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NEW FACE OF MEMES IN STUDENT-LED PROTESTS IN SERBIA AND THEIR ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to explore memes created and circulated by students and citizens taking part in the protests in Serbia. Memes from two social media platforms, X and Instagram, were collected and analysed in terms of their visual form and content, with emphasis on recurring themes. Based on these, six types of pictorial and one type of video memes in relation to the Serbian student protest are discussed. The article explores the meanings the memes created and distributed during the protests carried, understanding them as instances of political aims being achieved by non-political means. We further discuss the ethical implications of memes, both pictorial and AI-generated. The general issues the article tackles are those of protest mobilisation, humour, memes, ethics and AI.

KEYWORDS

student protests, Serbia, internet memes, humour, digital activism, protest mobilisation, social media ethics

Introduction

Since November 2024, Serbia has been shaken by what may be the largest anti-corruption protests in its history. Led by students from Serbian universities, these demonstrations are the longest-running political mass movement during more than a decade of rule by Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party. The longevity and resilience of the protests can be attributed to the fact that they are led by students, an untainted and trustworthy social group, rather than by traditional political parties, which enjoy far less popularity and public trust. The secret of the students' success lies in their organisation, their direct-democratic decision-making procedures and their well-executed public

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communication. Among the communication methods employed by the students at Serbian universities, humour and references to popular culture, expressed through widely shared internet memes, play an important role. This article analyses some of the more popular meme formats utilised by the students and their supporters in the digital space and the potential ethical implications of their usage.

Memes have become a staple of online communication, evolving from simple image-and-text formats into a versatile tool for humour, social commentary and political expression. Despite the ethical issues they carry, as we will unpack in the analysis of protest memes in Serbia, they are a powerful tool of political communication, where they are used to recruit supporters and respond rapidly to current events. Therefore, this article has a twofold aim: firstly, starting out with memes created during the student protests in Serbia, we intend to explore their meanings for the protests and the broader socio-political context. For this aim, a multimodal analysis of the selected memes was conducted, that includes both the analysis of their visual and textual/discursive aspects. Through this, the general goal is to unpack how certain political messages can be articulated in a non-political form and what the function of memes is in the expression of this. Second, we aim to investigate the similarities and differences in the creation and distribution of memes using pictorial templates and video memes generated by artificial intelligence (AI), as well as the ethical implications of their usage.

The research is based on the collection of visual content from the digital field, specifically memes and their theoretically grounded analysis. Through applying theoretical frameworks to the exploration of the selected memes, we approach empirical insights through relevant literature in the fields of popular protests, online humour and memes, as well as the ethical issues of AI.

The empirical component of the research material was collected between early November 2024 and the end of May 2025, with additional revisiting the social media platforms on which the memes were disseminated throughout the summer of 2025. A corpus of memes that use a common visual template was established, and those memes that use templates that have a prominent number of occurrences identified and used for analysis. The primary data sources were two social media platforms – Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) – based on their distinct user demographics and communication modalities. Instagram was chosen as the principal channel for younger generations, primarily members of Generation Z, characterised by its focus on visual content and a streamlined system for sharing short-form media, particularly static images and brief video clips. In contrast, X functions as a microblogging platform with a significant user base among older Millennials and members of Generation X. It is marked by more explicit and articulate textual commentary, often politically charged. Although content about the ongoing protests in Serbia is also available on Facebook, a popular social media in Serbia, it was excluded from the analysis due to modest student presence on the platform and its older user demographic.

In accordance with the distinct characteristics of the platforms we considered, pictorial memes on Instagram were predominantly produced by students participating in campus blockades, with an emphasis on calls for civil disobedience and protest participation. They were all created by humans and share the structure of an image with text. These memes often contain an implicit political dimension, conveyed through humour and irony, yet lacking overt political articulation. On X, by contrast, memes were largely created by a broader pool of users and are marked by an explicit political tone, frequently critical of institutional responses to student activism. Also, on this platform, students occasionally shared existing social media content. However, as time went by, more student-created memes began to emerge, signalling a shift towards more explicit political articulation and a potential change in activist strategy.

Video memes related to the topic of the protests were scarce, and those that were found used videos created by AI. They were created and originally distributed on TikTok, a platform for videos. However, they were frequently shared on the X platform as well. Although this is the smallest pool of material, it is valuable regarding the topic of AI and its ethical considerations.

While video memes were chosen based on availability, the selection of pictorial memes from a much larger pool was based on the following defining criteria: repetition of a single visual template with variations in textual content, use of images modelled after well-known internet meme formats and photographs featuring recurring visual motifs or characters that operate as mimetic anchors in specific contexts. This approach facilitates the understanding of memes not merely as digital cultural products but as dynamic forms of political articulation, rooted in the temporality and specificity of their socio-political context. Conversely, the collection and analysis of memes were organised chronologically and thematically, following the unfolding of real-time developments. A chronology in which the memes have been created and distributed is provided in the following section.

A Chronology of the Protests

On 1 November 2024, the canopy of the railway station in Novi Sad, the city in the north of Serbia, collapsed and killed sixteen people, while one person was left severely injured. The tragedy infuriated many in Serbia, as the railway station was recently reconstructed and opened by politicians with pomp on two occasions, the latter happening in July 2024. The canopy collapse of a seemingly new and modern structure came to symbolise the corruption of the ruling regime and sparked the largest protests in Serbian history.

At first, the protest was limited to the city of Novi Sad, where clashes between the police and protesters happened outside City Hall on 5 November, with several protesters being arrested (Baletić 2025). Consequently, the Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, Goran Vesić, resigned, as well as Milan Đurić, the mayor of Novi Sad. This did not pacify the protesters, who kept the streets occupied, which culminated on 20 November when

thousands gathered and demanded responsibility, resulting in the resignation of the Minister of Trade and former Minister of Construction, Tomislav Mo-mirović. Simultaneously, silent protests took place in several other cities in Serbia, with citizens standing still and quiet at designated locations for as many minutes as there were victims of the canopy collapse.

