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SOUNDTRACK OF DISSENT: SONIC PRACTICES IN THE 2024/25 SERBIAN PROTESTS

ABSTRACT
On November 1, 2024, the collapse of the Novi Sad Railway Station canopy resulted in the death of 16 people. This event catalysed a wave of public outrage which transformed into what is arguably the largest student-led protest movement in Serbia's history. Starting with 15-minute commemorative silent vigils enacted during traffic blockades, the sonic practices of the protests gradually grew in variety and scope across urban and digital spaces—ranging from public musical performances, posts on social media and performance interruptions. Apart from violent obstructions by government supporters, the alleged deployment of a military-grade sound weapon cemented sound as a political instrument in both its metaphorical and physically harmful manifestations. This paper argues that sonic practices, ranging from orchestrated silences to street-level musical performances and viral soundtracks, were crucial to the articulation of the 2024/25 protest movement. While the musical "soundtrack" of protests often draws from already existing pop-cultural material, their immediate sonic identity emerges through performative action and its rapid reproduction by supporters. The goal of the paper is to explore how aesthetic and affective expression via sound functioned as both an organizing and a destabilizing political force. The sonically shaped propensity for public gatherings during the 2024/25 protests is, the paper argues, instead of being an explicit political articulation, embedded in performative assembly and affective mimesis. To examine this, the paper will examine the sound practices of protests and attempt to identify mechanisms of political expression via silence, music and their obstructions.

KEYWORDS
silence, music, sound, sound weapon, mimesis

Exposition

Starting in November 2024 and proceeding well into the winter of 2025, the student protest movement in Serbia facilitated a space for political expression that was, up to that point, profoundly absent. In response to the canopy collapse at the Novi Sad railway station and the death of 16 people, silent commemorations in intersections, collective singing, choral performances,

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viral clips on social networks allowed a sonic delineation of spaces for political imaginaries that gradually mobilized the nation. The culmination of political instrumentalization of sound, however, came with a suspected use of a sound weapon directed against the students and citizens. The goal of the paper is to determine how these sonic practices functioned and resonated within the political discourse of a country in crisis. Sound is therefore evaluated as a relation to modalities of its application by sounding bodies (see LaBelle 2018; Voegelin 2010) or an active negation thereof (see Jungkunz 2013), with the focus on its ritualized importance for generating group cohesion (Nielsen and Cobussen 2012; Eyerman and Jamison 1998) to its capability of attacking an opposing group (Volcler 2013). Furthermore, the paper will argue that the resonance within the public and its sonic modalities was grounded in the mimetic mechanism of impersonation, where a clear ideological background was supplemented with possibilities of affective interpretation (see Hofman 2020).

Ana Hofman has argued that ideology can indeed be the condition for affective political mobilization despite prevailing scepticism towards such a view within trends of sound studies (Hofman 2020). While sound acts a mobilizing factor in its capacity of affective influence (cf. Massumi 2002; Goodman 2010), it carries intrinsic connections to the context and constellation of participants of the event it is taking place in (Born 2012; Feld 2015). Meaning and action go hand in hand and the foundation of both lies in the attractivity of those mechanisms related to sound, silence or music that allow for them to be mimicked or imitated. Any political activity including sound or a negation thereof goes beyond positions of autonomous agency, relying on a degree of imitation of the action of others (Girard 1977; Oughourlian 2010). While underlying mechanisms of mimesis rely on unconscious and violent actions as well, the 2024/25 student movement relied on imitation of affect that galvanized parts of the public both supportive and critical of it.

The analysis proceeds chronologically, following the shift from the initial one-minute vigil in front of the Novi Sad railway station to the regular fifteen- (and later sixteen-) minute commemorations, the subsequent expansion of protests into universities and large urban gatherings in Belgrade and other cities. Several points of emphasis are accounted for: 1) the role of silent vigils; 2) the use of music in live and digital contexts; 3) the weaponization of sound. Source material includes protest performances, digitally circulated songs, journalistic accounts and an investigation report regarding the sound weapon.

Moment(s) of Silence

Several months after its reconstruction, the concrete canopy at the Novi Sad railway station collapsed on November 1, 2024, killing 14 people and badly injuring two more. After the initial attempt by Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, Goran Vesić, of the ruling SNS party (Serbian progressive party) to deny responsibility, followed by his resignation, the first mass protests occurred on November 5, 2024. The initial gathering included

a one-minute silent vigil in front of the railway station. Violence eventually ensued when groups of protesters attempted to enter the Novi Sad City Hall, resulting in clashes with the armed police. The commemorative silence would in the following days be extended to 14 minutes—one minute for each person killed—and would be extended to 15 minutes after another victim succumbed to their injuries in November 2024. Following the death of another victim in March 2025, the commemoration was extended to 16 minutes, corresponding to the final death toll (AP 2025a).

