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Student Protests and Changes Without Politics

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It is important to begin by noting that Serbia is currently experiencing widespread mass events, including blockades of universities, secondary and primary schools, road closures, teacher strikes, and large-scale street protests in numerous cities. These events, which have been ongoing since November 2024, erupted in response to the tragic deaths of fifteen people caused by the collapse of the canopy of the Novi Sad Railway Station. As said, these events are *massive* and this massiveness has instilled confidence in people that changes are possible. But what kind of changes? While students in protests and blockades emphasize that they are not fighting to replace the current regime, but rather *to change the system*, many of their supporters—who join the protests and blockades—argue that the regime itself must step down. However, the students do not clarify what the change in the system means to them, except that it may refer to their main demand, which is that *the institutions do their jobs*. This raises the question—would a call to change the system then actually serve as a euphemism for a change in government, in power, while the request addressed to the institutions would mean the need to preserve and reform the state? What is certain is that the protesters are not explicitly demanding a change in government, but rather insisting on the improved functioning of the state and its

institutions. For now, let's say that the core principles emerging from these protests can be summarized as: *responsibility*, *security*, and *justice*.

Mass participation is a crucial element of these events: nearly all universities are blocked, the street protests are also massive. One of the key actions accompanying these demonstrations is the counting of participants, with the numbers seen as an indicator of declining support for the current regime and growing solidarity with the students. However, as our friend Sylvain Lazarus, an anthropologist of the name (and of the singular), says, *mass effect* is an important principle of the real of (the) politics, but it is not merely about "counting." Massiveness is a form of verification of the politics, as is its relevance and effectiveness for people. According to Lazarus, the existence of an organization in and of itself is not sufficient for politics to exist. Therefore, when we say massiveness, it does not refer to the politics of "numbers," but to *the mass acceptance of proposals, signifying the existence of politics in subjectivity*. We reference his thinking of politics, because it is highly relevant and inspiring for our own work, as we seek to engage with current events affirmatively. It encourages us to reflect on politics and the thinking of people—particularly from our standpoint as *former activists* whose work with people ended with the disappearance of *our* mass political situations. If Sylvain is considered a friend of the Yellow Vests he dealt with, can we say that we are *friends of the student protests*?

At the very beginning, we encounter a problem: in the current mass situation, people are widely rejecting politics, or, at the very least, refusing to recognize their actions as politics. What are the consequences of this, even if it is a tactical stance toward the (current) government? Nonetheless, they are doing something and

it is necessary to try to look at this phenomenon, because mass acceptance of proposals is evident, albeit in different forms.

The students have *demands* as well as *proposals*. The four demands of the students in the blockade are unified within their synchronized statements, which emphasize that *the institutions should do their job*, that is, *that everyone who works in the institutions should do their job*. Thus, their demands are directed at institutions whose jurisdiction and responsibility include addressing these issues. At the forefront of these demands is the public prosecutor's office, particularly regarding the request for the full disclosure of documentation related to the reconstruction of the Novi Sad Railway Station. Fulfillment of this particular demand could expose corruption, establish political and criminal responsibility, and lead to the prosecution of those accountable for the corruption that resulted in the loss of lives. Additionally, it calls for accountability for actions that have endangered the safety of students participating in the protests.

However, according to the students, the public prosecutor's office is still not doing its job, despite releasing parts of the documentation. For them, this means their demands have not yet been met. They almost stubbornly stand behind them, insisting that only they can determine when their demands have been fulfilled, as these *demands are their own*. At the same time, there has been a varied response to their demands directed to the institutions: their employees approach them with their own, *individual* understanding. Some offer declarative support, expressing agreement with the students' demands without taking concrete action—this form of support is massive. Others go a step further by suspending classes in schools and kindergartens, often with the backing of parents, lawyers, and public sector unions. Some institutions have openly endorsed the students' demands,

adopting them as their own. In doing so, they understand the demands as *proposals,* and like the students, they block the work of institutions, meaning *they start doing their job*—by suspending it in the first place.

The students refuse to compromise with the authorities, rejecting every invitation to dialogue. The first to reach out to them was the president, who, through his ruling party, has effectively usurped power and the institutions of the state. However, the students' response was unequivocal: "You have no jurisdiction." Their unwavering refusal to engage in dialogue has exposed the regime's deception and insincerity (a day after the president's invitation, members of the ruling party brutally assaulted a female student, breaking her jaw—which is just one of many attacks on students). Incidents like these have further eroded the legitimacy of the president and his regime. At the same time, the protests demand that he, along with state institutions, *return* to their constitutional and legal mandates. Therefore, the students are calling for adherence to the law and the constitution, respect for the state and its institutions. They claim that this is the only way that the realization of justice, responsibility, and security for all can be achieved. On this point, they express no doubt.

Although the protests demand both criminal and political accountability—and one of the slogans, "corruption kills," directly addresses culpability—these are not strictly anti-corruption protests. The students are not explicitly focused on eradicating corruption from institutions; rather, their demands emphasize an affirmation: *institutions should do their jobs*. In this, one can hear in a rather blunt way that what is actually required is *a healthy society* and *a rule of law*, that is, *a right, true state*,[1] as they sometimes put it. They seek changes for making the state better, and for them that means making it *their own*. What is undeniable is that

students are at the center of these events. The impression is that public support is directed primarily towards them as a student population, and then only secondarily towards their demands. Therefore, these protests are protests of the youth and for the youth, protests marking a generational shift and a national renewal, in which, for the first time in many years, people see a future for themselves and their children.

