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Student Rebellion - The Last Lifeline Above the Abyss

Boris Buden, Interview: Ljubica Gojgić

They simply don't want to repeat the fate of their parents, who wasted their lives endlessly compensating for, catching up to, adapting to or imitating some supposedly real, authentic life that's lived by other, better people and which is always somewhere else, residing in those, as you put it, "much more developed and democratic countries of the West". That's also why they took to the streets: to teach their parents what life is and how it should be lived in accordance with human dignity ~ Boris Buden

In monitoring events in Serbia and the student protests that have now entered their fifth month, Buden writes about their originality and significance that transcends national boundaries. He simultaneously makes reference to the fact that the establishment and mainstream media of both the West and the East seem to still be unsure about what stance to take regarding these protests that appeal to the universal values of the rule of law and the functioning of institutions. "They don't know what to do with the rebellious Serbs – whether to put them under the flag of the European Union, or what's left of the West following Trump's resurrection, or under the banners of Putin, China and Iran. They aren't capable of thinking of or even imagining something else, because they are mentally already at war and see the world exclusively through the

prism of the binary relationship between friend and enemy," says CorD Magazine's interlocutor in this exclusive interview.

Mr Buden, you have commented on and interpreted Serbia's student protests with great interest. Your assessment is that this isn't only an unprecedented event in Serbian, but in the modern history of Europe. How does it differ from the youth protests we witnessed in previous years in Greece, Croatia or other EU countries?

It clearly differs from both Eastern Europe's "colour revolutions" and Serbia's "5th October" revolution of the year 2000. Today students in Serbia are, as you can hear, "pumping up", but they aren't themselves pumped from the outside, as was the case with, say, Otpor [Resistance]. Let's recall how that "regime change" project, specifically the project to overthrow Milošević, received investments of millions of dollars. In a coordinated action conducted by the secret services, primarily the CIA, Western philanthropic foundations and externally funded civil society organisations, Serbia's anti-Milošević opposition was 'pumped up' ideologically, financially, logistically and in the media, in accordance with the recipe of a so-called "Psyop". And the objective was achieved, with Milošević being ousted. Of course, that external pumping up in no way reduces the authenticity of the democratic will and energy of the citizens that Otpor then mobilised. The vast majority of those who then took to the streets did so with the sincerest faith in the ideals of democracy, and they were even convinced that they shared those ideals with the so-called 'West'. The problem, of course, was in the very ideology of the "colour revolutions", which weren't designed to resolve actual contradictions, rather only to remove their personifications, such as

Milošević and his regime, and to replace them with Western puppets. Đinđić certainly wasn't a puppet, nor was he prepared to accept that role, but the question is whether he had any other option. Otpor's leaders, in contrast, were indeed puppets of the West, and they went on to pump up colour revolutions in dozens of countries worldwide. We can see how much they pushed their luck in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, or Ukraine. And when you want to discover something about that today and head to Wikipedia, you will come across a paradox: the English article about Otpor is almost thirteen times as long as the Serbian version. So, there's no confusion about who writes history, about whom and for whom.

What's going on in Serbia today is, thus, not part of that story. This isn't about continuity, about a second attempt, or rather a third attempt, to finally convert Serbia into a democratic state, regardless of how convinced of that the bourgeois opposition might be. The current protests are no longer unfolding in the ideological code of post-communist transition, in which we are awaited at the end of the road by some kind of democratic normality akin to that which has supposedly already been achieved in the West – a fantasy of harmony between the classes under the conditions of benevolent global capitalism that guarantees everyone economic and cultural progress under conditions of everlasting peace. What has compelled students to take to the streets of Serbia today aren't illusions of someone else's past, but the requirements of their own future, a radically different future. In this sense, they're more akin to the student protests that happened in Croatia 15 years ago, or to the anti-regime protests in Bosnia-Herzegovina, than they are to the colour revolutions – in logic, and not in dimensions, where they surpass all three by far.

Paraphrasing the famous slogan of the student demonstrations of

1968, you wrote that Serbian students' demands are "unrealistic, because they are seeking the possible"; for the respect of existing laws and for that to be done publicly. After more than four months of protests and insistence on the meeting of demands, a question arises as to what would constitute victory or disappointment for the students.

