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MIRRORS AND MESSAGING: THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SERBIA'S PROTESTS, 2023–2025

ABSTRACT
Over the past few years, Serbia has seen several major protest movements, including the Serbia Against Violence protests in 2023 and the 2024-2026 student protests after the collapse of the canopy at Novi Sad Train Station. Over the course of these protests, media have served not only as a way to channel and disseminate information about political protests, but have also themselves become a target of critique. Indeed, through protests targeting otherwise obscure bodies such as REM (the national regulator of electronic media) and the framing of seemingly unrelated issues (such as interpersonal violence) through narratives of media, these protests have highlighted the role of media capture, censorship, and suppression as key tactics of the state in Serbia. Through discussions of media as a "mirror" for society, media is framed as indistinguishable from or even synonymous with politics, corruption, and the problems perceived to exist in Serbian society. Drawing on a year of ethnographic research in Serbia, including interviews, participant observation, and media analysis, this chapter situates the relationship of media to democracy, authoritarianism, and protest in the context of the successive social movements that have taken place in Serbia over the last several years.

KEYWORDS
Serbia, Media, Protest, Metaphor, Television, Youth, Ethnography

Introduction

In March 2025, Serbian student protesters blockaded the offices of RTS (Radio Television Serbia) and RTV (Radio Television Vojvodina), the two largest state-owned television services in the country. Using metal fences, they executed what they called "the liberation of our RTS," symbolically blocking access to these iconic outlets of state media.[1] The first blockade was temporary, designed to last only a day as a symbolic exercise. Students planned to blockade the RTS offices for 22 hours only, as a demonstration of the injustices they

1 Baletic 2025: March 11.

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perceived to be taking place at the national broadcaster. The second blockade, however, lasted two weeks. Students pitched tents outside the offices and worked to prevent station workers from returning to the offices, forcing them to enter through a nearby kebab shop; they were demanding that changes be made at the highest level of the national media regulator.[2] After two weeks, the student protesters achieved their goal: a revised process for selecting members of the REM (Regulatory Body for Electronic Media) the national regulatory body that controls access to TV and digital media, including the RTS and RTV state television channels.[3]

Why were the students protesting outside two major state television stations? This action took place as part of a broader series of protests that emerged in the wake of the collapse of a train station canopy in November 2024, killing 16 people. The protests soon extended beyond Novi Sad, the city where the tragedy had occurred, and became a broader movement against perceived corruption and autocracy in Serbia's current regime, ruled by the Serbian Progressive Party. As I will demonstrate in this article, the protests demonstrate how media is seen as central both to the control that the Serbian Progressive Party and President Aleksandar Vučić hold over Serbia, and as a potential tool and site of resistance.

At first glance, the scale of this particular protest action – a two-week blockade – may seem to be disproportionate to the demand: a legislative change to a seemingly obscure regulatory body, REM. Yet, in the context of the protests Serbia has witnessed over the past five years, this concentration of people power at the national broadcaster speaks to the central role of media within both the Serbian political system and the movements mobilizing in opposition to it. The REM is the body that determines which channels are allowed to broadcast widely, and with what content; in that capacity, it oversees the public broadcasters, such as RTS, as well as the many private broadcasters currently operating in Serbia. RTS, the state-owned television, has been increasingly criticized in the last decade for insufficient coverage of wide-scale protest movements, the implication being that it is following the wishes of President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party.

Privately owned stations, such as Pink and Happy, have also been a target for protesters due to the tone and content of their coverage, particularly of opposition politicians and protesters. However, RTS's status as a public broadcaster means that it is a symbol of public media in Serbia; it should theoretically be a nonpartisan outlet serving the needs of all citizens. Whereas Pink or Happy can traffic in scandalous content, diatribes against opposition politicians, and direct attacks on political opponents, the state broadcasters are supposed to be officially unbiased. They fulfil this remit, according to their critics, by studiously not addressing topics that those in charge don't want addressed – protests against the government, or critiques of President Aleksandar Vučić and his

2 A. M. 2025.
3 Stojanovic 2025.

reigning Serbian Progressive Party. In occupying and blockading the premises of RTS, the student protesters were symbolically registering a complaint against this elision of reporting on serious topics, and asking them to report more objectively in future; symbolically "taking back" what should belong to the public, and highlighting the ability of the current regime to cement power by maintaining control over news media and the flow of information in the country.

In this article, I argue that media is not just a tool or platform for protesters, but a major focus and venue of political conflict. To do so, I analyze key moments and elements from political protests in Serbia in recent years, focusing on the period from 2023 to 2025 that saw the Serbia Against Violence protests following two mass shootings and the student movement that grew out of the collapse of a canopy at Novi Sad Railway Station. Over the course of these protests, opposition activists have marshalled increasingly sophisticated technologies and rhetorics of resistance, employing social media campaigns, humor, spectacle, and carefully targeted demands to challenge the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. Scholars and mainstream accounts of protest often highlight this dimension of media, particularly digital media and online platforms, as a tool for mass mobilization and circulating a movement's messaging. Yet, alongside these creative ways of channelling and disseminating information about political protests, the protests have also zeroed in on media platforms and institutions as central targets of critique. In this article, I analyze the protests' focus on media and the broader role media plays within these movements by drawing on both the history of Serbia's media ecosystem and my own ethnographic fieldwork on youth media consumption and the politicization of media in Serbia, conducted between 2022 and 2024. Ultimately, I show how the intertwining of media and politics in the Serbian context makes media into a venue and target of large-scale social mobilizations.

