

ART, MEDIA, AND DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARIES IN THE 2024–2025 PROTESTS IN SERBIA

UMETNOST, MEDIJI I DEMOKRATSKE PREDSTAVE
O PROTESTIMA U SRBIJI 2024–2025

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION:

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On November 1, 2024, at 11:52 in the morning, the concrete canopy of the newly reconstructed central railway station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing sixteen people. The disaster resulted from systemic institutional failures: corruption in public procurement, the absence of effective oversight, and the continued deferral of accountability. What followed became one of the most sustained waves of student-led civic protest in Serbia's post-socialist history. Within weeks, universities across the country entered the blockade. Every day, intersections were halted for sixteen minutes of collective silence commemorating the sixteen people who lost their lives in the collapse. Hundreds of thousands of citizens including students, professors, farmers, lawyers, medical workers, artists, and others gathered in cities across Serbia and within diaspora communities abroad. The movement's demands were concrete: transparency regarding reconstruction documentation, prosecution of those responsible, an end to intimidation of protesters, and increased public funding for higher education. At the same time, the protests evolved into a broader confrontation with the structural conditions that made such a tragedy possible and with a political system in which accountability had long been postponed.

This thematic issue of *Philosophy and Society* examines the 2024–2025 protests in Serbia through two analytical perspectives: art and media. Both played significant roles in the movement, shaping its forms of expression, visibility, and collective action. Serbia's captured media landscape, widely recognized by civil society as a mechanism of authoritarian consolidation, became a direct target of protest action. Artistic practices including collective exhibitions, street performances, sonic rituals, and choreographed marches emerged as integral components of the movement. The decision to frame this thematic issue through these two lenses reflects an editorial interest in the cultural and

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communicative dimensions of protest, which often remain secondary in political analysis focused primarily on institutional actors and formal demands. The articles in this issue examine artistic practices and media environments as forms of political action, showing how art, sound, architecture, movement, images, and mediated communication operate within protest as practices rather than metaphors.

These protests also pose methodological challenges for academic analysis. The movement is ongoing, and the essays were written while events were still unfolding. Any attempt to analyze a protest in real time necessarily operates within a shifting political and social landscape in which meanings, strategies, and forms of collective action continue to evolve. Even so, several characteristics of the movement have already become visible. Among them is a notable degree of formal inventiveness. Silence, collective movement, aesthetic gesture, humor, and collaborative forms of making emerged as central modes of political expression. For us as editors, this formal inventiveness raised a broader question about how protest movements produce their own aesthetic and communicative infrastructures and how these infrastructures shape political demands and the forms through which collective experience becomes visible and shared. In this context, the long-discussed avant-garde aspiration to dissolve the boundary between art and life appeared as a practical condition of political action.

Aesthetic Practices of Protest

Several contributions examine the protests as a field in which aesthetic practices played an active role in shaping collective political action. Rather than approaching art as a symbolic reflection of protest, the authors analyze how architecture, exhibition-making, bodily movement, and sound participated directly in the formation of protest cultures. Drawing on perspectives from architecture, art history, performance studies, and musicology, the articles explore how sensory experience, spatial organization, and performative practices articulated forms of collective resistance.

In her article “The Use of Arts and the Performativity of Architecture within the Culture of Resistance,” Sonja Jankov examines the relationship between material environments and protest imaginaries through the case of the Novi Sad railway station. The station emerges as a physical site of protest and a symbolic reference point for protest activity across multiple locations. Drawing on theories of architectural performativity and new materialist approaches to agency, she traces how the station’s distinctive zigzag roofline circulated through protest signs, scale models, marionettes, and even an appropriated Monopoly board staged at a Belgrade crossroads. Through these acts of artistic reinterpretation, the architectural form became a shared visual marker that mobilized memory, grief, and collective identity across geographically dispersed protests.

Collective artistic production also emerged as a mode of political organization during the protests. The *stUUdenti* exhibitions, organized by students

from all four faculties of the University of Arts in Belgrade, provide a particularly revealing example. In her article “Our Art Is Our Struggle! Our Works, Our Voice!” Milica Pekić interprets these exhibitions through Jacques Rancière’s concept of the distribution of the sensible, as institutional interventions within the protest movement. The collaborative structure and aesthetic strategies of these exhibitions cultivated forms of care, solidarity, and mutual empowerment that reflected the broader democratic aspirations of the movement.

The protests also revealed the performative capacities of bodies in public space. In “Being Moved and Moving, Non-Metaphorically,” Nevena Delić and Petra Parčetić examine the choreographic and dramaturgical dimensions of collective protest. Engaging with the work of Hannah Arendt, André Lepcecki, Jonas Staal, and Judith Butler, they examine protest as a field in which artistic knowledge and choreographic strategies shape collective action. Practices such as durational marches, traffic blockades, and coordinated moments of silence are thus understood as embodied political acts through which collective freedom takes shape.

