

# GEN P (E A C E B U I L D E R)

## Students on march

How a national tragedy sparked mass youth mobilisation that is reshaping Serbia

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The collapse of the canopy at Novi Sad train station in November 2024, which claimed 16 lives, ignited a struggle for justice in Serbia that was met with repression. Student-led protests have since shaken Serbia, creating a society-wide front demanding the rule of law. This text examines the crisis through the lens of the UN Youth, Peace and Security agenda, showing how government actions threaten three of its pillars – participation, protection and partnership – and how youth are experimenting with new democratic practices.

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### 1. Introduction

For over a year, a historic student-led movement has been fighting for democracy and rule of law against an authoritarian regime in Serbia – a country where only 16 per cent of the population is under 30 and where youth are often dismissed as apathetic. This article examines the ongoing sociopolitical crisis in Serbia through the lens of the UN Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda, arguing that the authorities' response has undermined three core pillars of the YPS framework – participation, protection and partnership.

Serbia experienced a national tragedy on 1

November 2024 when the canopy of the recently renovated Novi Sad train station collapsed and killed 16 people. The train station reopened twice during reconstruction, in 2022 and 2024, both times before elections, with private contractors who were later accused of corruption and safety violations (Serbian Monitor, 2025).

The public protested, demanding justice for the victims and accountability from the government. However, as student protesters experienced attacks that went on unpunished, these events proved to be the

tipping point that started one of the biggest protest movements in Serbian history (FDU Student Plenum, 2025).

Students blockaded their faculties starting in mid-November 2024 and by December, three-quarters of all public faculties were blockaded, with high school pupils also joining in. Students soon settled on four demands: 1. The publication of all documentation regarding the renovation of the Novi Sad train station; 2. The

## 2. Youth without peace or security

The YPS agenda, as established by three UN Security Council Resolutions, aims for youths' active role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. It is comprised of five pillars: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships and disengagement and reintegration.

The YPS agenda is relevant to Serbia, being part of the post-conflict Western Balkans region that has many unresolved issues. One, for example, is the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia, which is addressed through the Belgrade-Prishtina Dialogue facilitated by the EU as part of the region's integration process. However, peace begins at home. The current sociopolitical crisis strongly impacted the lives of youth, which is another reason why the YPS agenda is relevant to Serbia.

Several political commitments to implement

prosecution of all individuals that attacked students and protesters; 3. The withdrawal of criminal charges against peaceful protesters; and 4. An increase in allocated funding for state universities (N1 Belgrade, 2024).

Analysing the course of events through the lens of the YPS agenda helps to make sense of the crisis (response) and highlights several new democratic practices employed by young people.

the YPS agenda exist. The National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS) analysed Serbia's progress in integrating the YPS agenda into legislation and found that Serbia's Youth Strategy (2023 – 2030) included YPS principles (KOMS, 2023). This analysis reflects the author's personal views, notwithstanding the author's role as President of KOMS.

In addition, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, an intergovernmental Western Balkans organisation, advocates for advancing the agenda in the region. There are some laws and strategies covering youth policy, education, employment, health, gender equality and human rights. Yet, the implementation of many laws and measures remains weak and Serbia lacks a National Action Plan that would bring together all the YPS agenda's goals.

The following section will take a closer look at how three of the five YPS pillars relate to the current crisis.

### 3. Participation

The participation pillar of the YPS agenda aims to ensure that young people are not only passive participants but active decision-makers who contribute to building sustainable peace in inclusive societies.

KOMS's annual Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in Serbia provides an overview of youth participation mechanisms (KOMS, 2025a). Young people can participate in decision-making processes through bodies such as the Advisory Council on Youth of the Government of Serbia (Advisory Council) on the national level, local youth councils in their local self-government units and public consultations for legislation. Yet, there are doubts that these structures ensure meaningful youth participation.

There are several concerns regarding the Advisory Council. First, only 40 per cent of its members are young people, giving government representatives a built-in advantage in voting. Second, it rarely meets – in 2023 it met twice, while in 2024, only one session was held. Third, the Government takes major ad-hoc decisions, such as the adoption of a Law on Housing Loans in March 2025, without prior youth

consultations (KOMS, 2025d). In regard to the local youth councils, they lack standardisation. It is left to local discretion – often to the detriment of youth – how they are founded, how they function and which institutions they advise (KOMS, 2025a).

Youth participation structures also exist in the educational sector. High school parliaments exist, but they often lack meaningful power in practice. When it comes to student organising, several problems have arisen throughout the last years. In 2021, legislative changes made student parliaments obligatory (which is a good thing!), but the students were required to collect signatures from 10 per cent of all eligible students before they could participate in the elections, making it exceedingly hard to do so (VP.rs, 2021).

Finally, parliamentary elections represent the foundational model of participation. During the protests, students saw elections as a potential exit out of the crisis. As the next regular election is scheduled for the end of 2027, students articulated an additional demand in May 2025 for snap elections. Students announced an electoral list of their own, a novelty for democracy.

However, snap elections have not been called to date.