That is, in directing actions and demands toward media institutions – rather than just political bodies – recent protests have also highlighted the role of media as a tool of government control, and its relationship to democracy and authoritarianism in the Serbian context. Protesters have not just used media to organize and distribute messages; media institutions, regulators, and discourses have been central foci of protest demands, and both physical and symbolic sites of debate and activism. In thinking through the successive social movements that have taken place in Serbia over the last several years, this research finds that through actions targeting otherwise obscure[4] bodies such as REM (the national regulator of electronic media) and the framing of seemingly unrelated issues (such as interpersonal violence) through narratives of media, these protests have highlighted the role of media capture, censorship, and suppression as key tactics of the state in Serbia.

4 Obviously, electronic media regulators like REM hold significant power in their ability to shape media availability and access; that said, they can be thought of as "obscure" in that they are not a usual topic of citizens' everyday conversations about politics and media.

In focusing on events like the REM blockade, this article turns its attention to how the protests both illuminated and worked to disentangle the deep-rooted links between media channels, information flows, and the state. RTS, as a symbolic nexus of state power, informational control, and wide media reach, was central to the protesters' strategy and rhetoric, highlighting the importance of media in discussions of protest politics. At the same time, broader global discussions of misinformation, press freedom, and increasing polarization frame media as essential to a functioning public sphere, and by extension, democracy.[5] What can the Serbian case contribute to discussions of the global public sphere? The Serbian protests are a vivid demonstration of the intertwining of media and politics and the way this relationship is shaped by historical, social, and political legacies. By unpacking these dynamics, we can shed light not only on the dynamics of the protests in Serbia, but on larger questions of what being a mediated subject – and *citizen* – means in the present day.

Methodology

These observations form part of a larger research project on media consumption, media literacy, and institutional trust among Serbian youth, a project that employed a variety of ethnographic methods, particularly participant observation, interviews, and content analysis. Research for this project was conducted in Serbia over nine months between January and September 2022, with six weeks of follow-up research trips in April/May 2023 and March 2024.[6] The main period of this research was based in Niš, Serbia's third largest city; research also took place in cities including Belgrade, Kragujevac, Novi Pazar, and Novi Sad.

During the main period of my fieldwork, I conducted 55 interviews and focus groups with 76 participants. I allowed respondents to choose to be interviewed in either English or Serbian, and most chose Serbian. I also asked them whether or not I could record; only two opted not to be recorded, in which case I took notes during the interview. Formal participant observation was conducted at public events related to media, culture, and nonprofit organizations, such as panels, workshops, media literacy trainings, festivals, and presentations; these events took place in community venues, such as co-working spaces, NGOs, and bars, as well as online.

Approximately a quarter of respondents were media workers, NGO employees, or other media experts; the rest were a mix of youth, including youth activists, recruited through universities and other connections. In addition, a university professor organized two focus groups for me with their communications students. Because my personal and professional networks were centered

5 See Peruško, Vozab, and Trbojević 2022 and Strömbäck 2005, for example.

6 Research for this project received IRB approval from the Northwestern University IRB; detailed information on ethics protocols and considerations is available upon request.

around universities, this study speaks to a population of largely urban-dwelling, college-educated individuals; while many respondents came from more rural areas, they moved to cities to attend university.

Interview questions asked respondents about their media consumption habits and their views on the importance of media and media literacy in general; probed education, profession, and political and religious views; and asked about their goals and plans for the future. For those whom I was interviewing as representatives of media organizations or NGOs, interview questions focused more on the goals, priorities, and histories of the organizations. When interviewing youth, I would ask them to scroll with me through the public news feed of a social media application that they used regularly; when they accepted, we would look at the posts together, with me asking questions about what things meant, how they chose to follow different accounts, and whether different posts on the feeds were typical or not for them. By employing this "digital walkthrough" method,[7] I sought to account for the fact that media consumption is a practice that increasingly takes place across online and offline worlds. These walkthroughs, moreover, allowed me to see what media consumption looked like for youth in practice, and they prompted discussions of topics such as algorithms and media practices that were shared within social groups. In addition, for a subset of interviews with youth, I would send them links to three articles from three different Serbian publications. I deliberately selected these articles to be from very different sources, and to not be explicitly political but to be able to speak to wider issues if the reader chose to interpret them that way.[8,9] I discussed these articles with respondents, asking them what their impressions were and collecting data on which article they thought they might hypothetically click on first, which article was most like the typical content in Serbian media, and which sources they thought were trustworthy and why. These discussions elicited both helpful media comparisons and also reflections on what constituted a high-quality or relevant piece of news.

For content analysis, I made a point of keeping abreast with Serbian media – primarily online, as my informants did, but also drawing on TV and print publications. I followed as many news sites and political parties as I could find on Instagram and Facebook (creating a new Instagram account specifically for this purpose) and paid special attention to both traditional and social media during major media events. I stored articles and snippets of social media posts that were particularly interesting for later coding and analysis.

7 Lane 2018.

8 Drawing on methods from Mankekar 1999.

9 For instance, one set of articles included an article from opposition-oriented *N1* about how satisfied Russians were with the rebranded McDonalds dupe launched after the pullout of Western companies from the country, an article from state broadcaster *RTS* about the vandalization of the new flagship "fast train" from Belgrade to Novi Sad, and an article from controversial tabloid *Informer* about the most common names of historical female Serbian royalty.

As such, the empirical data set that this paper draws on dates from early 2022-mid 2024. I did not conduct formal fieldwork during the 2024-2026 student protests, and the parts of the paper that deal with that time period are reflections exploring the conceptual implications of my earlier research, rather than empirical research findings; my focus is on larger trends within the Serbian protest space in the last five years.