At one such protest on 22 November outside the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDA) of the University of Arts in Belgrade, vigil participants were attacked by individuals later identified as members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SPP). The victims of the attacks were mostly FDA students who reacted by announcing the blockade of their faculty until their demands were fulfilled: the documentation of the railway reconstruction made public, the attackers apprehended, their superiors dismissed from public service and protesters arrested by the police freed without charges (Baletić 2025). Faculties of other universities across Serbia soon followed with similar proclamations, and by late January 2025 most of them were blocked by their students.

The students legitimised their decision by organizing a plenary assembly where the faculty blockade was proposed and voted on after a deliberation at *plenums*. Direct democracy and deliberation became the trademarks of the student movement, with every student who could prove their status being able to speak, vote and propose. By the end of 2024, the students expanded the initial FDA demands, urging the government to publish all the documents relevant to the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station. They also demanded that the resources for higher education be increased.

The life of students in the faculties under blockade constituted a novel mode of everyday. University halls and classrooms became makeshift communal rooms where *plenums* and other meetings concerning the organization and logistics of student movement took place. Rooms and corridors were converted into dormitories with rows of mattresses and personal belongings near them. Food was stored and prepared in improvised kitchens (Knežević 2025). Even pets were allowed at most of the faculties and cared for by students. Free time was filled with social games such as chess, cards and board games. In some situations, students obtained gaming consoles and played video games. For those interested in music, acting and other forms of art, dedicated classes were formed, and famous guests, such as actors, singers and television show hosts were invited to visit the faculties. Other than activities *in situ* in these spaces, everyday activities included a significant virtual component. Students communicated and strategised with peers from other faculties and cities, prepared public announcements and created digital content, including social media posts and humorous memes.

Large student-initiated rallies with tens of thousands of participants were held in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac. Some students walked hundreds of kilometres to the city where the next large protest is taking place and/or to raise awareness in the countryside (Mašina 2025). Meanwhile, following the silent protests to commemorate the victims of the fall of the canopy of the Novi Sad railway station, then the clashes between protesting citizens

and the police, and finally the blockade of virtually all public and some private universities in the country, the government sought to defuse the situation by making several arrests and criminal charges against the SPP members involved in the railway reconstruction. Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned in late January 2025, while the President announced on several occasions that the demanded documents would be published; however, this promise was never fully implemented.

At the same time, President Aleksandar Vučić and the SPP organised their rallies with noticeably smaller attendance. A camp organised near the Presidency of Serbia was set up by students and citizens who oppose the faculty blockades, but it soon grew to something akin to a paramilitary camp for SPP loyalists. Their colloquial name became *ćaci*, and the name of the camp *Ćaci-land*, referring to the first phase of the protests when a graffiti “*Ćaci u školu*” instead of “*Đaci u školu*” (Students to school), confusing the Cyrillic letters “Ђ” (“Đ”) and “Ћ” (“Ć”), appeared on one of the Novi Sad schools whose students and teachers went on strike.

Student-led protests culminated on 15 March, when the largest public rally in Serbian history took place in Belgrade. The students gathered hundreds of thousands of people. The protest represented a symbolic stand-off between them on one side and hundreds of anonymous, hooded *ćaci* in front of the Presidency who were visibly armed with bats, hammers, rocks and knives. During the silence for the canopy collapse victims, a stampede happened because of a strange sound produced by what is believed to be a sonic weapon or another unspecified sound-emitting device. The government has categorically denied that any such instrument was used. The investigation into what had happened on March 15 became a new, fifth demand by the students (Radenković Jeremić and Owen 2025).

That day marked a turning point in the student-led protests in Serbia. After 15 March, the government became bolder in repressing dissent and civil disobedience. Public-school teachers on strike and university professors were left without income. At the same time, the students were left with a dilemma whether to stick to the initial demands and wait for President Vučić to fulfil them, accept that the current regime is incapable of meeting them or to embrace the political struggle of toppling the current regime in the next elections. The students articulated their demands by asking for extraordinary parliamentary elections. The so-called “student list” was agreed to be formed by plenums and filled by trusted individuals.

Throughout May and June, the regime focused on sowing discord between students and professors. The government conditioned the withholding of professors’ salaries on the switch to online teaching, which led to disagreements not only between students and professors but also among the students themselves. However, the direction of the protests changed again after the large student-led rally on 28 June. Clashes between citizens and the police during the protests, an unprecedented level of police brutality and subsequent mass civil disobedience, with roads and streets blocked by garbage containers and other

obstacles across the country, presented a new radical face of the protests in Serbia. The summer that was expected to be protest-free due to the vacation season and heat turned out to be anything but quiet. Standoffs between protesters and members of the ruling party escalated in several towns across Serbia. Members of the SPP fired pyrotechnic devices at the protesters on several occasions, causing physical injuries and with no reaction from the police. This infuriated the citizens and sparked large August and early September protests in Belgrade, Novi Sad and other major cities in Serbia that were dispersed by a large police force, tear gas and armoured vehicles. The police used excessive force and abused arrested individuals mentally and physically, including threats of sexual violence (Zoric and Andric 2025). As of the time of writing this article (early autumn 2025), the summer of 2025 marks the most violent period of the protests in Serbia.

With the demands of the protesters taking a turn to be openly political, their activities at the faculties as well and their virtual communication strategies changed and the production and distribution of memes diminished. However, we believe that memes are an important feature of the student-led protest, that is, in turn, one of, if not the most important events in the past decade in Serbia. Conversely, we hold that memes are not a minor feature of the blockades and the mobilisations, but that they hold explanatory value in analysing them.