Silent vigils established themselves as a repeated ritual with a political statement. Victor Turner (1969) and René Girard (1977) had pointed to the performative dimensions of ritual for its collective action and synchronizing potential for coordinating participating bodies. Just the fact that individuals gather for a single, uniform reason detaches the occasion from the everyday. Simultaneous participation through mutually generated noise imposes social cohesion through shouting, singing or playing instruments, the most familiar example of which are perhaps songs by football fans (Nielsen and Cobussen 2012: 99), where cohesion is made explicit through coordinating participating bodies in their multiplicity of possible responses. The sonic space of organized mass participation is by default exclusive of those who are not participating, making the multiplicity singular (ibid: 82). Reconsidering this aspect in the case of music, noise or silence, the sonic landscape delineates spaces of participation that an interpretation of the lyrical content alone fails to adequately account for because it fails to consider mechanisms of this generated exclusivity. A sonically formed space (as in the case of football fans) emerges where the coordination of bodies is directed at the "Other" or enemy group, even if it is momentarily absent. While football fans might present an extreme case, spatial delineation and group cohesion nonetheless constitute the nature of any musical event. What is essential, however, is that the initial gatherings in Serbia were not grounded in coordinated noise or music, but enacted silence that, rather than signalling absence, operated as a performative and political articulation of presence. Schweiger and Tomiak (2023: 857) describe protest silence as a strategic refusal that asserts presence through disruption of communication. In relying on their deliberation via individual dispositions by present subjects, silence is not enacted as an aesthetic performance, but a mimetic rhetorical statement in being "embraced from below" instead of "forced from above;" silences interrupting public life can be even more effective than noise (Jungkunz 2013: 2, 14).

On November 22, 2024, during one silent commemoration, students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade were attacked by groups of government supporters, including members of the SNS. In response, on November 25, 2024, students backed by faculty and staff announced a blockade of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, demanding prosecution of the assailants. From December 2, 2024, other universities across Serbia followed suit, effectively halting higher education nationwide. Besides the articulated four demands of

accountability formulated by the student movement,[1] all forms of performative action were reducible to the act of enforcing the right to enacted silence. In turn, the attackers defended their action by describing the 15-minute vigils as obstructions of public order, unintentionally exposing the regime's disregard for any forms of assembly exogenous to its own. What the student movement managed was to mobilize the public to align with their willingness to protest, even at a time when no specific ideological articulation was provided, made all the more evident in students continuously avoiding political, ideological, ethnic and national divisions (Knežević 2025).

Commemorations played both a memorial and a mnemonic role. Apart from paying tribute to the 16 victims, the function of these commemorations was a reminder of what the normative order allowed to happen. From the standpoint of each collectively immersed participant acting as individual and part of an integrated "partition" (Nancy 1999), one was required to discipline oneself for the duration of the commemoration. Their public visibility eventually took root as a subject of everyday life amongst the population as a central political act that asserted the right to presence as a fundamental right to exercise one's political position (Butler 2015: 26). The vigils engaged discussions of their right to take place which introduced the prospect of its potential prohibition to the general public that most were willing to oppose. They did so by imitating the students' prerogative to political assembly and, in effect, by a mimetic desire of their desire (see Girard 1977); furthermore, doing so in relation to the "Other" that violently opposes them enforces group cohesion even further (ibid.) Mimetic desire operates through competitive escalation, in which the question becomes not *what* is desired, but who desires *more intensely*, transforming imitation into rivalry (see ibid, Girard 1987). A sonic interruption of everyday life first introduced an enacted division of participants and non-participants which soon translated into a moralized division to supporters and opponents, with both attempting to surpass the assertiveness of one another.

And indeed, the silent vigils did function as social gatherings that disrupted public spaces by imposition which would, normally, be loud protest noise (LaBelle 2010: 82), with cohesion achieved, among other reasons, through general rules of conduct (Collins 2005: 82). With the vigils, however, rules of conduct were still retained, but the sonic imposition was silence, a negation of noise. Disruption of the everyday is obstructive in that it is directed at those exact values the political apparatus would arbitrarily suspend (transparency regarding the canopy collapse), yet continuously claimed to be defending (rule of law and state order). Their subversiveness and the necessity of their violent dissolution by political opponents implies that the uninterrupted continuity of urban life was a property of the ruling party and the state—in disrupting

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1 The student movement articulated four demands: publication of the complete documentation relating to the reconstruction of the railway station; prosecution of those responsible for the 22, November attacks; an end to the prosecution of students; and a 20% increase in public spending on higher education.

urban life, students were disrupting the state—in addition, a growing number of people showed the same propensity.

While the silent vigils rapidly grew in size and support, acts of disruption and violent intimidation continued through interruptions by shouting and threatening passers-by. Several incidents involved automobile vehicles ramming into protesters. On January 16, 2025, a car drove into a blockaded intersection in central Belgrade, injuring a young woman (AP 2025b); only eight days later, a similar incident happened at a public student assembly, with a young woman suffering a severe head injury (AP 2025c). The right to enacted subjectivity was perceived as a threat and a disruption of the normative order; what Jacques Attali describes in sonic terms as a signal interference, a disturbance "noise" (Attali 1985: 27). The pro-regime media insistently exculpated the perpetrators of the attacks. Following November 22, various regime pundits repeatedly framed the attackers' actions to be a spontaneous retaliation for the disturbance of everyday life, while president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić continuously downplayed the severity of the attacks (021.rs 2025). The subsequent student blockade was used to support this claim by framing even silent vigils as blockades, and the movement as "blockaders" ("blokaderi"). It was imposed in a climate of overwhelming domination of media close to the SNS, censorship and aggression towards investigative and critical journalism and a monopolized generation of narratives which either simulated political conflict (Janjić and Šovanec 2018) or intimidated its opponents with public accusations or threats (Markov and Đorđević 2023; Tasić 2024). The same principle applied to the attacks on students, portraying them as a reaction to "public disorder," and the students as "terrorists" and "foreign mercenaries" (021.rs 2025). Furthermore, a vague narrative of silent vigils and the university blockade being a "coloured revolution" (European Parliament 2025) became routine.