Literature Review: State Power and Media Control: The Case of Serbia

To think about the protests in Serbia over the last few years, we must consider Serbia's growing authoritarianism, particularly the ways in which that authoritarianism manifests through media suppression and censorship.[10] Serbia has been described as "a postcommunist country with backsliding democracy and a highly politicized, polarized media system in which media freedoms are in decline"[11] and a "fragile democracy."[12] Kmezic further notes how the decline in media freedom in fact represents a historical norm in Serbia and its antecedent countries; a slight increase in press freedom in the 1980s later became, in the 1990s, a system that was "formally pluralist, but remained government-controlled." In his comprehensive summary of the Serbian media scene, he argues that influences on the media are nowadays more covert, consisting of self-censorship and soft censorship, and rendering Serbia's democracy "an empty shell." "Without the ability to access and exchange information, without fearless fact-finding and exposure of potentially uncomfortable truths, and without debates that allow for critical and diverse points of view, the democratic standing of the country is forfeited," he writes.[13]

The media landscape today is marked by extreme polarization; outlets are sorted into "pro-regime" (TV channels such as Pink and Happy and print/online tabloids such as *Informer*) and "opposition" (the TV channels N1 and Nova, which are only available via a specialty cable provider, as well as numerous local online portals). This polarization is one factor driving young people to disengage from media; as a student I interviewed told me:

> That's why I don't follow the yellow press [tabloids], I don't follow the numerous powerful spins and daily political shots fired that appear in our media. I don't polarize myself like Serbian media generally polarize themselves on different sides. I don't do that. I make a big, big cutoff, I only accept a small amount [of that content].

In other words, this young person was so frustrated by media polarization that they cited it as a reason for severely restricting their media content

10 Higgins 2022.
11 Kleut and Milojevic 2021.
12 Kmezic 2018.
13 Kmezic 2018.

because they felt like media polarization jeopardized their ability to read media effectively.

This polarization is in part driven by post-transition processes of media privatization, which left many outlets in the hands of wealthy businessmen with state connections, as well as informal mechanisms of government influence on media; scholars refer to this as "media capture."[14] As Kleut and Milojević write, "as important tools for gaining popular support, the loyalist media were generously rewarded, while critical media were verbally harassed, and targeted in smear campaigns run by pro-Vučić tabloids."[15] They describe mechanisms of media control including "state ownership of influential media; clientelist relations with major private TV channels; political influence on the appointment of broadcasting regulator and public service media boards; and use of public funds to reward loyal media," which all further drive media polarization. Scholars have also documented the economic problems of local media[16] without powerful foreign partners to support them, and the impact of political pressure on journalists' self-censorship.[17]

The interdependent relationship of media structures and the conditions for democracy has been well-documented in the literature; scholars have described this as certain media conditions being necessary for deliberative democracy to exist.[18] Though what media pluralism looks like may vary depending on the variety of democracy that is being pursued,[19] certain normative standards remain consistent: to provide basic information about society and political processes, to provide factually correct information, and to provide a forum for political discussions; Strömbäck characterizes this with the formulation "media and journalism are under some form of – at least moral – obligation to democracy."[20] In fact, illiberal and authoritarian public rhetoric (as often conveyed through media) has been empirically linked to autocratization, as a kind of "early predictor" of political change.[21]

The Serbian context, therefore, can be theorized, in a Europe-centric context, as a process of "de-Europeanization."[22] It can also, however, be understood in a post-socialist context;

Natalia Roudakova, in her book *Losing Pravda*, argues that the particularities of the socialist public sphere – when colliding with the system of free-market capitalism post-transition – resulted in an erosion of the value of truth itself.[23] Notably, she refuses to consider journalism and propaganda as being the

14 Milojević and Kleut 2023.
15 Kleut and Milojević 2021.
16 Vujović, Pavlović, and Obradović 2019.
17 Mitrović and Milojević 2022.
18 Peruško, Vozab, and Trbojević 2022.
19 Raeijmakers and Maeseele 2015.
20 Strömbäck 2005.
21 Maerz and Schneider 2021.
22 Castaldo and Pinna 2017.
23 Roudakova 2017.

opposite sides of a binary; instead, she traces how media privatization in the Soviet Union severed previously existing moral and social relations, which in turn devalued truth, fostered cynicism, and paved the way for ultra-nationalism. Of course, Serbia is not Russia, and not the Soviet Union; however, it is perhaps more instructive to consider the media situation in the sense of the complicated and much-critiqued "transition" rather than as a failure of a democratic ideal.

These problems and structural factors mean that media production and consumption inevitably becomes a highly and explicitly politicized act. Choices about media – which channels to tune into, one's news consumption habits – are telling decisions that speak to one's political orientation and outlook. Interlocutors told me that journalists were doing political party work or that they saw certain local media as extensions of the government, pressuring them to do what they (the government) wanted. One young person I spoke to, citing the infamous incident where seven major publications all featured a paid ad of Vučić's campaign poster as their title page before the election,[24] said that this proved that they "weren't real media." I asked another interviewee why it was important for him to keep up with current events; he explained "because, to cite my uncle, who I respect greatly: 'If we don't deal with politics, politics will deal with us.'" (*Ako se mi ne bavimo politikom, politika se bavi nama*). In this quote, the difference between media and politics is elided, and they become one and the same. In this article, I examine why that is, and what it means for protests against the media and against the government.