I don't know, and it seems to me that that's not important at this point. The question for me isn't what will disappoint them, but primarily what was it that captivated them and activated all that great will, energy and socially creative intelligence? I don't think that it was one of the ideals from the conceptual arsenal of the ruling liberal democratic ideology, such as, for example, "the rule of law", "free and independent media", "institutions that do their job" and similar phrases that have been worn out completely by this project of unending transition. But nor is it the law, as it appears to be at first glance. This law, as the only so-called value that the protests refer to explicitly, is in no way ideologically neutral, or the lowest common denominator of the protest, rather, in contrast, it is its broadest common ideologeme – something like the last bastion of liberal bourgeois ideology. Behind that law is a chasm that causes reason to freeze, and reason is, of course, a historical category – rationality within its epochal and local limits, thus the rationality of someone's very tangible will for power, someone's profit, someone's unscrupulous realpolitik. It is naturally possible to respect the law. It is unrealistic, however, to expect that this will restore a dismantled society, confirm the people's sovereignty or finally realise the ideals of justice. And people know that on the basis of their own experience. They have no illusions over the law that convicted Serbian war criminals, because they know that it condemned them only because they are Serbs, and not because they are criminals. If they weren't Serbs, they could have

got through it unscathed. They could have killed not only 8,000 men aged between 16 and 60, but twice as many children and tens of thousands of women and old people to boot; they could have reduced Sarajevo to ashes and remained unpunished, if they'd been – as wasn't the case – under the protection of an omnipotent sovereign who's above the law, and who threatens to destroy anyone who dares to apply that law to his vassals. In short, the law referred to by the student protests isn't some normative ideal that will finally be realised when the opposition is brought to power, but rather represents the last straw of salvation above a chasm that no longer has at its bottom any law, nor the people as sovereigns who create and establish that law, nor a society whose life is regulated by that law. It has but a straw, and nothing more.

Your comments express a critical attitude towards Serbia's opposition political parties, which you describe as sitting on the sidelines awaiting a favourable moment for themselves. Discussion has intensified in Serbia in recent days over whether the student protests can achieve concrete results if they insist on distancing themselves from all political parties. Can there be democracy without institutions?

And what would constitute a concrete result? Which opposition politicians and parties will replace Vučić and his regime? Who will clean which ministry of corruption? Which of Vučić's tabloids will transform overnight into serious media outlets that will publish objective information based exclusively on verified facts? Which local oligarchs will enrich themselves at the expense of the poor exclusively in accordance with laws that were passed in their interest in the first place? Which foreign capital will render the health, wellbeing and progress of the Serbian people more important than profit? Who will Serbia's Mirage jets fly against

when Serbia finally joins the EU and NATO - Russia, China or Gaza? Which Islamists will Serbia dub terrorists and which will they brand freedom fighters? Whose crimes will it be silent about and whose will it label horrific? Why, then, should they deal with these specific questions today, when they won't be able to influence their answers? Abstractly distancing themselves from the entire party political and parliamentary system is the very essence of their democratic protest. And that abstraction isn't a lie, but rather an undeniable dimension of truth, or an expression of authentic democratic practice.

You ask whether there can be democracy without institutions. Are there institutions without democracy? And what about if, and when, the existing political institutions exhaust their emancipatory potential and deplete their democratic legitimacy? If they also only spoke Latin, which people no longer understand, because their lives and their actual problems speak a language to which the institutions are deaf and dumb? It is people that establish institutions, or that tear down old ones when they lose sight of their reason for existing. What if sociologist and political theorist Peter Mair was right when he wrote that Western democracies actually still only rule the void, i.e., that their political institutions are hollowed of any democratic content and that the political parties, which have erased all mutual differences, will never again move closer to the people who elect them and from whom they have distanced themselves endlessly? So, what if these protests that were launched by students in Serbia aren't yet another attempt to breathe new life into old institutions, to fix them again, polish them up, but rather, on the contrary, the heralding of the creation of new institutions. Perhaps students don't want to restore institutions, but rather democracy. Because if democracy always

adhered to existing institutions and laws, it would have long since disappeared.

Students in Serbia, their assemblies and calls for citizens to self-organize, seem to have been understood best by philosophers. Apart from yourself, in terms of talking about the events since the start, Frenchmen Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière also spoke out recently. As for the rest of the public, the media, and especially the establishment, both in the West and the East, Serbian students Serbia aren't "breaking news". Why is that?

It's because they're conceptually incompatible with the ruling ideological discourse that has reduced the current political reality, in the global dimension, down to a conflict between so-called democracies and so-called autocracies, as if it were, as the ancient Greeks would say, a Gigantomachia, a battle of the giants that will decide the fate of the world. That's why they don't know what to do with the rebellious Serbs – whether to put them under the flag of the European Union, or what's left of the West following Trump's resurrection, or under the banners of Putin, China and Iran. They aren't capable of thinking of or even imagining something else, because they are mentally already at war and see the world exclusively through the prism of the binary relationship between friend and enemy. But they are blind to the meaning of what's happening in Serbia today, and that partly includes the participants themselves, who occasionally wave different combinations of flags. That was once the Ukrainian one together with the Palestinian one, while another time it was the Palestinian one, and now it's in an arrangement with the Russian and North Korean flags. In the first case, this is about an illusion of the possibility of taking a non-political and non-ideological position of pure solidarity with the victims, as if we were in a courtroom and