Politics, Humour and Memes: From Evolutionary Metaphor to Vernacular Creativity

The meme was defined for the first time by Dawkins (1976) as a replicator of cultural information analogous to genes in biological evolution. Early approaches focused on this evolutionary metaphor. However, with the rise of digital culture and the internet, the definition of memes has shifted from abstract cultural replicators to being used to mean a “unit of information – an idea or a concept – that can spread from person to person through the social network” (Ferrara et al. 2013: 548). Copying and imitation have also become significant concepts that define memes (Denisova 2018), while Shifman (2014) conceptualises them not merely as isolated units but as groups of digital items that share common characteristics, are created with awareness of each other, and are circulated, imitated and transformed by many users. More recently, Dynel (2021) has noted that memes are increasingly multimodal, combining text, image and intertextual references in complex ways, which makes them both adaptable and context-sensitive.

In its narrower usage, a meme has come to mean “any specimen of online humour on the internet, especially if multi-modal” (Dynel 2021: 79), i.e. containing both a visual and a textual element. More recent research also underscores the multimodal, creative and intertextual nature of memes, framing them as dynamic, context-dependent artefacts that facilitate collective identity formation, cultural critique, political expression and online activism (Dynel 2021).

Milner (2016) argues that memes are forms of “vernacular creativity,” deeply embedded in participatory media practices, while Denisova (2019) stresses their role as socio-political commentaries that shape and reflect public discourse. This is particularly evident in the Balkan context, where digital folk narrative genres serve as tools for crisis management (Katsadoros and Kardamila 2025). In a similar vein, Guja Dražeta (2024) suggests that memes act as modern vehicles for folk narratives and social commentary in Serbia. Building on these insights, a growing body of research examines internet memes in the Serbian and broader Balkan context, framing them as forms of digital folklore, vernacular creativity and political commentary. These studies highlight memes as hybrid artefacts positioned between folklore and popular culture (Banić Grubišić 2023), as well as key elements of contemporary visual communication shaped by imitation and repetition (Milosavljević 2020). Other authors emphasise the role of memes in identity construction and resistance (Marinkov Pavlović 2016), feminist and activist expression (Davidović 2021) and the amplification of political scandals (Bebić, Dolinar and Boko 2024). Taken together, regional perspectives demonstrate how memes operate as culturally embedded and politically salient communicative practices in moments of crisis and contestation.

Throughout the years of their usage, memes have been connected to the expression of humour (Milner 2016; Denisova 2019), and are an important means of reflecting on current events, especially political. Political humour refers to any form of humour that arises from phenomena, events and figures that can be perceived as political. It can take various forms and serve multiple purposes, such as exposing or critiquing incompetence and immorality in politics. This form of humour is not unique to the modern era, and its first instances can be traced as far back as antiquity. In medieval and early modern times, it was often expressed during carnivals and festive events, where social hierarchies were temporarily suspended, and political dissent was permitted, provided it took a humorous form (‘t Hart 2007). In more recent history, political humour has found new platforms through mass media such as print, radio and television, allowing it to reach wider audiences. With the rise of the internet and social media, political humour found a new, fertile ground in the online space, enabling greater public participation in its creation and more importantly, circulation. Internet memes, a common vehicle for such humour, can go viral and achieve high levels of user engagement, sometimes surpassing traditional media in reach and influence and highlighting their potential to inform and shape public opinion (Halversen and Weeks 2024).

What characterizes political humour not only in memes but in general is that such jokes create an in-group of those who understand them, thus serving to induce a feeling of solidarity (Rácz 2016; Dynel 2021; Kallius and Adriaans 2022; Rácz 2024). While such jokes can be polarising, political humour may also defuse tensions and foster cooperation (Bippus 2014). Although meme creators do not see memes as political in nature and usually express humour and entertainment as the main motive of their creativity, they recognise their potential in conveying political messages in an easy, understandable and effortless

way, thus creating a pathway for anyone to start engaging with political topics (Leiser 2022). Therefore, in the context of political protests, memes can play an impactful role as mobilisers of political participation and facilitators of internal dialogue, as observed in the Occupy Wall Street movement (Milner 2013) or strengthening collective identities and internal cohesion within movements such as Black Lives Matter (Leach and Allen 2017).

However, while not denying much of these assessments, some authors notice that the potency of political memes in informing the public, mobilising it and creating a sense of unity is limited. By prioritising humour and wit, meme creators can risk oversimplifying and trivialising serious political issues and contributing to polarisation through an overly satirical or mocking attitude towards opposing viewpoints (Penney 2019; Fernández-Villanueva and Bayarri-Toscano 2021). Memes and digital activism can even be criticised as neutralisers of the political potential of mass movements, as they shift people away from the physical spaces where they are most potent disruptors of the *status quo* into the digital sphere (Hristova 2014).

Furthermore, memes serve as a creative outlet for their creators. The increased sophistication of AI programmes, their growing capacity to generate images based on human prompts and suggesting creative concepts, facilitate the rapid creation of memes by utilising the vast material available across the internet. However, the scientific community warns that these co-created memes introduce significant ethical questions related to the ethical framework of AI (Gal-Or 2025). The reason for this is that, in addition to using all available online material, including content for which they lack copyright permission, AI-generated memes also incorporate deepfake material. This raises a crucial call for discussion on copyright, intellectual property and the need for transparency regarding the sources used in the creation process (Gaykar et al. 2025). Furthermore, Gaba and de Cristofaro (2025) warn that AI-created memes open up the possibility of spreading hate speech. This is because they can evade detection by the very algorithms designed to prevent such offensive materials. This brings up another ethical issue based on the fact that, in addition to Article 17 of the EU Copyright Directive, which directly addresses user-generated content in the digital space (Nečák 2019; Furgal, Kretschmer and Thomas 2020; Sanchez 2021; Akinci 2024), there is a lack of clear legal frameworks for content created by AI. Meme creation is a creative process that captures the subtle, underlying implications of a society or social situation. This is especially true for political memes, which are created for a specific context and aimed at a particular social group. Wu, Weber and Müller (2025) showed that, for now at least, human-made memes are still more effective at conveying messages through humour.