Similar to the insufficiency of interpreting silent vigils along expressive or aesthetic notions alone, interpreting moves by the regime as an attempt of violent censorship would be unwarranted, since it was not the meaning of the commemoration that was attacked, but the credibility of the students as political agents and the very possibility of enactment of one's political rights (Butler 2015: 83). Exposure to interruptions by violence simultaneously presented the assembly to the public as precarious; as having to contend with life-threatening antagonisms for exposing its political position (ibid: 18, 25). The enactment of precarity in silence asserted the right to its own existence (ibid: 218) as well as the moral authority of the movement. It introduced a mimetic capacity that the SNS failed or refused to acknowledge. As the protests spread beyond major cities, the 15-minute silence remained the core ritual around which all events were organized. With time, the number of participants would increase and silent vigils would garner more spatial authority. Mass protests in cities like Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš or Kragujevac would result in festive parade-like marches with students marching from all over the country. Videos and photos documenting these events would be transmitted via social networks, such as Instagram, Facebook and live streams on YouTube. Silent commemorations

would eventually prove to be effective in mobilizing the mass population and positioning the students as a role model for potential supporters; at times, students would be described by the general public as walking through villages and towns in the country "as liberators" (Beširević 2025).

The most productive achievement of the silent vigils is the emergence of a semiotic nexus of meaning not exclusive to students, but familiar to all dissatisfied members of Serbian society. Political alignment through group constitution by populist means present in much of Serbia's political scene was absent. The fact that the initiators were students did not immediately present itself as advantageous, but eventually revealed them as a precarious political entity whose right to protest was dangerously exposed to violence. It followed that if they are exposed to violence, then everyone is. The right to a performed political assembly required fighting for, even if only by the assertion of being-there. What began with silent commemorations soon grew into a social movement that reached beyond universities. With presenting themselves as precarious subjects, students allowed others to witness the precarity and violence in their immediate vicinity, but also to participate and join, allowing the movement to gradually encompass a wider social bandwidth.

Digital Musical Spaces

The potential of political protests to mobilize and assert visibility is profoundly shaped by social networks. The performed political message and its signalling in the digital domain allow for synchronous activism that interconnects the two political spheres. While protests themselves require the personal participation of protesting bodies, digital and online capabilities of dissemination of information, narrative, organization and the call to action position the two spheres as interconnected and mutually invested (Tufekci 2017). In the case of Serbia 2024/25, the creation of social network accounts by individual Faculties facilitated a medialization of their activism and significantly contributed to the increase in public support. Instagram accounts regularly posted content via stories, video statements, announcements and summaries of student-plenum decisions. This gradually expanded the movement's reach and by early 2025, even students from a number of high schools joined the blockades (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2025).

As with other political movements, their long-term effects remain existent in art objects such as songs, photographs or literature due to immediacy in experiencing collective memory, but also due to the availability of historical material (Eyerman and Jamison 1998, p. 11). Any artistic material related to the event for which it mobilizes assists in attuning the perceiving subject to the current events. Even if using "old" music interprets the present based on social constellations that no longer exist, their familiarity and partial actuality is retained and imagined. Engaging these artistic objects allows for interpretation that accounts for present time contingencies by employing the familiarity of the past. Circulation via digital platforms enabled an assertion of legitimacy

through mobilization of other social and demographic groups. Edited images and recordings from public gatherings accompanied by musical tracks circulated widely with the aim of communicating sentiment and encouraging participation. Rather than being articulated in explicit political narration, political upheaval situates songs as experienced through a sentimentally driven protest narrative instead, or what Papacharissi describes as "affective attunement" (Papacharissi, 2014: 134-135). The role of music was of particular importance as it emphasized the implicit political disposition present throughout the mobilized public, often by referencing well-known musical works from past decades of political turmoil (Danas/BBC Serbian 2025). It would become clear that, from the moment of their mass medialization, the aesthetic and affective coordinates of the protest movement would no longer be under strict control by the students.

Reliance by oppositional protest movements on media for achieving outreach is not new. The political activism of the "Otpor" movement against Milošević in the 2000s is credited with mobilizing the population through visual signs and print media (Aulich 2011: 2). In retrospect, the political agency of "Otpor" remains largely unsubstantiated: while it was at the time perceived as an advocate of a democratic turn, it neither managed to assert proper reform, nor ideological continuity. The efficiency of "Otpor" can be greatly attributed to the exploitation of media for massive appeal, but at the cost of an explicitly articulated political ideology (Aulich 2011). The opposite can be claimed for the role of music throughout the 1990s however, as it was often interpreted as politicized and ideologically polarizing in its institutional and discursive embeddedness (Dragićević-Šešić 1994; Gordy 1999; Momčilović 2024). An example for this is the musical genre of so-called "turbo-folk," which mostly functioned as an ideological coinage rather than a musical one (Đurković 2001), often perceived in terms of semiotic instrumentalization and ideological resonance with the Milošević regime (Nadjivan 2014). It denoted a premise of politicized application of music which often reemerges anytime a "turbo-folk" musician performs in urban areas or becomes associated with the governing regime. However, the protests of 2024/25 dismantled this paradigm due to technological modes of contemporary media dissemination never explicitly ideologizing music nor negating already pre-formed categories. In addition to the expanded oppositional soundtrack of the 1990s, several popular songs of folk music and its twin-genres were also spontaneously sung by students throughout the country.