Theoretical Framework: Media As Mirror

This idea, that media is inherently inseparable from politics, was first introduced to me in a conversation with a worker at a pro-democracy NGO in Belgrade. We were having a wide-ranging conversation about the current state of Serbia's media environment and its historical antecedents, and she said:

> We are a country that is now post-conflict. In our society, there is a great deal of influence, from the one side, of global changes in the information sphere, through new technology, the Internet to begin with, and then social media. And on the other hand, we have the local context – the actual breakup of one country 30 years ago, and the creation of new, smaller countries in that post-conflict environment, which, if I may say so, is still not resolved. Everything was just put – I hope not on hold, but stopped. These two big directions, global and local, impacted our whole society, and also the media, because everything that happens in society impacts the media and vice versa, everything that happens in the media impacts society. Because media are always the mirror of society.

Her formulation, which puts the problems of Serbian media in a historical and geopolitical context, raises several questions. What does it mean to talk about the media as a mirror of society?[25] What does it mean to say that political

24 Nenadovic 2017.
25 Krovna Organizacija Mladih Srbije 2022.

and social problems are **reflected** in media? How are understandings of broader dysfunction dependent on **appearances**? Do the media provide an accurate **image** of actual events? The image of the mirror was one that arose several times in my research, and it provides an interesting crystallization of one way of conceptualizing the relationship of media and politics: as reflecting one another.

In other contexts, this metaphor often conveys positive ways that the media might reflect society: as a watchdog, as a forum for democratic debate, or as a kind of useful magnifying glass.[26] This is not, however, what this respondent meant by "media as mirror." Instead, in her mention of the "information sphere," the NGO worker raises an important question regarding the shortcomings of the model of the "public sphere"[27] for conceptualizing political deliberation and participation. Normative conceptions of the relationship between media and politics, drawing on this model, often focus on the ideal of a well-functioning public sphere, in which journalists hold governments to account, or on cases such as the Arab Spring, in which new media technologies facilitate the growth of large protest movements and even revolutions. Accounts of media problems, such as polarization, fake news, and disinformation, often reinscribe the notion of the public sphere as central to political life, highlighting how these phenomena threaten the possibility of a lively public sphere.

But the public sphere model often implies a space of political deliberation and informational exchange as existing outside of the political system; this compartmentalization is suspect anywhere, but breaks down most obviously in a semi-authoritarian context like Serbia's, where media is central to the apparatus of state power. Media as a mirror, as the NGO worker describes it, speaks instead to media as embedded within and intertwined with broader social and political structures. The image of media as mirror here locates the issues of media – whether that issue is fake news or a culture of violence – as inseparable from the society that it is meant to reflect – in its moral values, in its political makeup, in its own particular pathologies. Understanding media as a mirror allows us to examine shared social and moral concerns about media that are tied to cultures of violence and political dysfunction.

Ari Adut, in his book *Reign of Appearances*, argues for bringing the **visual** and the **spectacle** into our understandings of the public sphere and for understanding the citizen's role as one of spectatorship rather than participation.[28] But the image of the mirror offers more than just the visual element: it also hints at the intimate links between the political structure and the media that reflect it. This connection can sometimes be quite literal: one interviewee mentioned to me that Aleksandar Vučić, the current president of Serbia, used to be Minister of Information in the 1990s, "so he knows all the ways to control media."

If we take the media-as-mirror framing as a dominant way through which Serbian citizens understand their media ecosystem, it offers crucial context for

26 Raeijmakers and Maeseele 2015.
27 Habermas 1991.
28 Adut 2018.

how the protests have made media broadcasters and regulators into the targets of their movements. Social movement theorists and other social scientific accounts of protests often focus on the capacity of media to mobilize, to create shared frames, and to disseminate information. However, in the Serbian context, the very channels through which this information ought to be disseminated are suspect, given histories and presents of state media control and manipulation. Media cannot simply be a neutral channel for the dissemination of information, but in themselves become part and parcel of the political solutions these protests are calling for. In the following sections, I highlight moments from recent protests that speak to this mutual imbrication of media and politics, and how it shapes the tactics and political imaginaries of these movements.

Serbia Against Violence Protests

In May 2023, Serbia experienced two mass shootings within the span of 48 hours. The first, in a high school in central Belgrade, was carried out by a 13-year-old student who borrowed his father's handguns and killed nine fellow students and a security guard, as well as injuring six others. The country, which had never experienced a school shooting before, was in shock – schools were closed, three days of national mourning were declared, and concerts and events were cancelled for weeks.

The very next evening, a 22-year-old man who had quarreled with his friends went on a shooting spree from his car in villages near Belgrade, killing nine people and injuring twelve. While the first shooter had turned himself in to the police, a manhunt was required to pursue the second shooter all night, until he was apprehended the next morning near the city of Kragujevac. These events, which are highly unusual in the Serbian context, upended society throughout the country, and were to create a firestorm in response; here we might begin to think about Adut's highlighting of shock, awe, spectacle, and their importance in mobilizing dialogue within the public sphere.

In the days after the shootings, public discourse coalesced around two major narratives explaining why these events had occurred. The right-wing version, embodied in a statement by Education Minister Branko Ruzić, blamed "the cancerous, pernicious influence of the Internet, video games, so-called Western values."[29] This narrative, which found evidence in a few TikTok videos and disturbing social media comments making light of the killings, marshalled support among a segment of society that was already concerned about "Western" influence liberalizing Serbia, particularly in terms of hot-button issues such as feminism and LGBT rights.