Analysis and Discussion

Visualizing Resistance: Meme Types and their Contexts of Emergence

The Archetypal Confrontation: “Student vs. Progressive”

The first few weeks of the start of the student-led protests, immediately following the Novi Sad railway station tragedy, were profoundly marked by a single iconic meme. While numerous photographs and short video clips were shared daily, this single image stood out and became a defining protest symbol. The image captured a student standing calmly and silently, face-to-face with an aggressively confrontational driver. The photograph went viral on the X platform and was immediately transformed into the “Student vs. Progressive [Party member]” meme. The construction of this meme is notably simple: the original photograph serves as a fixed background for various overlaid texts. The core thematic strategy, however, is consistent: the student is invariably presented through phrases that denote intelligence, composure and dignity, while the “Progressive” figure is characterised as uneducated, vulgar and unintelligent. In one prevalent version of this meme, presented in Figure 1, the Progressive supporter poses the question, “Šta ti je to u glavi?” (What is that in your head?), to which the Student replies simply: “Mozak” (A brain). This exchange concisely captures the conflict between brute force (represented by the Progressive) and superior intellect or critical thought (represented by the Student), thus placing emphasis on intellect and dignity as a counter-narrative to political force.



Figure 1: The “Student vs. Progressive” meme illustrating the contrast between the composed student and the confrontational motorist.¹

1 <https://x.com/eeevunkump/status/1866535591460081665>

The meme quickly evolved beyond simple humour, establishing a potent counter-narrative of silent, composed resistance against aggressive, repressive impulses. While incorporating classic meme characteristics such as irony and contrast, its power derived from the emotional weight of its represented silence: a form of resistance that stood firm without violence. This public narrative was in sharp contrast to the reaction of state officials and pro-government media, who portrayed the blockades negatively and, through implicit rhetoric, painted the students as destructive elements. The captured incident where the student maintained his composure while being aggressively threatened by a motorist became viral content that fundamentally undermined the official discourse characterising the demonstrations as violent. The meme thus encapsulated the spirit of silent defiance and the conflict between the younger generation and the governing elite.

In a symbolic sense, this meme not only marked the beginning of intensive meme creation surrounding the protest but also coincided with the end of the overtly “non-political” phase of the movement. By the late summer of 2025, the protest was increasingly met with aggressive responses from law enforcement and frequent student arrests. Significantly, the student captured in the original, iconic photograph, Andrej Tanko, as the public learned his name, was among those detained. Tanko was subsequently officially charged with an alleged attack on a police officer. This development further reignited the virality of the meme and intensified its political symbolism, shifting its narrative from one of silent resistance to one of targeted legal repression.

Visual Metaphors and Satirical Reappropriation: The Red Hand

Especially at the beginning of the protests, the most widely used visual symbol became that of a bloody hand. This image appeared on banners, badges, digital platforms and elsewhere, as a red print of a hand usually on a white background with the text “*Ruke su vam krvave*” (Your hands are bloody). This meme articulates a direct critique of political impunity, condensing public sentiment into defiant fragments. One example includes an imagined dialogue on a meme: “*Ruke su vam krvave. / Pa šta??? Može nam se*” meaning “Your hands are bloody,” followed by the unapologetic response by the government: “So what??? We can get away with it.” This pairing framed the motif of the red middle finger as a symbol of acknowledged corruption and an explicit demonstration of unchecked political power.

Although the motif of the red hand seldom appears as a traditional meme, instead functioning primarily as a symbolic emblem that suggests complicity in recent tragic events, a notable exception has emerged on the X platform. This particular meme, seen in Figure 2, features a captured scene from an official appearance by Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. The image depicts the Prime Minister placing her hand over her heart, with the resulting visual, upon its removal, of a bloody handprint. This highly contextualised visual rhetoric, absent of any textual overlay, powerfully conveys the public sentiment

of citizens supporting student protests regarding the perceived actions of the current Serbian government. As a meme, therefore, it operates as an eloquent, non-verbal political critique.



Figure 2: The “Ana Brnabić and the red handprint” meme is a visual critique of political accountability featuring the Prime Minister.²

For a brief period at the beginning of 2025, the government supporters’ short-lived but memorable response to the student-led protests was a visual, also showing a red hand, but without text, exhibiting a middle finger (Mitkovski 2025). Members of the ruling party catalysed this meme cycle by printing the controversial symbol onto a large canvas and prominently displaying it on an overpass above the highly congested *Autokomanda* interchange in Belgrade, a key traffic nexus during peak hours. This choice of location by SPP members maximised the visibility of the banner while also ensuring its immediate entry into public discourse by students and their supporters, illustrating the interplay between physical political stunts and digital capture. Supporters of the student protests subsequently engaged in direct action, successfully removing the canvas; however, it was quickly re-erected, this time accompanied by “guardians”