Sound formed another important dimension of protest practice. In “Soundtrack of Dissent: Sonic Practices in 2024/25 Serbian Protests,” Nikola Vasilijević analyzes the evolving sonic landscape of the movement, from the sixteen-minute commemorative silences that became its defining collective gesture to choral performances, street concerts, viral protest songs, and techno gatherings. His analysis also addresses the alleged use of a military-grade acoustic weapon against protesters by state forces. He argues that sound functioned as a means of generating solidarity and as a terrain of political struggle.

The protests themselves demonstrate that artistic practices formed a central part of the movement’s political vocabulary. Architecture, exhibitions, bodily choreography, and sound became ways of organizing protest gatherings, expressing solidarity, and sustaining the movement’s public presence. These practices shaped protest beyond slogans and demands, structuring shared gestures, images, and atmospheres through which the movement was experienced and remembered.

Media Arenas of Protest

The media section highlights the struggle for control over messaging during student protests in Serbia’s captured media environment. The main themes include the contested role of the media in shaping public perceptions of protest movements, the strategic use of labeling and narrative saturation in pro-government communication, and the emergence of alternative forms of digital expression used by protesters to challenge dominant narratives. Together, the contributions examine how a deeply politicized and polarized information environment shapes competition over the meaning, legitimacy, and stakes of the protests.

In “Mirrors and Messaging: The Role of Media in Serbia’s Protests, 2023–2025,” Emma Brandt asks how the media became a focal point in recent Serbian

protests, which initially seemed unrelated to the media and instead concerned environmental justice, a culture of violence, and corruption. Her ethnographic research combines interviews, observations, and content analysis of the country's recent major protest movements. She finds a widespread perception of the media as a political actor deeply entangled in the social and political transgressions that mobilized these movements. The article contextualizes the politics of information against ongoing public grievances in Serbia and explains why media blockades within the student protest movement were a near-inevitable outcome.

Ana Jovanović-Harrington's contribution combines qualitative and quantitative content analyses of news on pro-government and independent digital outlets to study control over the narrative in the student protests. Her study, "Digital Authoritarianism and the Politics of Noise: Co-optation and Narrative Flooding in Serbian Protests," focuses on the use of the labels "ćaci" and "blockaders"; the former refers to a misspelled graffiti ridiculed by student protesters and used to denote a corrupt and incompetent ruling elite and their followers, but later co-opted by the government to signal in-group loyalty; the latter is a pejorative term for student protesters used by the government. She finds a hyperproduction of content in pro-government outlets, peaking around key protest events, with increasingly hostile rhetoric equating protesters with "terrorists," "traitors," or "fascists." Independent outlets were more reactive in their attempts to debunk such narratives. The article illustrates how content oversaturation in a captured media environment can obscure the truth without resorting to outright censorship.

The final contribution explores one way in which student protesters are pushing back against the shortcomings of traditional Serbian media through the creation of memes on social media. In "New Face of Memes in Student-led Protests in Serbia and their Ethical Implications," Krisztina Rácz, Mirjana Nećak Gavrilović, and Andrej Ševo analyze different types of pictorial and video memes, both human- and AI-generated. They focus on creativity, affect, humor, and the ethics of memes to discuss how they are deployed to advance social critique and protest mobilization. The article balances the political and creative potential of memes against rising ethical and security concerns in a digital environment, particularly with the proliferation of AI.

Concluding Remarks

The contributions in this thematic issue examine the 2024–2025 protests in Serbia through the aesthetic and communicative practices that accompanied and shaped them. Studies of the artistic and performative dimensions of protest show how architecture, exhibitions, bodily movement, and sound became part of the movement's political repertoire. The Novi Sad railway station, whose collapsed canopy triggered the protests, reappeared across protest signs, models, and performances as a circulating architectural symbol. Student-organized exhibitions transformed artistic production into a collective space of political

articulation, while protest marches, assemblies, and coordinated silences foregrounded the choreographic and sonic dimensions of collective action.

The media-focused analyses shift attention to the environments within which these protests unfolded. They examine the circulation of memes and humor on digital platforms, the discursive strategies used by pro-government media to delegitimize student protesters, and the broader politics of media capture shaping public debate in Serbia in recent years. These analyses show how struggles over information, framing, and visibility became integral to the dynamics of protest.

Examining the protests through these two perspectives reveals how collective action unfolded simultaneously in public space and across contested media environments. In the streets, squares, and campuses where the movement took shape, architecture, bodies, and sound structured forms of collective presence and remembrance. At the same time, digital platforms and media institutions became arenas in which the meaning of the protests was framed, amplified, or distorted. The protests that followed the collapse of the Novi Sad station canopy became a confrontation with state institutions and a struggle over visibility, narrative, and the interpretation of events in the public sphere.