The other narrative made reference to a broader culture of violence in Serbia, propagated by and through the media. A former student at the school where the first shooting happened, Luka Babić, was quoted as saying, "We can't put the blame on this school or its teachers. (...) It's a tragedy of a society that

29 Gec and Stojanovic 2023: May 3.

promotes violence. We live in the society of violence, and it has been promoted in media, in public spaces, on social media."[30] This second narrative, which was associated with the left-wing opposition to Serbia's current government, eventually formed into a protest movement entitled Serbia Against Violence, which became the largest protest movement in Serbia (at that time) since the downfall of Slobodan Milošević in 2000.[31]

Throughout the rest of the spring and into the summer of 2023, tens of thousands of people would fill the streets weekly, primarily in Belgrade, but also in towns and cities throughout Serbia, demanding government accountability for the violence. Although the protests were organized by several opposition parties, protesters did not carry party signs; instead, they advocated for a list of particular demands, the overwhelming majority of which related specifically to the production and broadcast of media. They wanted the resignation of several government ministers, the removal of the Pink and Happy TV channels from the national frequency,[32] an end to the broadcasting of reality shows, and the sanctioning of tabloid media outlets that did not follow the national code of journalistic ethics. Pictures of the protests circulating online showed protesters holding up signs with such slogans as "Turn on your brain, Turn off Pink." Another sign showed the logos of popular TV channels such as Pink and Happy, as well as popular tabloids, with X's through them. Another sign called REM, the national regulator of electronic media, "evil."[33]

Initially, I was surprised by the direction of the protests; as a citizen of the US, where these kinds of violent events are sadly commonplace, I expected to hear calls for gun control or mental health support. The steps between a mass shooting and the national regulator of electronic media weren't at first clear. But in Serbia, a protest against violence had seamlessly become a broader social movement mobilized around media – media ethics, media governance, and the power of media to promote a culture of poor moral values and violence. To those marching under the banner of Serbia Against Violence, media institutions were not just symbolic of, but reflective of, even constitutive of, a breakdown in Serbia's political, moral, and social system. In this section, I examine how this illuminates the ways in which critiques of the media ecosystem mirror broader moral economies, epistemic practices, and political structures.

At the time of writing, the channels on the national frequency (a package of channels that are broadcast to every household with a television at no

30 Gec and Stojanovic 2023: May 3.

31 Higgins 2023.

32 Five channels available for free to anyone with a television set; a government body controls which companies are awarded these coveted broadcasting spots. RTS, the national broadcaster, takes one of the spots; because there are three RTS channels, some respondents also refer to seven channels on the national frequency.

33 The national regulator of media had also appeared in media literacy trainings – I attended one whose script mentioned looking to regulatory bodies as a tool of media literacy, and the facilitator shrugged, saying a little desperately, 'Well, we know what we can expect from these regulatory bodies now!'

additional cost) are RTS (the state television), B92, Happy, Pink, and Prva. All of them are understood to produce news coverage favorable to the ruling party. The two major opposition channels, N1 and Nova, have been repeatedly denied public broadcasting licenses and are available only on more expensive private cable providers (and not all of them). This means that critical TV news coverage reaches only a small portion of the Serbian population, who are financially disincentivized, or even excluded, given small incomes, from receiving it. The problems that this causes for media pluralism have been reported on by media freedom organizations,[34] protested by the channels themselves,[35] and also became a key demand during the Serbia Against Violence protests.

This particular media ecosystem and the monopolization of channels by political elites led people to conceptualize media and political corruption as mutually reinforcing. One young person narrated the connection between the media environment and the political situation as follows:

> [The media situation in Serbia] is disgusting, but I suppose congratulations, how he [Vučić] gets so many people to believe in him. In general, in Serbia a great number of people live in rural areas, in villages, they don't have access to all the channels. They only have the national frequency, 7 channels, literally, and he chooses these 7 channels. For you [the interviewer, an American], you have BBC, CNN, and you can hear everything – he arranges it nicely and no one else has access. It doesn't matter if they fulfill the regulations, what should be in the program – that's not important. You only have Pink, Happy, RTS1, which should be a national service. We pay for it. It should serve us. And in fact, it only serves those with whom it has an agreement.

Here the respondent describes how government control of media, in her view, is especially effective in rural areas, where people have fewer options for media access; she also critiques the bias of these supposedly "national" public services.

> And what happens is, young people leave Serbia, old people stay, who only have access to these media, young people can't choose and they don't have the will to, they're sick of Serbia, because they plan to leave (...) and that is very logical. He saw that there are a huge number of retirees in Serbia; of 6 million people, 2 million of the voters are retirees, and he controls them, they vote for him in great numbers, he bribes workers with employment, those who are more like 30, 40 years old – 'If you vote for me you'll get a job in this factory' – and that's how it goes. He has half the votes and he generally controls media in Serbia. You can't succeed at all, the only way he would not be in the government any more is that, I don't know, in 2000 they lit the parliament on fire and changed the government that way, but it's the same people these 20 years and no one sees an exit, because people keep voting for him, and probably they're rigging the elections.

34 Moratti 2023.
35 Radosavljevic 2022.

Here she connects this media control explicitly to political control, through elections, and to youth emigration, which she characterizes as being driven by frustration with this system.

> In every city in Serbia are people from the main party, the mayor of Niš is SNS [Serbian Progressive Party], all the cities and towns, so you don't have any opposition government in Serbia (...) . So you don't hear another voice, there's nothing to fight for.

Here she connects the two: government control of media allows political control to tighten, which furthers government control; this is the vicious circle at work.