2 https://x.com/natasha_crimson/status/1879218585710764460

who physically defended the banner to prevent its further removal. This volatile cycle of posting, removal, and defence highlights the intensely contested nature of both public and digital space during the protests, demonstrating the immediate and reciprocal relationship between physical demonstration and digital meme culture. The banner was instantly filmed and photographed by citizens, transforming the physical object into viral meme source material rapidly disseminated across social media platforms. The photographs of the physical banner were initially disseminated on the X platform, accompanied by the caption: *Čuvari kurca u zimskom periodu* (Guardians of the dick in wintertime), a satirical reappropriation of the title of the acclaimed 1976 Yugoslav film, *Čuvar plaže u zimskom periodu* (Guardian of the beach in wintertime). The original film is a black comedy that explores themes of post-educational disillusionment, unemployment and the collapse of ideals for a young protagonist trying to establish a decent life in Yugoslav society. By substituting the title of the film, the meme employs pastiche and parody to critique the current situation, positioning the “guardians” of the political symbol as characters engaged in an absurd and socially fruitless activity: the defence of a vulgar, defiant gesture. This caption subsequently recurred in later memes, particularly when paired with the image of one of the “guardians” who gave a televised interview on national news. In memes, the individual’s portrait was circulated either with the aforementioned satirical title or placed alongside a picture of the popular succulent plant known as *čuvarkuća* (houseleek, in which the Serbian name reads as “house guardian”). In this instance, the images were juxtaposed with the corresponding labels *čuvarkuća* (house guardian) and *čuvar kurca* (dick guardian), beneath the person’s image, establishing a direct, humorous contrast between a traditional symbol of home and stability and the perceived vulgarity and futility of the political defense of the banner and the regime in general.

Beyond this initial reaction, a type of meme by the protesters emerged that referenced the visual of the red middle finger in another manner: they depicted a hand displaying the middle finger, augmented with added eyeglasses. The frames of the glasses used in the meme clearly alluded to the distinct style worn by President Vučić. Initially, this symbol was created and employed by members of the ruling party, who even utilised it as their social media avatars. However, the motif was quickly reclaimed and repurposed sarcastically by student protesters and their supporters, who began circulating it as meme material on the X platform as a satirical reappropriation of ruling party imagery by student protesters to critique political arrogance.

Other memes of this type included crude overlays that replaced the middle finger with the faces of not only Aleksandar Vučić but also other high-ranking SPP government officials, culminating in highly personalised satire. A notable example involved rendering the middle finger as a literal extension of the body of popular folk singer and television host Jelena Karleuša, a prominent public advocate for the President. This demonstrated the capacity of the meme for granular and culturally specific political criticism.



Figure 3: The “Middle finger with glasses” meme, where the iconic frames associated with President Vučić are added to a government-created symbol.³

Linguistic Subversion: The “Ćaci” and “Ćirica” Phenomena

Memes featuring various references to *ćaci* are, in a way, similar to the type of memes depicting a middle finger analysed above in that they make fun of the supporters of President Vučić and the regime on account of their vulgarity. While in the type of memes with the red middle finger, the supporters of the regime are presented as corrupt and arrogant, the *ćaci* memes mock the protesters’ opponents as being uneducated. As already mentioned, the name *ćaci* originates in the confusion of two letters of the Cyrillic script in the Serbian word denoting “students” on the wall of the school in Novi Sad. Soon after this, another graffiti with misspelled text appeared, also in Cyrillic script, saying “*Piši ćiricom*” instead of “*ćirilicom*,” meaning “write in Cyric” instead of “Cyrillic,” where *Ćirica* can be read as a male nickname, similarly to *Ćaci*. These misspellings become an easy target for laughter and mockery. These memes can be read to generally refer to the pro-government camp being ignorant and illiterate, while in their more context-specific reading, the underlying assumption of these and other similar *ćaci* jokes is that the supporters of the regime, who are thought to be prone to nationalism and traditionalism, cannot use the script they themselves propagate.

Some *ćaci* memes joke on the misspelled graffiti directly. Such memes, for instance, show the photograph of the graffitied wall and a makeshift badge made of paper, saying “1st place for the worst knowledge of the Cyrillic script.” Other memes make fun not only of the misspelled *ćaci* but also the *ćirica* text,

3 <https://x.com/Pedja682/status/1881751518686376111>

personifying Ćaci and Ćirica as two boys, one of whom is holding the other in a position as if he were a pen to write with, with the text “Ćaci writes with Ćirica.” Another meme of this kind, presented in Figure 4, shows two young men in tracksuits squatting next to each other (as a possible reference to the famous “Squatting Slavs in tracksuits” memes) with their names written above them: Ćaci and Ćirica.



Figure 4: The personification of the “Ćaci” and “Ćirica” linguistic errors, using the “Squatting Slavs in tracksuits” template.⁴

Yet other *ćaci* memes make use of intertextual references to various other media, ranging from films, historical figures, tales, cartoons or internationally circulated mimetic templates. As we have seen in the memes thematising the “guardians,” some of these utilise various Serbian cultural references, mainly cinematography in Serbian history. An example of these is Figure 5: a meme whose visual looks like a child’s drawing of Saint Sava, a prince and archbishop dedicated to the promotion of education in Medieval Serbia, and a humbled *ćaci*. The archbishop’s name and the phrase that means “bugger off” are handwritten in Cyrillic in front of the phrase “to school,” with the text making it clear that the educator is sending the young man to obtain some education. The meme thus reappropriates national symbols to frame the student protests as a struggle for enlightenment.

4 <https://x.com/frenkywice9/status/1882905225348198658>



Figure 5: An intertextual meme featuring a stylised depiction of Saint Sava sending the “Ćaci” figure to school.⁵

Other *ćaci* memes use a wider array of references, not restricted to Serbian ones, like the above-mentioned “Squatting Slavs in tracksuits” template. Another one of these is a meme with a visual template showing Little Red Riding Hood and her mother, who advises her “Don’t go through Ćaciland, they are going to steal your pie,” referring to the inhabitants of the camp in front of the Presidency who claimed to have received a lot of in-kind presents from sympathising citizens, including home-made pies. Another one shows the commonly used meme template with three frames from the film *Neverland*: the first shows Johnny Depp asking “Whose [son] are you?,” the second one the boy answering “I am a *ćaci*, sir,” and the third one Depp hugging the boy in an attempt to console him for belonging to that group. What can be said about the *ćaci* memes in general is that the source and target of the humour in them are the government supporters who are portrayed as uneducated, desperate and not living up to the standards they themselves allegedly propagate, thus the memes become a way of unmasking the system.

