PhD candidate in anthropology at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. She works as an Elisabeth List Fellow at the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz, on the project "Women's and gender history in Southeast Europe

[10] That the use of 'family' in this context has normative implications is explained by Zaharijević, Adriana / Wawrzyniak, Jan, and Alexandru Dohotariu. 2024. Who cares for families? Narrative(s) of return in postsocialist Europe. *East European Politics and Societies* 38(2), 576-593.
[11] Mercier, Hugo, and Dan Sperber. 2011. Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative theory. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 34, 57-74.
[12] Mercier, Hugo, and Hélène Landemore. 2012. Reasoning is for arguing: Understanding the successes and failures of deliberation. *Political Psychology* 33(2), 243-258.
[13] hooks, bell. 2000. *All about love: New visions*. New York: William Morrow.

in the 20th Century: Oral history, ethnographic and biographical approaches as a way to advance intersectionality. Aleksandra completed her MA in philosophy at Central European University. Her research interests include critical science studies, feminist philosophy of science, and the philosophy of the life sciences, with a particular focus on the integration of evolutionary and anthropological explanations of human social behavior.

Acknowledgments
I am grateful to Rory Archer for his support in facilitating the publication of this piece. I also want to thank Adriana Zaharijević, Krisztina Rácz, and Andrej Ševo for their valuable feedback and words of encouragement. This research article was realized with the support of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, according to the Agreement on the realization and financing of scientific research 451-03-136/2025-03/ 200025.

References

Badiou, Alain. 2005 [1988]. *Being and event*. Translated by Feltham, Oliver. London & New York: Continuum.

Bochner, Arthur P. 2012. On first-person narrative scholarship: Autoethnography as acts of meaning. *Narrative Inquiry* 22(1), 155-164.

Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. 2016. *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. New York: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1970. The Berber house or the world reversed. *Social Science Information* 9(2), 151-170.

hooks, bell. 2000. *All about love: New visions*. New York: William Morrow.

Mercier, Hugo, and Hélène Landemore. 2012. Reasoning is for arguing: Understanding the successes and failures of deliberation. *Political Psychology* 33(2), 243-258.

Mercier, Hugo, and Dan Sperber. 2011. Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative theory. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 34, 57-74.

tekstovi.net. *Detour: Daleko* (accessed: 7 March 2025).

Todorova, Maria. 2009 [1997]. *Imagining the Balkans*. Updated ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zaharijević, Adriana / Wawrzyniak, Jan, and Alexandru Dohotariu. 2024. Who cares for families? Narrative(s) of return in postsocialist Europe. *East European Politics and Societies* 38(2), 576-593.