Nonetheless, a number of defining songs from the 1970s and 1980s were revived, including the children's song "Deca su ukras sveta" ("children are the ornament of the world," 1977), the title track from a popular television series of the same name "Bolji život" ("a better life," 1987) and the Yugoslav Band-Aid contribution "Za milion godina" ("for a million years," 1985). Other songs had already been played in earlier protest movements such as "Zemlja" ("Earth," 1985) by the band Ekatarina Velika, "Šejn" by Haustor (1985) and others, all of whose themes and arrangements aligned the current political struggle with

previous cycles of dissent. Several musical pieces reemerged as dominant in the public gatherings by the assembled students. At the 24-hour blockade of Autokomanda, a major highway interchange on January 27th, as well as that of the Radio Television of Serbia building on April 10th (AP 2025d, Guardian 2025) there were sing-alongs to songs such as "Pada Vlada" ("the government is falling," 2003) by Bajaga & Instruktori, "Živeti slobodno" ("living freely," 2000) by Đorđe Balašević, reintroducing parallels with the Milošević-era protests (Danas/BBC Serbian 2025). These public assemblies often assumed the form of an open-air music festival, incorporating pop, dance and rock'n'roll music as well as various DJ sets. Another more recent song "Vatra u mraku" ("Fire in the dark") by singer Marko Louis and rapper Marčelo—originally written in response to a Belgrade school shooting in 2023—was repurposed and temporarily became the most widely recognizable musical reference on social media. A number of songs explicitly thematizing the 2024/25 protests were also produced by students themselves, most notably "Svi u blokade" ("everyone to the blockades," 2024) by students of the Art Academy in Novi Sad and "Sunce se ponovo rađa" ("the sun rises again") by the collective "P.E.S.M.A" consisting of students from the Belgrade Music Academy who collaborated with the popular folk singer Miloš Topalović "Topalko."

Unlike the period prior to social networks which more vividly materialized a split between consumers and industry (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002), the convergence of products works in more unpredictable ways. "Old" and "new" artistic materials both paved the way for active participation in digital culture by generating content which also implied generating meaning. This converges on the various "do-it-yourself" models via digital media, allowing for a "semiotic democracy" in relation to freely generated meaning, a factor that turned out particularly evident with music (Brusila, Cloonan and Ramstedt 2022). Musical tropes from socialist Yugoslavia, as well as from its rump inheritor, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, are interpreted as at the time of their emergence either having anticipated or openly agitated for a political change that never truly arrived. Employing songs as outdated semiotic and familiar musical tropes utilizes the past to reimagine the political and social reform of present time (Danas/BBC Serbian 2025). If anything, the political imaginary of the student movement was constructed and performed already beyond of the artistic domain—by the students themselves with deliberative plenary sessions (also known as "plenums"), direct democracy and absence of single-figure representation (Beširević 2025). Medializing the protests on social networks and employing musical cues allowed the general public to participate with its own imaginary through "sharing" or "reposting" content.

Performative Musical Spaces

The circulation of songs in contemporary student movements is increasingly dependent on digital platforms and visibility of politics in aestheticized form, as several other cases in the world have shown (Jenzen et al. 2020). The

"diagnostic" framing of the protest requesting responsibility was merged with a "motivational" framing which invited others to join for two distinct reasons (Benford and Snow 2000: 615): rooting out corruption and doing it together for the sake of the entire country. When music was included, a balance was required between its instrumentalization for generating "vitalizing emotions" that precede group constitution on the one hand, but also between new forms of articulation on the other (Danaher 2010). In the digital sphere, its forms of outreach pointed to a highly diverse and heteronomous musical identity, but a uniform application in the performative sphere. While the former is contingent and depends on the repackaging of content by what Prior characterizes as "new amateurs" (2019), namely, individual users on social networks, the music performed live served a different purpose.

What recorded music conveyed in its extra-musical associations, performed music would capture through its ideological positioning. Protests would often include performances by student choirs of the famous piece "Gaudeamus igitur." During the more patriotic-laden commemorative portions of protests, most often preceding speeches and silent vigils, choral performances of patriotic songs would also take place. Protest choirs would perform the Serbian anthem "Bože pravde" at almost every larger protest gathering; the hymn of St. Sava; on March 15, the Blockade Choir of the Student Protest performed the ancillary anthem of Serbia "Vostani Serbie" ("rise up, Serbia") at almost every large protest, thereby dismantling the anti-state narrative insisted upon by the SNS. Other performed works for the choir included an arrangement of the Aleksa Šantić poem "Ostajte ovdje" ("Stay here"), a performance of "Srpkinja" ("Serbian woman") by Isidor Bajić and "Ovo je Srbija" ("This is Serbia") by Nikola Grbić and "Tamo daleko" ("There, Afar") by Đorđe Marinković, as well as the above mentioned "Zemlja." The inclusion of compositions patriotic in character, along with the national anthem "Bože pravde" and its ancillary, "Vostani Serbie" should be understood as an act of reclaiming overtly politicized national symbols. The students, largely Gen-Z, born in the 2000s, were for the most part not alive during any political turmoil in the Milošević era when the country's name, the anthem and the constitution were all contested.[2] For the student generation during 2024/25, all three have existed for some time and accepted as a given. The active use of state symbols removed any link between the statehood of Serbia as a consequence of the democratic changes post-2000 and consequent systemic corruption. By reappropriating and collectively performing the musical symbols of the state, the students effectively (re)claimed the country symbols from corrupt governance itself. Despite