Unlike the demands, the proposals have been presented to the public through calls for protests, blockades, and participation in a general strike. Here, too, each individual can make her own decision—whether to join the protests, take part in blockades, or suspend work. On a personal level, many people have embraced these proposals, and their response has been massive. This engagement is effective in the sense previously mentioned, as supporting the students is seen as an act of mutual *solidarity*. As individuals, people are also coming together in practical ways—they cook meals for students at the blockades, secure donations, and offer other forms of support. Farmers, taxi drivers, pensioners, and various other groups have also expressed solidarity with the students.

What is particularly interesting is that the acceptance of proposals does not take place through an organization where proposals could be presented by anyone that had them and who would want to join that way. This means that there is no broad organization at play, nor is there any directed, joint action and *sharing of politics*. Instead, what exists is massive, acclamative support for the students, sometimes through self-organized protests. This form of support has become the dominant way that people are engaging in these mass events.

Proposals are defined by students during their plenums and then presented publicly as an invitation for people to support them and join them in their actions. However, this reflects a form of organization that is relatively closed. It is student-led, with professors typically not participating—especially those who oppose the blockades—and all decisions are made within the occupied university faculties. At these faculties, students decide and control who is allowed to enter, with access being strictly limited. This restriction stems primarily from concerns for their own safety, as attacks on students have been frequent. Additionally, there is a fear that provocateurs could infiltrate the blockades with the intent of undermining their integrity. The students reject the idea of representatives or spokespersons, viewing this both as a demonstration of their unity and equality and as a measure to protect individuals from being singled out and potentially targeted in the public. The consequence of this has been that students have spoken very little in public and do not care to make an effort to articulate their statements.[2] The aforementioned nature of student organization was particularly evident during the first "citizens' plenum" at the end of the day-long bridge blockade in Novi Sad. Although it was widely announced that people would be able to participate in decision-making, it was later clarified that the plenum was largely performative. Given the large mass of people, it was explained that there were no real conditions for discussion, and it ultimately concluded with an acclamation—a collective, affirmative response to the students' question of extending the bridge blockade.

What does this tell us? We are witnessing a mass situation due to the acclamative support for the students and their centralized organization. Although the demands and proposals go far beyond the usual student demands—such as study conditions—any

suggestion that their actions are political, that is, that it could be *their politics*, is firmly rejected. This rejection of politics largely reflects an effort to distance themselves from political parties, and increasingly, from non-governmental and activist organizations as well, i.e. from any organization. What is new, however, is that students are now even distancing themselves from one another over concerns about the "influence of politics," demanding from themselves a *depoliticization* of the protest. We have already seen that distancing from politics is actually distancing oneself from political parties as a strategy to avoid government attacks that have long been used to discredit the opposition. In this context, politics is reduced to power, but not to the state, which both students and protesters want to preserve. The rejection of politics is one of the elements that led to the mass situations, which might suggest that the people are also rejecting the government itself. They do not want politics or government, but they want *a real, true state* and *a new order* that they would establish with such a state. In other words, it seems as they are calling for a state without government, without power. One often hears the sentiment that "the state is not the same as the government—the state is the ordinary person." What kind of state that would be is not the central question at this moment. However, what is clear is that people believe that only through such a *depoliticized* and *disempowered* state can justice be served and security be ensured for all.

Therefore, the student demands, which enjoy massive public support, do not explicitly call for *a change of government* or *power*—something generally considered a political demand. However, is such a demand not implicitly present, given that their main demand is addressed to the institutions of the state to do their job? More specifically, is the desired functioning of these institutions even possible under a government that has so thoroughly usurped

and corrupted them—resulting in fatal consequences due to their criminalization? These pressing questions remain unanswered, creating the impression that there is a deliberate decision to avoid talking about them.

What does this tell us? While politics is rejected, the desire for change is undeniable, with a firm insistence that such change must not be political. Therefore, I want to emphasize again that we are witnessing mass situations, a closed organizational structure (for multiple reasons), and demands and proposals that have been widely accepted. However, it also appears that change is occurring on a different level—outside the realm of government and power—effectively sidelining the issue of elections, which has dominated political discourse for years. In other words, what seems to be happening is a gradual and unspoken taking over of the power (of the state?) through the erosion of its legitimacy. Moreover, any suggestion of snap elections or a transitional government as a potential solution is firmly rejected, as that path is currently seen as a betrayal of the demands and principles set forth by the students.

The rejection of politics, government and its dispositives—elections, negotiations, parliamentarism, representation—simultaneously sets a limit to the understanding of this situation, because there is no intention to seize power through a coup. This accusation is levied solely by the president and government officials, seemingly without genuine belief in its possibility, as it is not even a topic of discussion among the people. Indeed, a key slogan of these protests emphasizes non-violent resistance, a struggle against the violence inflicted upon students and the people.

What is evident is that people are encouraged by the student struggle and their persistence, against the government's falsehoods

and attempts to undermine their blockades (such as the offer for inexpensive student housing). The students' answer is that they are *incorruptible*, and this is the implied content of their main demand, implicitly demanding the same of those working within institutions who have been subjected to intimidation, blackmail, and corruption. Is that change, then, a change in the morality of which the establishment and order are being worked on? Because corruptibility and agreeing to blackmail are the basis of the corruption of every individual and the criminalization of this regime, this government, and this state.

Language editing: Lina Dokuzović

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[1] In the Serbian language, *rule of law* is translated as *pravna država* (the state of law), and protestors also say *prav(n)a država*, i.e. *prava država* (the right, true state).

[2] Interestingly, one of the main actions of the students and people in the streets, in addition to protests, has been a fifteen-minute *moment of silence* for the fifteen victims of the tragedy in Novi Sad, most often accompanied by blocking intersections and stopping traffic.