5 https://x.com/kova_brat/status/1882110603613159855

Digital Personas and Universal Templates: “Brain Before Sleep” and “Doge”

There is another type of memes that makes extensive use of visuals of individuals, most prominently Aleksandar Vučić. This group of memes refers to the first phase of the unrest in the streets and employs the popular template “Brain Before Sleep,” where the original character is replaced by the cartoon drawing of the President. The texts of the memes are related to thoughts imagined causing him sleepless nights. Here too, like in the “guardian” and “ćaci” memes, intertextual references are abundant, thus in the “Brain Before Sleep” memes the issues that cause anxiety to the President range from political betrayal to social unrest: his followers making grammatical errors (a reference to the misspelling of *ćaci*), the Minister of Internal Affairs and other possible traitors in his cabinet, investigative journalists and the news they may publish, his party’s failure at local elections, him losing popularity, being scared to show up in Novi Sad, the student protesters’ nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize and the student movement’s slogan “*Pumpaj!*” (Pump it!). Figure 6 is an illustration of this type of memes, with the text that reads: “Hey, are you asleep? / Yes, shut up / Who do you think is going to betray you first?” In general, what the “Brain Before Sleep” memes aim to achieve is to show the cracks in the system that cause trouble to the government. Also, these memes present the student protest as a serious threat to the government, which is something not visible from the pro-government media.



Figure 6: An adaptation of the “Brain Before Sleep” meme template featuring a caricature of President Vučić.⁶

6 <https://x.com/mrcoslav/status/1883796102555771198>

Another widely circulated group of memes that was created during the blockades using a universally recognisable visual template, like the “Brain Before Sleep” and the *Neverland* memes, is the “Small Dog vs. Big Dog” or “Strong Dog vs. Weak Dog” meme. In this format, the face of Kabosu, the Shiba Inu dog behind the iconic “Doge” meme, was placed on an exceptionally muscular body and juxtaposed with a smaller, weaker Shiba Inu that looked sad or confused. The primary function of this meme template was to draw a distinction between the students and protesters on one side and the government on the other.

For instance, in the meme presented in Figure 7, we can see that the thugs of the ruling party, who, even though they are armed with clubs and ready to apply violence with the aim of dispersing the protest, represent an essentially weak and disoriented force compared to the democratic legitimacy and unity of the student movement. Hence, the text on the “Big Dog” reads *Studentska pešadija*, meaning “Student infantry.”



Figure 7: An application of the “Strong Dog vs. Weak Dog” template. The “Big Dog” represents the “Student Infantry.”⁷

On a more abstract level, this group of memes also makes a statement about the low potency of violence and repression against popular will. While the text on this meme template varied across versions, the overall message remained consistent: it portrayed the protesting students as strong, determined and principled (the “big dog”), while the regime was shown as weak, disoriented or threatened (the “small dog”). Beyond communicating a general message, the “Small Dog vs. Big Dog” meme also served as commentary on everyday events, emphasising the students’ adept responses compared to the government’s poorly executed ones.

7 <https://x.com/BlokadaFon/status/1884900588510401021>

Occasionally, the same meme was used self-reflectively to highlight the changing perception of the opposition public's strength before and during the protests, or before and after the social mobilisation that the protests sparked. One such meme, originating on X, mocked users of the platform prior to the protests as “weak dogs” wasting their energy on trivial arguments, while celebrating the activist spirit that emerged with the student movement as a qualitative and impactful transformation, or the “strong dog,” with the popular protest chant “*Pumpaj!*” written across its chest. Conversely, the perceived power of the regime was analysed through the same meme: it was portrayed as confident and dominant before the protests, but ridiculed during them through the image of a small, crying dog, confused and unable to act with the same assurance as before.

In general though, the meaning and message of the “Small Dog vs. Big Dog” meme is similar to the “Student vs. Progressive” shown in Figure 1, which was based on the face-off between the peaceful and self-assured student and an erratic and insecure supporter of the ruling party. This meme format exemplifies the light-hearted and creative spirit that characterised the protests in Serbia during the winter of 2024–2025. Despite being sparked by a tragic event and state-sponsored violence, the protests carried an undercurrent of optimism. The regime appeared shaken, while the peaceful, persistent demonstrations seemed to pressure it towards concessions and possibly even collapse. In these memes, the visual contrast between the students' strength and the fragility of the regime captured the hopeful and confident mood of the early phase of the movement.

The Affective Dimension of Memes: Animal Mascots and Community Building

There is another type of memes that emerged and featured animals, namely pets or sometimes stuffed animals, serving as mascot figures for the faculties under blockade. Although their content differed from other protest materials, their purpose remained the same: to entertain citizens and encourage them to join the movement. Using approachability and humour, the “pet memes” foster community solidarity and encourage public participation in the protests.

The first such example was an Instagram page run by students who had blocked the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade, dedicated to the black cat Đole living in the courtyard of the building. *Đole u blokadi* (Đole in the blockade) featured photos, announcements and various other memes in which Đole was the main character. As an example, in the meme in Figure 8, Đole is standing next to the Constitutional Court of Serbia, inviting people to attend the protests scheduled to take place in front of that institution.