2 Following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992, the successor state was constituted as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), comprising the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro. In 2003, it was reconstituted as the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, which dissolved after Montenegro declared independence in 2006. Until that dissolution, the FRY/State Union's official anthem remained "Hej, Sloveni", although "Bože pravde" continued to circulate informally as a Serbian national anthem.

the diversity of ideological backgrounds of various factions within the movement, employing national symbols allowed a mobilization on both affective and ideological levels (see Hofman 2020).

Performing music in a group is itself a propositional action attached to the expressivity of the gathered crowd and the success of their statement, as a "dicent index of belonging and social identity" due to the innate musical knowledge being "both a sign and simultaneously a product of shared musical knowledge and experience—shared habits" (Turino 2008: 43). Those present are joined in an embodied, physical and spatial sense organized through participation as a "cognitive praxis" (Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 35). If mediated content provides room for imagination and diversity in interpretation, live musical performance produces uniformity in singular spatiotemporal terms, where all participants are simultaneously present. Thus, a reduction of the performance of the anthem as an expression of ethnonationalism disregards its semiotic importance and its previous political misuse (Turino 2008: 44), but also its mimetic capacity during the performance by a multitude of subjects. Even if individuals would sing or be affected for different reasons, the enacted uniformity would be grounded on the singular multiplicity of subjects acting in similar fashion. Musical space was a rallying ground for all imaginaries and interpretations with the central claim lying in their being-made-present for a community of varied individuals (see Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Nielsen and Cobussen 2012).

A crowd, as Butler points out, constitutes itself through a shared prerogative of asserting its right to appear as a right that precedes any explicit articulation (Butler 2015: 11, 172). This prerogative does not exclude the mechanisms that assist in achieving this but also includes media and music as well (Aulich 2020: 276). The medialization positioned the students as imitable role models whose ideological position was not mimetically familiar because it remained absent. The consequence of the students' performance installed legitimacy in what is conveyed as their credibility of mediation of any political position to begin with which Street explains by using the Kane's notion of "moral capital" (Street 2012: 57; see Kane 2001). The public did not want to be students; it wanted to be *like* the students; to embody their position and political potency. Music served this purpose in the same way silent commemorations did – as reminders of what collective political presence could become.

The students were convincing in performing their right to assembly and were ready to take the punches. It also meant that students were charged with either taking the blame for a disappointing outcome or for successfully continuing further engagement until the regime fulfilled the demands – an interpretation partially present in the popular protest slogan "Pumpaj!," which can mean both 'Pump It!' (Baletić 2025), but also 'Keep Pumping!'. Standing behind the students can both absolve one of one's own political passivity, but also provide a figure to rally behind. Students became both figures of affective mimesis, but also potential scapegoats willing to take the fall. The role of music was to articulate this function into an acceptable sonic image of the protest.

Silencing the Silence

On March 15, 2025, the student movement organized what many described as the largest public gathering in Belgrade's history. Under the slogan "15th for 15," the protest counted over 300,000 people from across the country (Reuters 2025b). The massive number of protesters required crowds to be distributed across converging streets in anticipation of the silent vigil scheduled for 7PM. A report by a Non-Government Organization Earshot analysed 19 videos and measured the ambient level during the vigil at roughly 50 dB—remarkably low given the size of the assembly—resulting in an exceptionally quiet soundscape (Earshot 2025). One witness reported being able to hear sounds from approximately 200 meters away (Earshot: witness 08: 9), while others recalled distinguishing distant noises such as drones and mobile phone notifications (ibid., Witness 13: 9). The silence overpowered all ambient noise, producing an "acute analytical state of sonic attention" (Earshot 2025: 8–9), indicating heightened spatial and auditory awareness.

At approximately 19:10, during the 15-minute silent vigil, a sudden high-intensity sound occurred on Kralja Milana Street, followed by a stampede as civilians attempted to move away from the street further onto the sidewalk. Early speculation, supported by a subsequent report by the Russian intelligence agency FSB, attributed the panic to a conflict between protesters and pro-government supporters in a nearby park (Reuters 2025c) or to "pyrotechnic and incendiary devices." However, several participants noted that the acoustic event preceded any visible disturbance (Le Monde 2025). The character of the sound phenomenon consistently evaded clear identification, being described as "alien" and impossible to reproduce (Earshot, witness 11: 10) or as unusual to witness in that particular position (ibid., witness 02: 10). For the most part, descriptions largely relied on analogies with other invasive sounds—"like a jet," "like a machine," "like a roar" (ibid., witness 7: 11). Comparative audio testing concluded that sounds of pyrotechnical devices, motorcycles, quadcopters, sirens or vortex cannons were all considered mismatches by witnesses (ibid: 8–11). In addition to descriptive analogies of sound, 2335 out of 3244 written statements (72%) describe the experience as somatic, with the sound being accompanied by a physical sensation (ibid. 10). Witnesses described it as having felt the soundwave "in my bones," "in my muscles" (ibid., witness 09: 10). Nearly all witnesses clearly distinguished the event from crowd noise. Earshot ultimately concluded that it was "highly likely the protestors were subjected to a targeted attack using a directional acoustic weapon" (ibid. 4).