This quote ties together unequal access to media in rural areas, the problem of brain drain and youth emigration from Serbia, and generational differences in political behavior; this respondent gives a vivid and succinct summary of a narrative I heard many times over. Another summarized it simply as: "On national television, they show it how they want us to see it." These complaints about the political monopoly on major media sources came from across the political spectrum – the ruling party's opposition from the left, but also the opposition from the right.

As people understand it, the biased and corrupt media situation is intimately linked to Serbia's political situation. Channels such as Pink, which I often heard described as showing immoral content and outraging standards of behavior, also prop up an increasingly autocratic government, and are allowed to do so by the biased media regulation of that same government. The corruption of the media, the corruption of the political system, and the corruption of the epistemic system are closely linked and mutually reinforcing. As one interlocutor told me:

> They can do whatever they want, because they literally have, they have a program where for ten hours some people speak against the opposition, against people who rose up, they say that the government is the best and that goes in a circle every day, all day on Pink. We have an expression: a lie said 100 times becomes the truth. The 100th time you hear something, you say, maybe it's really true.

Media corruption, then, led not only to degraded standards of behavior and political dysfunction, but to a degraded value of truth. And political dysfunction led to media dysfunction. It is impossible to identify a cause and effect; one way to describe this would be a vicious circle, but another would be a mirror, or a hall of mirrors, reflecting the same problems back and forth endlessly. The moral problems of reality television were inseparable from the culture of violence that gave rise to the mass shootings, which was itself inseparable from a degraded political situation where the ruling party manipulates the media to serve its own ends. Moral problems and political problems mirrored one another. In this context, it makes perfect sense for political protests to target the media; the media are constitutive of the political problem.

Of course, the "Serbia Against Violence" protests were not the first time that protests had targeted the national regulator of electronic media. During the "Ekološki Ustanak" (Ecological Uprising) protests against the proposed Rio Tinto lithium mine in southern Serbia in 2021, the public broadcaster had aired an advertisement by Rio Tinto promoting the mines; a protest shortly afterwards took place outside the REM offices.[36] These protests, like others in recent years, were also plagued by framing of protests as "disinformation" potentially seeded by bad actors.[37] However, the Serbia Against Violence protests were notable in that they demonstrated a shift towards making media a central target of protest demands; this rhetorical interconnection of media, political, and financial corruption set the stage for the approach to media during the student/train station protests in Serbia from 2024-2026.

Protests Following the Novi Sad Train Station Canopy Collapse

On November 1st, 2024, a canopy at Novi Sad's central train station collapsed, killing 16 people and injuring others. The train station had recently been renovated to "European standards" with Chinese investment, a marquee infrastructural project of Serbia's ruling Progressive Party. Much like the shootings in May 2023, collective grief over this tragedy was to morph into a powerful social movement, this one led by students and centered around institutions of education. Over the coming months (and continuing into the present day) vigils for the victims would morph into critiques of the state that had created the circumstances that allowed the tragedy to happen, bringing together unlikely coalitions to protest government corruption and lack of transparency.

At a remove, the circumstances shaping the inciting incident and subsequent social movement after the Novi Sad train station collapse share several things in common with other recent protest movements in Serbia. Critiques of the process that led to the foreign-led infrastructural development process as colonialist, betraying the interest of local people, echoed the Rio Tinto protests, which targeted the Serbian government's partnership with an Australian mining company. The framing of loss of life as a reason for protest (and the ensuing protest rhetoric of vigils, moments of silence, and other rituals of grief) echoed the Serbia Against Violence protests of 2023, which focused on the responsibility of protesters and citizens towards the lives that had been lost and highlighted collective mourning as a righteous motivation for political action. And, of course, all three protest movements targeted corruption at the federal level, the highest level of Serbian government. Whether that was the corruption of colluding with a foreign mining company to change laws with ecological ramifications, the corruption of allowing poorly performed renovations in the service of outside investors rather than local safety, or the corruption of a media and political system that fostered a culture of violence, all three protest

36 Milovanović 2021.
37 Garcia 2025.

movements framed themselves as against a corrupted system, one that was not looking out for the interests of everyday people.

This sense of pushing back against a corrupted system was shaped by the resistance to commemorations of the disaster that quickly coalesced among pro-regime elements; the first attack on students was on November 22nd, 2024, when students and professors from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, paying homage to the victims, were attacked by pro-government supporters. Later protests were marred by cars driving into them, as well as police brutality against and detention of student movement supporters and organizers. Controversy grew after an incident on March 15th, 2025, when hundreds of thousands of protesters flocked to Belgrade, and a stampede occurred, which the protesters said had been caused by government use of a sonic cannon or weapon.

The social movement that grew out of this event has now been going on for over a year; student protesters have succeeded in blocking various university faculties for long stretches of time, and have been supported by vast swathes of Serbian society, including professional associations of lawyers and teachers, celebrities in music, acting, and sport, and countless everyday people who made food for students or greeted them along their routes. Besides the occupation of university buildings and traditional protest gatherings in city centers and blocking highways, the movement has been marked by several well-publicized journeys on foot and by cycle; students traveling on foot from southern Serbia to Belgrade to attend protests, for example, or the journeys to Strasbourg and Brussels that I will discuss later in this section. Avoiding any overt cooperation with established opposition parties, the student leaders of the protests have focused on their core demands: the publication of the documentation of the renovation of Novi Sad Train Station, the institution of criminal proceedings against those who had attacked student protesters; the end to criminal proceedings against student protesters and activists started since the beginning of the student movement; and an increase of 20% in the funding for state universities. The student movement has also been marked by its use of democratic deliberation to come to decisions, particularly the "plenums," and its focus on media-friendly actions that nonetheless show sincerity.