Figure 8: An example of an animal mascot meme featuring Đole, the resident cat of the Rectorate.⁸

Similarly, several other faculties managed Instagram pages featuring their own mascot animals, such as hamsters, dogs or stuffed animal toys. The content of this type of memes was often humorous but at times serious, aiming to draw followers' attention to specific issues, events and needs of the student movement. Unlike the "Small Dog vs. Big Dog" meme, the memes featuring mascot animals were rooted in the specific context of the student blockades and represented an authentic generational expression. Created in a distinctly original way using memes, the animal mascots represented the "cute side" of the student protests, one associated with youthfulness, warmth and approachability. A powerful narrative about "the future of our children," often misused by the regime, was now being reclaimed by the public to describe students themselves or Serbian youth in general, striving for a better future. Such memes served to humanise the student blockades: these mascots and related memes served as a reminder that the students, while a strong and well-organised social force, were still young people, full of emotions and vitality typical for the chapter of their lives they are in. At the same time, the mascot animals conveyed messages of solidarity, inclusivity and care, traits that before the student protests were not usually attributed to a generation that was often seen as individualistic or socially disengaged in Serbian society. It would be inaccurate to say that this was a calculated marketing strategy by the students; rather, the

8 https://www.instagram.com/p/DEp_yLPCyQM/?hl=ru

spontaneous and playful sharing of online mascot content allowed the broader public to connect with a generation they often misunderstood, seeing them through stereotypes or superficial impressions.

AI-Generated Narratives: Multimodal Mimicry in Video Memes

The complexity of video memes was demonstrated during the student protests, where three distinct videos stood out from citizen-shot footage, identified as being created with the assistance of AI. These video clips are inherently mimetic, demonstrating mutual copying of content and structure. The conceptual foundation for their creation was likely derived from the multitude of mobile phone footage showing students marching through the streets carrying their faculty flags. Each of the three videos depicts students processing while carrying signs bearing the bloody handprint motif, as seen in the meme in Figure 9. Central to each video is a towering, famous personality from history or a figure related to the scientific field, symbolically representing the students' respective faculties. Each figure holds a recognizable emblem of their discipline, e.g., sheet music, test tubes, a judge's gavel, etc. The aim of these memes is to establish a sense of historical continuity and professional pride within the protest movement.



Figure 9: A screenshot from an AI-generated video meme depicting a student march. The image features a towering symbolic figure associated with a specific scientific discipline leading the procession.⁹

9 <https://www.tiktok.com/@aidreamcraft/video/7451564079291976966>

The AI-generated figures are occasionally interspersed with actual footage of the protests. This visual march is underscored by a specific musical accompaniment. For instance, the video primarily featuring the Faculty of Law, is set to *Ne lomite mi bagrenje* (Don't break my locust trees) by the renowned singer and songwriter Đorđe Balašević, containing a line that refers to observing the law. In the video for the Faculty of Pharmacy, students used the song by the rock band Riblja Čorba *Pogledaj dom svoj, anđele* (Look homeward, angel), which is about a devastated homeland and the people who live (t)here. The music of the video of the Faculty of Architecture is *The hanging tree* by James Newton Howard ft. Jennifer Lawrence, from *The Hunger Games* film series, alluding to injustice and rebellion in a dystopian political system.

These AI-generated video memes differ from human-made ones not just in how they are produced, but also in how they create political meaning. While a typical protest video tries to capture the “vibe” of being there, these AI videos use computer-generated precision to build a sense of symbolic authority. Because they look “too perfect” with their massive scale and cinematic style, viewers immediately recognise them as artificial. However, this does not make them less powerful. Instead of being “proof” that someone was there, they act as constructions of legitimacy. They function like digital actors that help define the group's identity, turning a messy, scattered protest into a unified, legendary story that feels bigger than any single person on the street.

To systematically explore the contrast between these AI-generated videos and traditional human-made content, it is essential to look at the difference between the “aesthetic of the real” and “algorithmic monumentalism”. While human-made video memes from the protests are often characterised by an unfiltered and shaky camera perspective that emphasises the authenticity of the moment (Highfield 2016), these AI-assisted videos introduce a high level of curation. Human-made content focuses on the horizontal – the mass of people and immediate action, whereas these AI-generated visuals introduce a vertical dimension, placing historical or scientific “giants” above the crowd to provide a sense of legitimacy and permanence.

From the perspective of media power, this shift is politically significant. While traditional protest videos focus on the collective presence and the scale of the crowd, AI-generated memes do something else: they “package” the protesters' demands within famous cultural and historical symbols. Because of this, their success does not depend on the raw emotion of the moment. Instead, they are designed to fit the logic of platforms like TikTok and Instagram. These applications prefer visual clarity, clear symbols and a coherent story. In this sense, AI memes do not just change how the protest looks, but they also translate it into a format that algorithms are more likely to pick up and promote.

Although the sample size of these AI-generated videos is limited to three instances, they highlight a shift from spontaneous “remix culture” towards a more structured “synthetic activism”. Unlike human-made memes that often use humour to deconstruct the opponent, these AI videos use synthesis to

construct a professional and historical identity. They function less like a quick satirical jab and more like a digital monument (Sarswat, Saxena, and Pal 2025).

Ethical Issues in Pictorial and Video Memes

While being powerful tools for social critique and protest mobilisation, pictorial memes that feature humans also pose certain challenges regarding the ethical issues of their creation and distribution. While memes are often seen as satire or parody and therefore protected under “fair use” (Patel 2013; Adams 2019; European Commission 2021; Nobre 2024), their content can be harmful (Phillips 2015) and reinforce stereotypes and biases (Drakett et al. 2018). An illustration of this is the “Student vs. Progressive” meme, where both the student and the figure who stands in opposition to him lost their anonymity without consenting to it, though in different ways. As noted, the student Andrej Tanko became known after he was arrested and placed under house arrest for allegedly splashing water from a bottle on police officers during the August protests. The person opposing him, in Serbian independent media referred to as M. M., on the other hand, became known as a “negative character,” much like other persons featured on memes that contain photographs as their visual element, featuring *ćaci* or “guardians” who become exposed against their will (Douglas 2016).