Understanding sound weapons as so-called "non-lethal devices" requires attention to both their technical capabilities and intended application. Juliette Volcler distinguishes three basic characteristics of non-lethal devices: the imperative of "neutralizing rather than killing," a blurring of the line between "war and law enforcement or humanitarian operations" and consideration of public opinion and the media in "management of conflict" (Volcler 2013: 127). The permitted application of sound weapons does not include the option of

visible physical harm, but permits deterrence from violent conflict. This situates sound weapons in an ethically ambiguous position: they have the power to cause 'invisible' harm and therefore demand heightened operational responsibility.

Sound weapons do not operate solely within audibility, but extend into what Volcler terms "extra-auditive effects of sound" (Volcler 2013: 11) because their vibrations can exceed perceptual thresholds through bodily resonance. At the right intensity, frequencies below 2 Hz move the entire body, while 5 Hz is among the most discomforting; frequencies between 4 and 6 Hz resonate with abdominal organs and the chest wall (Altmann 2001: 181). Thus, amplifying frequencies that would otherwise remain imperceptible introduces physical repercussions. Additionally, some frequencies are perceived as stronger than others even at identical intensity levels: 1500 Hz, for instance, is perceived as stronger than 15,000 Hz (Volcler 2013: 15–16).

Long-range acoustic devices (LRADs) can be correspondingly tasked with amplifying particular frequencies within a selected sound range. They are most efficient between 2–3 kHz, corresponding to peak human auditory sensitivity, but can also intensify lower frequencies. An example is the sound of a jet engine which occupies a lower frequency range (roughly up to 1 kHz) whose amplification will emit more power, producing soundwaves felt as a physical force in addition to being audible. Ordinary phone microphones may fail to record these acoustic effects adequately, which does not prove their absence during use (Earshot 2025: 11). Moreover, the perceived intensity of sound emitted by an LRAD can diminish due to diffraction taking place when sound reflects off other surfaces or encounters atmospheric interference (Altmann 2001: 195–196). If an LRAD was used on March 15, it would have likely been directed linearly along the Kralja Milana Street.

Innate human responsiveness to sound establishes a foundation for understanding how acoustic technologies acquire political force. Berendt argues that sudden and intense noise triggers reflexes rooted in survival mechanisms as involuntary readiness to potential danger. Loud sound affects everyone in its path as an unconscious call to arms (Berendt 1983: 79). Physiological sensitivity implies loudness as disruptive, unrelenting and requiring defensive action. This provided the reasoning for research of "no-touch torture" with the goal of inflicting pressure and coercing behaviour without leaving visible injuries (McCoy 2006: 28–29, 33–34). From the outset of their development in the United States, they also belonged to a lineage of weapons of "no-touch" torture characterized by the ability to "incapacitate without leaving visible traces" and render the enemy "docile or ineffective" (Volcler 2013: 126–127). Similar techniques were explored with loud music even prior: during the 1989 U.S. intervention in Panama, loud music and noises were continuously played outside the Vatican embassy sheltering Manuel Noriega (ibid: 101). The capability of LRAD however surpassed pure psychological warfare and would be used in US operations for deterring pirates in Somalia and military combat in Fallujah, Iraq (ibid: 104, 112). Its use later expanded to crowd dispersal during lootings following Hurricane Katrina (Goodman 2010: 21). Goodman situates

such weapons as arising out of a strategy of producing fear without material violence (ibid: xiv) capitalizing on uncertainty regarding the nature of what was experienced. The danger is thus not only in its intensity, but in ambiguity as to whether the phenomenon was an actual attack or just a sound event without an identifiable source.

Its potential use on March 15 introduced the possibility of arbitrary reuse at any given moment. It poses a greater problem to explain the phenomenon in question if the LRAD was absent rather than if it was employed, given the consistency of earwitness accounts. If it was truly deployed as all descriptions point to, then its use against silent, non-violent protesters demands a convincing rationale. Even more perplexing is that the event it was used during was a familiar silent vigil enacted for months without exceptions, with the only difference being the amount of people. The expected effect of using an LRAD in such a situation would be either to incite panic and a riot or to disperse the crowd: if the former is the case, then the sound weapon becomes used entirely contrary to its initial intent; if the latter, then the issue concerns the citizens' right to assembly, but also how the justification for disputing these rights is articulated. It introduces the possibility of complete lack of ability to counter the mimetic mechanism of the movement, instead attacking it outright.