While several government officials have resigned (and a few even been criminally accused of corruption) as a result of the social movement, the students' demands have not been fulfilled, even as the broader world has taken note. However, the movement has been reshaping the political landscape of Serbia, as well as the political experience of a youth generation often assumed to be apathetic, only in search of emigration or "getting by." Against a backdrop where change is often assumed to be impossible, the student movement, while rhetorically focusing on concrete and achievable changes, as exemplified by the above demands, has managed to rhetorically conjure up an image of a system turned on its head; in the midst of a landscape of resignation and stalled reform, to imagine a context of responsive institutions and democratic participation, even if only by highlighting their absence.

It is in this context that the blockading of the RTS and RTV channels, discussed at the beginning of the chapter, is so significant. Besides achieving the stated goal (in the case of the April protest) of restarting the competition for membership of the REM, this blockading symbolically highlighted control over media as a key source of power of the current regime. By demanding and achieving a change to the key institution through which the government regulates media, the protesters were able to symbolically highlight the role of media capture, suppression, and censorship as key tactics of the increasingly authoritarian state. This is related to but distinct from the critique of the "culture of violence" we saw in the Serbia Against Violence protests in 2023; here, there was a specific pattern of bias and elision in reporting that was being highlighted, critiqued, and linked to broader structural issues. Protesters were highlighting the connection and the inseparability of media and politics.

For another angle on the protests' strategic deployment of media as not just a medium but a mode and target of critique, we might look at the student journeys to Strasbourg and Brussels. In April, 80 students began a "journey of hope" by bicycle to Strasbourg, France, a 12-day, 1200-kilometer journey with the ultimate goal of delivering a letter to the Council of Europe. "That's why we are going to Strasbourg," they wrote. "Not because we expect someone to solve our problems, but to make the world hear the voice of Serbia – for European institutions to exert pressure on the authorities and stand in defence of the rights of all those who are forced to remain silent."[38] Similarly, a relay "ultramarathon" of students from Belgrade to Brussels met with European politicians in May.

From a certain viewpoint, these quests have a quixotic, even fairytale quality in the current day and age – traveling from Serbia to France, or Switzerland, by bike, or on foot? Of course, it is precisely this seeming naïveté that gives these actions their power, drawing on a rhetoric of youth, innocence, and purity of intent. Surely, they seem to say, surely you simply don't know what is happening, and if we travel to deliver you a letter, surely you will do something about it. These actions draw not only on the publicizing effects of social and traditional media but on the public resources of spectacle, narrative, and drama to communicate a message about the wrongness of things as they stand currently in Serbia. Media is no longer simply a tool through which to spread information about protests, to organize, and to build consensus; it is a key target of protest demands and a key resource that can be mobilized for the goal of resistance.

These bike rides also speak to another limitation of the traditional way of viewing the interaction of media and politics in the public sphere. As previously discussed, one of the many demands of the protesters was that domestic Serbian media report differently, covering protests and challenges to state power as carefully as they covered state initiatives. However, the possibilities of making this kind of change are limited in a domestic public sphere; this is

38 Baletic 2025; April 4.

why the rise of social media and the internet have been so consequential for governance structures around the world. Now more than ever, a protest movement in Serbia is not just operating in one public sphere, but embedded within large-scale international media flows through which it has access to other kinds of audiences.

The bike ride to Strasbourg and the ultramarathon to Brussels were not just appeals to a certain idea of "European-ness" – rule of law, functioning of institutions, etc., though that was a central dimension. They were also attempts to circumnavigate the limits of the Serbian public sphere by bringing the protesters' message to a wider, European or even global audience; to break out of the information system where they might otherwise be contained. Media and politics might reflect each other, but there are other places to look besides the mirror.

Conclusion: Mediated Citizenship, Democracy, Public Spheres

This article began by asking the question: why did media become such a central focus of protests against a corrupt and arguably authoritarian or autocratic state? From one angle, the answer seems obvious. There are ways in which the control of information directly enables political control; if people cannot see that others are protesting on the national broadcast television channel, this argument goes, they will not be able to imagine protesting themselves. But this has been true before the present day, under "traditional" media systems and before them.

In contrast, these protests have specifically targeted media institutions; not only using social and traditional media to organize and distribute information about protests, but attempting to make changes in media regulation, media cultures, and modes of reading media. What do protests against government corruption, environmental damage, and colonial foreign control have to do with media?

Besides highlighting the power of media as a tool and locus of protest, I would argue that this focus on media represents the way that citizenship is increasingly mediated; the politics of information having become central to discussions of deliberation and identification in democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid regimes. To see this, we need only look to the endless discussions of conspiracy theories, disinformation, misinformation, civic education, and media literacy that have consumed academic and scholarly discourse over the last decade. As societies (and media systems) become increasingly complex and increasingly globalized, information remains necessary to participate in – or, arguably, to create – a public sphere of civic and political engagement and participation. This creates obvious strains in cases – like the Serbian one – where different generations deploy different media and information habits shaped by different historical experiences, but also in all those where media and information habits are shaped by differences of location, class, education, and gender. And it places greater pressure on media as a determining factor

in the political direction that a given society is going to take, even whether it tends toward democracy or authoritarianism.