This loss of anonymity highlights a central tension in digital activism: the public/private distinction. When individuals engage in confrontation in a public space, they technically forfeit some privacy; however, meme culture transforms a fleeting public moment into a permanent digital legacy. This is exemplified by the *Učinimo ih poznatim* (Let’s make them famous) initiative. This campaign represented a form of digital “wall of shame” where images of SPP supporters were shared with the intent of uncovering and publicly disclosing their identity and personal data. By embedding these photographs within popular meme formats, the visibility of what is essentially a doxing campaign was amplified. Doxing, that is, the malicious public disclosure of private information, constitutes a critical ethical issue because the viral nature of memes facilitates targeted harassment and public shaming (Douglas 2019).

Furthermore, the responsibility of social media platforms remains a grey area. Platforms like X and Instagram often fail to distinguish between satirical political commentary and targeted harassment, allowing viral doxing to bypass standard moderation protocols. Other than private individuals who lost their anonymity because they had been portrayed on memes, there is another group of people shown in the visuals whose treatment also poses ethical dilemmas. Namely, as exposed in the case of the memes showing the middle finger, many visuals utilise images of public figures, which are typically taken without permission from their social media accounts or television appearances. Since the photos that serve as the visuals of these memes are taken in public places and at public events, they do not pose legal issues. However, taken together, instances ranging from copyright infringement and the use of private images to the normalisation of vulgar political critique and targeted doxing campaigns

underscore the persistent and complex ethical problems that routinely accompany the creation and dissemination of memes in the digital sphere.

Video memes, defined as mimetic content incorporating text (Shifman 2014) and often referred to as remixes or mashups (Manovich 2015), intensify the ethical dilemmas associated with static memes. The use of highly regulated material like films and music exacerbates copyright infringement (Chateau 2025), while the frequent appropriation of private or unaware individuals' footage heightens privacy violations. Yet, despite the music choices encroaching upon a grey area of copyright infringement, video memes are notable for the possibility of being an exception to typical ethical pitfalls rather than the rule. Namely, while incorporating well-known historical figures, the visual presentation of the protesters themselves, being either AI-generated or filmed in live footage from the back, demonstrates intentional visual distance. This deliberate choice means the videos do not encroach upon the privacy of the students or participants, serving as an effective example of how AI video memes can, at least partially, navigate and avoid certain key ethical and privacy challenges.

Conclusions

Memes produced and disseminated during the Serbian student-led protest demonstrate that digital artefacts can be more than ephemeral jokes or mere artefacts of online humour, but are embedded in moral, political and legal frameworks. The memes created and circulated during the 2024–2025 student protests in Serbia examined in this article reveal how political humour can become an important mode of mobilisation, civic participation and resistance, and how political goals are possible to achieve through not overtly political aims.

Yet, the analysis of protest memes also demonstrates that digital creativity entails issues of ethics and exposes the ethical ambiguities of memes (Gal-Or 2025). Practices such as doxing transform digital communication into a potential instrument of harassment and public shaming, as seen in the “guardian” and in some *ćaci* memes, but even the benevolent showcasing of iconic figures of the protests, like the case of Andrej Tanko shows, are capable of negatively targeting private individuals. On the other hand, as the red hand and middle finger memes, as well as the “Brain Before Sleep” illustrate, public figures, especially politicians, receive even more negative attention through mimetic exposure.

The emergence of AI-generated video memes deepens these dilemmas. Memes replicate the logic of human creativity while detaching it from responsibility and traceability (Gaba and de Cristofaro 2025; Gal-Or 2025). Thus, their reliance on unlicensed material, composite likenesses and algorithmic opacity undermines conventional notions of authorship and copyright. In line with these, but on a smaller scale, the AI-generated protest videos analysed in this article avoided privacy violations by anonymising participants as much as possible.

Ultimately, memes highlight the tension between creative expression and intellectual property rights in the digital age. It is an ethical challenge of meme culture not to reproduce the injustices these digital expressions seek to resist.

Digital expressions like memes, both videos and pictorial ones, should thus be used reflexively and embrace their democratising potential. Their capacity to mobilise for protests and foster solidarity also makes them sites of ethical tension between empowerment and harm, critique and mockery, anonymity and exposure. The Serbian protest memes illustrate that their power to critique authority and mobilise rests on solidarity and creativity. These, however, rest upon the conscientious use of social media content, including memes. While, like other means of political humour, they strive to create an in-group of like-minded people who interpret it in the same manner, equally important is the safeguarding of their identities and precautions against them being targeted.

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Novo lice mimova u studentskim protestima u Srbiji i njihove etičke implikacije

Apstrakt

Cilj ovog rada je istraživanje internet mimova, nastalih i deljenih od strane studenata i građana, koji su učestvovali na protestima u Srbiji. Prikupljeni su mimovi sa platformi X i Instagram, analizirana je njihova vizuelna forma i sadržaj, sa posebnim osvrtom na teme koje se ponavljaju. Na osnovu te analize, u radu se razmatra šest tipova slikovnih i jedan tip video mima specifičnih za kontekst srpskih studentskih protesta. Rad istražuje značenja koja nose mimovi nastali i distribuirani tokom protesta, tumačeći ih kao primere ostvarivanja političkih ciljeva nepolitičkim sredstvima. Dodatno, rad preispituje etičke implikacije tradicionalnih slikovnih mimova, kao i onih generisanih pomoću veštačke inteligencije. Centralne teme kojima se ovaj rad bavi su protestna mobilizacija, uloga humora, digitalna etika i uticaj veštačke inteligencije.

Ključne reči: studentski protesti, Srbija, internet mimovi, humor, digitalni aktivizam, protestna mobilizacija, etika društvenih medija