we are the jury, while they, the perpetrators, are in the dock. However, we are actually in a political reality in which those who wave Ukrainian flags simultaneously support, both politically and militarily, the genocide of Palestinians. Just as those who fantasise about forming a united front against Western imperialism forget that their Putin is a great admirer of Netanyahu, who would most like to deal with his opponents in the same way he's dealing with the Palestinians. That's why the students are right to reject flags, and perhaps in a much deeper sense. Perhaps they sense that national flags are no longer letters of the alphabet with which one can still write texts about freedom, justice and emancipation. If you asked me, I'd also get rid of that last one, the Serbian flag. If they aren't "colour revolutionaries", they don't need any coloured cloth flying above their heads.

Are you suggesting that there could be other quite practical reasons to turn a blind eye to events in Serbia? When asked what's most visible in Serbia from Germany's perspective, you answer: "Nothing is visible in Serbia from Berlin's perspective, except lithium, of course".

Germany isn't what it used to be, as a kind of really existing utopia; a place where the ideals of capitalist progress and democracy were realised in a so-called "well-ordered state" – a phrase that the bourgeois elites repeat tirelessly in their project to complete an "uncompleted" Serbia. They remind us of that Germanophile character portrayed by Danilo Bata Stojković in Šijan's Who's Singin' Over There? – Whatever problem arises on the road, he has a role model for the solution: Germany, where order reigns, where rules are respected and where, to once again repeat the favourite phrase of our auto-racist elites, "institutions do their job". This Ljotićesque parody isn't specific to Serbs and is present among

everyone on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. But back then, like today, this ideal has a dark undertone. That which Olaf Scholz declared after the outbreak of Russian aggression against Ukraine - "Zeitenwende!", roughly meaning the epochal turning point – is nothing more than the announcement of a creeping state of emergency, which was confirmed in recent days when the German Bundestag, hurriedly and in its old convocation, voted in favour of huge borrowing for investment, both for the reconstruction of infrastructure and, primarily, for the purpose of rearming Germany. Another phrase that's used by German state policy today to legitimise its pathological contradictions is the Machiavellian "Staatsraison", meaning "raison d'état" and representing a euphemism for total arbitrariness, or the complete personal whim of political decision-making beyond all moral principles or norms of international law. Why does Germany swear by the inviolability of borders and the territorial integrity of sovereign countries, as is the case in Ukraine, while simultaneously stamping on these same principles when it comes to Israel? Why does it preach human rights while supporting genocide? Why does it provide political and financial support to Islamic extremists in Syria while they massacre the Alevi people? Why does Germany say one thing and do the other? The answer would not differ from that of a cynical street hooligan: "Because I can", which is the real and only truth of this "logic of state interest". Ultimately, there's more democracy on the streets of Serbia today than there is in Germany's Bundestag.

The Serbian authorities respond to the protests by accusing them of being an imported rebellion that's destabilising Serbia. Does the "colour revolution" model in Serbia suit some geopolitical concept?

But what is geopolitics? It isn't any kind of neutral sub-discipline of objective political science, nor is it simply a global perspective on the sphere of political reality. Geopolitics is itself an ideology par excellence. That's why we aren't included in it as subjects who decide our fate for ourselves. Because everything is decided by major geopolitical players like Trump, Putin, the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, the European bureaucratic elites, petrodollar sheiks etc. It's as if we're sheep in their pens that don't know which one is going to be sheared, which slaughtered, and which left to continue grazing. That's why it's completely logical that the Serbian student protests are totally invisible from a geopolitical perspective. As I said, none of the aforementioned players pumped them up artificially, but how dare they pump up themselves. We'll see if they're to be forgiven for that.

You see the protests in Serbia as challenging liberal democracy. You wrote: "The world as it is today is no longer a place for life, but rather an existential threat to life itself. They (students) have no choice. They will either change the world we've thrown them into radically, or they will cease to be". Should a movement of students and citizens, in a country on the periphery of Europe, believe that it can change the world – despite that not being achieved today in the much more developed and democratic countries of the West?

The marginal, or the provincial, isn't a destiny, but rather a class relation. The students have already learned the first lesson, while they're currently mastering the second lesson with the professional help of Rio Tinto and the European Union. In the meantime, they have also realised that postponing life no longer makes sense. They simply don't want to repeat the fate of their parents, who wasted their lives endlessly compensating for, catching up to, adapting to

or imitating some supposedly real, authentic life that's lived by other, better people and which is always somewhere else, residing in those, as you put it, "much more developed and democratic countries of the West". That's also why they took to the streets: to teach their parents what life is and how it should be lived in accordance with human dignity.

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