Serbian Interior Minister Ivica Dačić denied that any sound weapon was used during the vigil. The government initially denied possessing such devices, later admitting that an LRAD model had been purchased in 2021. An officer confirmed it was "mounted on the hood of our vehicle… to be activated if there is a need" (Earshot 2025: 16; European Western Balkans 2025a; Reuters 2025b). Meanwhile, pro-government media ridiculed the claims. On Informer TV, editor-in-chief Dragan J. Vučićević and SNS MP Vladimir Đukanović mocked the "sound cannon," joking that "the coloured revolution fell apart" because of it (Le Monde 2025). On March 19, 2025, the Interior Ministry acknowledged that an LRAD unit had been present in Belgrade, while maintaining it was not used (European Western Balkans 2025a). Shortly thereafter, on March 26, the European Court of Human Rights opened an inquiry and on April 29–30 issued interim measures ordering Serbia to prevent the use of sonic weapons or similar devices at protests (European Court of Human Rights 2025).

Disorder of the Aftermath

The regime and its supporters would persist in publicly discrediting the scale of the assembly on March 15 by both denying and ridiculing the accusations regarding the sonic weapon. Their response would, however, also entail a sonic component, evident in SNS-organized pro-government counter-rallies in April 2025 in several cities throughout Serbia. Unlike those organized by the student movement, the SNS rallies included staged musical acts, food tents, drinks and organized transportation. Notably, pro-regime groups occupied the boulevard and park in front of the parliament building, effectively blocking traffic in the very centre of the capital until 4 January, 2026. "Ćacilend Camp,"

as it was pejoratively monikered by the public, was installed under the pretext of gathering "students who want to study," in opposition to the students who are protesting. It soon expanded from the park onto the main avenue in front of the parliament building, with tents installed for the planned SNS rally on 12 April, 2025 (Andersson 2025). The camp was predominantly occupied by people who were either of pro-regime affiliations or had criminal records (KRIK 2025). Justifying the imposition on free public space as a response to the university and intersection blockades, one way this space was demarcated was through music. The rally on April 12 featured performances by musicians associated with popular folk-music such as Garavi Sokak, Dejan Petrović Big Band and the ultra-nationalist "turbo-folk" musician Mirko Pajčin, known professionally as Baja Mali Knindža; a performance in Niš also featured another regional music star, Aca Lukas (Nova 2025). This period would also include political activism by individual musicians on both sides of the political divide. In August, the rock festival Zaječarska Gitarijada cancelled the participation of the punk-rock band Goblini, reportedly due to the band's "political views," prompting other bands to boycott the festival, including popular acts such as S.A.R.S., Deca loših muzičara, Električni orgazam, Brkovi, Kerber, Generacija 5 (Vreme 2025). The "turbo-folk" singer Seka Aleksić reported cancellations of several concerts, reportedly due to her support for the student movement. Conversely, the public climate would increasingly shift to support for the students, particularly when musicians critical of the movement and supportive of the government would perform at public venues or city squares.[3]

Following the protests on June 28, 2025, attended by over 140,000 people, a violent stand-off between protesters and pro-government supporters protected by the police took place, sparking a period of several weeks of repeated violent confrontations (Washington Post 2025). This period intensified pressure and polarization within the cultural and education institutions. Some theatres and publishers cancelled performances in solidarity with the protests, while festivals saw artists withdraw or be removed because of their political positions. In numerous cases, teachers in public schools on part-time contracts would either have their contracts terminated or extensions suspended. In several cases, school principals who expressed support for the protests would receive contract terminations and be replaced by pro-government individuals (Martinović 2025). On November 1, 2025, a one-year commemoration of the canopy collapse was held at the station site in Novi Sad with tens of thousands attending (Reuters

3 At a festival in Loznica on July 10, 2025, a pro-regime singer Đorđe David performed before a hostile audience who shouted protest-related slogans to disrupt the performance before eventually turning their backs towards the stage and leaving; a similar incident also occurred in the city of Sombor in October. Performances by the singer Jelena Karleuša would be repeatedly interrupted and booed as a response to numerous public statements against the students containing hate speech and calls to violence (Ilić 2025). Another similar incident on January 13, 2026 included the folk singer Ana Bekuta when the audience interrupted her performance at the Čačak city square by throwing snowballs at her, forcing her and her band to leave the stage.

2025g). The next day, minor demonstrations occurred in Belgrade when Dijana Hrka, the mother of one of the victims, was prevented from initiating a hunger strike in front of the parliament building, in the restricted territory within the so-called "Ćacilend." This resulted in what was likely a spontaneous use of music violence with pro-government groups blasting loud music. The songs in question were selected and used as retaliation against the attempted hunger striker: namely, the lyrics of "Pukni zoro" and "Morem plovi jedna mala barka" thematize a mothers' reunification with her son. Used for their cheerful arrangement and subject matter, they were mockingly sung towards Dijana Hrka by the assembled crowd of pro-government supporters in "Ćacilend."

Coda

In choosing to assemble and to assert their right to political commentary, as well as by being willing to endure violence and by calling for the support of the broader citizenry, the students who blockaded their universities publicly presented themselves as political subjects. This made the precarity of their political position visible in their being physically attacked. The presentation in question was successful due to reconfiguring students into figures endowed with moral capital available for imitation by other like-minded political subjects. The reasoning was that if students could do it while being repeatedly attacked, then they are reliable role models for others as well. The result was a nation-wide mobilization of support that extended to the Serbian diaspora around the world that opposed the SNS regime. The performative act of students transfigured into a mimetically relatable position that would only be further asserted through overt negation of its right to exist by the government and its supporters. An enacted suspension of sound staged the students' political subjectivity as a public performance, whose violent disruptions were not perceived as part of the act, but as attacks on the mimetic potential of the movement.