The lack of meaningful youth participation and dialogue between youth and decision-makers pushed Serbian youth to express their opinions on the streets, holding more than 25,000 public gatherings in the period November 2024 – October 2025 (FoNet, 2025a). As they blockaded faculties, students organised plenaries where everyone could speak. This embrace of direct democracy became a symbol of hope that the decades-long democratic transition process could have a positive outcome. Perhaps their most impactful actions were marches throughout Serbia and to Strasbourg, leading some experts to claim that students had become the most

powerful political force in society (FoNet, 2025b).

It is no surprise that there was a major shift in youth perceptions this year: 60 per cent of youth stated they consider democracy the best form of governance, representing a 20-point increase compared to all previous years (KOMS, 2025a). In this regard, political stakeholders need to take action. Elections must be free and fair, according to recommendations issued by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE ODIHR, 2024). Additionally, youth participation mechanisms should be reformed through an inclusive process to align with the needs of youth and principles established by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2025).

#### 4. Protection

The protection pillar of the YPS agenda is vital because it allows young people to engage in society and activism without fear of violence or repression. Without protection, their voices are silenced and their role in building peace and democracy is severely limited.

In the context of the protests, the protection of young people has been lacking. Authorities responded to youth peaceful protests and commemorative actions with repression and violence. Students, alongside other citizens, have faced violence committed most frequently by

groups of masked individuals or the police force (Amnesty International, 2025). This included brutal physical violence, detentions, intimidation, targeted media campaigns and illegal surveillance by state security agencies (KOMS, 2025b, 2025c). On 15 March 2025, during one of the largest protests in Serbian history, an alleged sonic weapon was used against peaceful protesters, leaving more than 3,000 people injured (Slobodna Evropa, 2025).

Over the course of the year, repression became a constant, as if there was a government strategy of instilling fear to

deter citizens from protesting (Mašina, 2025). In response to all these events, the EU released Serbia's most critical enlargement report in November (European Commission, Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, 2025), a warning signal for this candidate state.

The YPS agenda is clear – protection of youth as a group that is disproportionately affected by conflict is paramount. Safety is

indeed a precondition for any engagement with decision-makers, and the risks to deterioration of social trust under current conditions are significant. Thus, all perpetrators of violent acts need to be apprehended by police and consequently prosecuted. Police and state security forces need to return to acting within their legal bounds, and protect all citizens.

## 5. Partnerships

The partnership pillar is essential to the YPS agenda because meaningful progress for young people depends on institutions, civil society and youth actively working together as equal, committed partners. In Serbia, such collaboration is lacking.

The partnership between Serbia's state institutions and civil society can be summarised through the following anecdote: On 25 February 2025, officers of the Criminal Police Directorate entered the premises of five civil society organisations, KOMS included, to investigate paperwork related to grants by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Civil Rights Defenders, 2025). It was an intimidation attempt, as these USAID grantees were accused of fomenting a “coloured revolution” for voicing support for the student movement (ibid.). Authorities also

exercised economic pressure on civil society, for instance through a de facto freezing of open calls for grants upon which associations, including in the cultural area and youth organisations, rely to keep operating (Nova.rs, 2025). In addition, university employees went months without pay and faculties' finances were blocked until an agreement was reached to bring back classes at least in an online, sped up format (Karaulić, 2025).

This pattern of intimidation from the authorities has caused a deepening of mistrust of institutions. Among youth, the Government of Serbia received a grade of 1,17 from 5 in 2025 compared to the already low level of 1,59 in 2024 (KOMS, 2025a). The damage to social trust may take years to repair, causing friction in future cooperation between different social actors.

However, positive partnerships have also emerged in Serbia. Students, high schoolers and citizens showed remarkable coordination throughout the crisis. Students' main challenge will be coordinating the 250-person electoral list of respected individuals that all student

plenaries must approve for the next parliamentary elections. If successful, this list could represent a tectonic shift in the political landscape of Serbia and pose as an example of how mass mobilisation can be successfully transformed into political power (Burazer, 2025).

## 6. Conclusion

After the deadly collapse of the canopy at Novi Sad train station in November 2024, a student-led movement ignited a struggle for justice in Serbia that was met with repression. It mobilised society to enact a clear vision of Serbia as a society that is governed by fair laws that equally apply to all.

Such a society will still have major hurdles to overcome, including prosecuting the crimes that went unpunished before and during the current sociopolitical crisis, deep corruption, reforms pertaining to EU accession and Kosovo\*. To address these, the student movement needs to revitalise Serbia's faltering parliamentary democracy. The YPS agenda offers a path forward, particularly the participation, protection and partnership pillars. The

energy of the movement could be utilised to reform participatory mechanisms, allowing for the co-creation of future policies. Protection will be key – police, prosecutors and security forces will need to work to apprehend criminals and reaffirm the rule of law. While the movement will most likely retain its dominant position, as they enter the realm of electoral politics, they will need to work in partnership with opposition parties, civil society, institutions and international actors to effectively govern and meet the lofty expectations set upon them.

Out of a deep crisis, Serbia may come out a stronger society, dependent upon whether its youthful democratic experiment bears fruit. While only time will tell, one cannot help but feel hopeful.

\*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

*The author is responsible for the content of the article. The contribution does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung.*

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