This is what the students were highlighting with the blockade of RTS, and what the Serbia Against Violence protesters were highlighting when they displayed signs "x-ing" out the logos of popular media channels, or reading "REM is evil." They were displaying an understanding of media as inseparable from the political situation, even as constitutive of it, as much as it reflects it – media as the mirror of society. Similarly, we might see the pilgrimages by bike and on foot to Strasbourg and Brussels as attempts to escape this hall of mirrors, or to appeal to different circuits of information and politics, to make visible a national struggle on a larger European stage. In each case protesters held up an ideal of the relationship of media and politics – responsive European institutions, fair and balanced media regulation, media outlets that promote a respectful civic and political culture – against its absence, not because they necessarily believed in the ideal, or as the student protesters put it, "because we expect someone to solve all our problems," but to highlight a problem. In doing so, they used deeply imperfect and flawed media as a tool to lodge a protest and to imagine an alternative – perhaps, even to hold up a mirror.

However, while the image of the media as a mirror illuminates the structural issues and political obstacles to a free exchange of information, it does not offer a simple solution. Put simply, if the problems of media are inseparable from the broader social and political structure, a solution requires large-scale political and social change rather than simple media reform. Describing media as a mirror implies that media in itself is not the problem, and, therefore, media cannot be the solution.

This is why I had initially understood the mirror to be a pessimistic analysis of the Serbian political landscape. The solution it implied – an overhaul of the social and political system – seemed to be so broad and ambitious that it seemed almost cynical. My view of the mirror framing, however, shifted as I watched protest engagement with media develop. For instance, in February 2024, when a new decision was handed down in the case of Slavko Ćuruvija, a journalist who was murdered in 1999 during the NATO bombing of Serbia and at the end of the Milošević regime. Ćuruvija was an independent journalist who had been critical of Milošević and his wife, Mira Marković, and his killing was understood to have originated in the government of that time. The case became a wider symbol of media freedom issues and the dangers to independent journalists in Serbia and in the region more broadly, and four state security officials were convicted of the murder in 2021.

Then, in February 2024, that decision was reversed on appeal, and the men acquitted. In response to the ruling, which was widely understood as a miscarriage of justice and as a step in the wrong direction, hundreds of people protested outside the appeals court which had issued the decision. As part of the protest, those assembled brought an array of mirrors – hand mirrors, wall mirrors, cosmetic mirrors – so that the judiciary could see their own reflection. The sight of hundreds of people holding up mirrors to the state speaks not only

to the power of the mirror as a symbol, but to a different way we might understand media as mirror. If media as a mirror reflects the problems of society, it can also be used as an ethical tool to hold that society accountable.

Indeed, another way to approach the idea that media, moral, and political problems are all connected – that if you pull on one thread, you get everything – is that you can start fixing the problem anywhere. On the one hand, this metaphor conceptualizes media as an insurmountable problem – if the issue with media is just an outcome of the issues with society, then one must fix society first, and media should follow suit. However, the work of organizers and protesters speaks to another way in which people take up the media-as-mirror metaphor in their actions. In seeing all of these processes – news, corruption, neglect, and violence – as interconnected and influencing one another, activists could choose any number of entry points to engage political actions and media activism, opening up new and creative ways to organize.

Take, for instance, the blockade of RTS, or the demands for change to REM. By channeling protest actions not just through media, but towards media, activists highlighted the possibilities of changing the information that people had available to them, changes that would have political, social, and cultural ramifications. These actions highlighted not just the mirror effect between media and politics, but the phantom of a set of different possibilities; of protest demands being recognized, of political and structural change, even of a shifting of funding priorities towards the university budget. The mirror does not only reflect the present-day society; it can help imagine a new one.

By making media a central focus of protests for environmental justice, against a culture of violence, and highlighting government corruption, protesters in Serbia over the last 5 years have highlighted the role that media plays in consolidating authoritarian rule and maintaining political dominance. Media is not only a metaphorical space for transmitting information about protests, but a physical location of protests, a target of social movement demands, and a stage on which to deploy the rhetorical resources of humor, spectacle, and narrative. Through their actions, the protesters have demonstrated that media-as-mirror is not only an indictment of a problematic political and information ecosystem, but a tool with which to fight back against it. It is hard to escape the political infrastructure of the media – but it is possible to blockade it.

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Ema E. S. Brant

Ogledala i poruke: Uloga medija u protestima u Srbiji, 2023–2025

Apstrakt

Tokom poslednjih nekoliko godina, Srbija je bila svedok više velikih protestnih pokreta, uključujući proteste „Srbija protiv nasilja" 2023. godine, kao i studentske proteste 2024–2026. nakon urušavanja nadstrešnice na Železničkoj stanici u Novom Sadu. Tokom ovih protesta, mediji nisu služili samo kao kanal za prenošenje i širenje informacija o političkim dešavanjima, već su i sami postali predmet kritike. Naime, kroz proteste usmerene ka inače manje vidljivim telima poput REM-a (Regulatornog tela za elektronske medije), kao i kroz uokviravanje naizgled nepovezanih tema (poput međuljudskog nasilja) kroz medijske narative, ovi protesti su ukazali na ulogu medijske kontrole, cenzure i potiskivanja kao ključnih državnih taktika u Srbiji. Kroz razmatranje medija kao „ogledala" društva, mediji se predstavljaju kao nerazdvojivi od, pa čak i sinonimni sa politikom, korupcijom i problemima za koje se smatra da postoje u srpskom društvu. Oslanjajući se na godinu dana etnografskog istraživanja u Srbiji, uključujući intervjue, participativno posmatranje i analizu medija, ovaj članak smešta odnos medija prema demokratiji, autoritarizmu i protestu u kontekst uzastopnih društvenih pokreta koji su se odvijali u Srbiji tokom poslednjih nekoliko godina.

Ključne reči: Srbija, mediji, protest, metafora, televizija, mladi, etnografija