If suspending sound was an initial political act where incurring violence contributed to a morally charged polarity, it would be music that assisted with inviting people to participate via imitation and relatability. This included popular music from the period of socialist and post-socialist Yugoslavia whose emotional cues did not require, but nonetheless left space for an explicit political interpretation. It was left to individuals to incorporate music into their own political imaginary. Furthermore, music used in public and digital spaces enabled different, pluralistic modes of sonification of the student movement. The digital space in particular was grounded in contextualization and interpretation of the movement itself, while the performed one rested on modes of embodied, living, bodily participation in groups of people. What also mobilized the broader public and denied the political polarization imposed by the regime was the public performance of Serbian patriotic songs and the national anthem, dismantling the notion that protests were directed against the Serbian state.

The response of the regime was nonetheless hostile through public speeches, media appearances, attacks, arrests and police brutality. The credibility of

the political imaginaries was attacked from the beginning of the political crisis, reaching their climactic point with the incident on March 15, 2025, and the suspected use of the sound weapon. Whether the intent was to cause panic and violent backlash, to dissolve the mimetic potency of the movement or to discredit the political power of the silent protest that amassed several hundred thousand people remains unclear. While silent acts of the student movement were attacked all along, the climactic event on March 15 raises suspicion that the performed silence was attacked directly with weaponized sound.

Silence as a suspension of intentional noise served as a remembrance of those killed in Novi Sad, while tacitly pointing the finger at the regime. It was used to enact the right to gather, which reminded the public of systemic corruption. Apart from the use of noise and silence, it would be their use of music that generated the character of assembly through its descriptive soundtrack and embodied character. Public obstructions of the vigils and political rallies organized with staged musical performances aimed to assert presence by showcasing a monopoly to political noise. Yet, there is an obvious performative contrast: while the student movement articulated itself in sonic cues (both through silence and music) during its assemblies for the purpose of inviting people into public spaces, the pro-government faction used music and sound for demarcating their own political space and pre-emptively defending it (with the alleged sound weapon). The mimetic and affective foundation of sound manipulation by the student movement was inherently *expansive*, while its instrumentalization by the pro-government faction was inherently *restrictive*.

Sound acts as a technique for redrawing the line between groups; between citizens and power structures. The students' insistence on commemorative silence, performing music in public, along with the regime's use of violence and noise denote a struggle of two opposed models for asserting political spaces. Both the outcome of the crisis and its subsequent articulations remain unknown, but what has fundamentally changed is the degree of willingness by the two opposing factions to make themselves heard. The student movement sound strategies prove that mobilizing consent and generating "moral capital" requires mimetic mechanisms for achieving correlation among the population critical of the SNS regime. In order to achieve this (at the surface level at least), the student movement renounced any ideological claim, leaving open the spectrum of affective strategies resting on mimetic foundations. In addition, it exposed the absence of mimetic mechanisms by the regime and unveiled its requirement of demarcation and restriction. The sonic practices of the protests by the student movement and the pro-government faction reframed the usual coordinates of politics as polarity between the government and the opposition. Within such a constellation, both the performance of silence and of music that the public found attractive asserted itself as subversive to the existing political order.

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Nikola Vasilijević

Zvučna kulisa pobune: zvučne prakse u protestima u Srbiji 2024/25

Apstrakt

Urušavanje nadstrešnice na Železničkoj stanici u Novom Sadu 1. novembra 2024. godine, koje je rezultiralo smrću šesnaest osoba, pokrenulo je talas javnog ogorčenja koji se razvio u ono što se može smatrati najvećim studentski predvođenim protestnim pokretom u savremenoj istoriji Srbije. Počevši od petnaestominutnih komemorativnih tišina tokom blokada saobraćaja, zvučne prakse protesta postepeno su se širile i umnožavale kroz urbane i digitalne prostore — od javnih muzičkih izvođenja i objava na društvenim mrežama do različitih oblika prekida javnih događaja. Pored nasilnih opstrukcija od strane pristalica vlasti, navodna upotreba vojnog zvučnog oružja dodatno je učvrstila poziciju zvuka kao političkog instrumenta, kako u metaforičkim, tako i u fizički štetnim manifestacijama. Rad polazi od teze da su zvučne prakse — od orkestriranih tišina do uličnih muzičkih performansa i viralnih zvučnih zapisa — imale ključnu ulogu u artikulaciji protestnog pokreta 2024/25. Iako se muzički “soundtrack” protesta često oslanja na već postojeći pop-kulturni materijal, njihov neposredni zvučni identitet formira se kroz performativno delovanje i njegovu brzu reprodukciju među učesnicima i pristalicama pokreta. Cilj rada je da ispita na koji način estetsko i afektivno izražavanje putem zvuka funkcioniše istovremeno kao organizujuća i destabilizujuća politička sila. Rad nastoji da pokaže da je zvukom oblikovana sklonost ka javnom okupljanju tokom protesta 2024/25, umesto da bude eksplicitna politička artikulacija, ugrađena u performativno okupljanje i afektivnu mimetičnost. Kako bi se to ispitalo, rad razmatra zvučne prakse protesta i nastoji da identifikuje mehanizme političkog izražavanja putem tišine, muzike i njihovih opstrukcija.

Ključne reči: tišina, muzika, zvuk, zvučno oružje, mimetičnost