



**BCSP** Belgrade Centre  
for Security Policy

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RESEARCH REPORT / 7

# EXTREMISM FROM ABOVE: SERBIA'S RULING PARTY AS THE PRINCIPAL ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT EXTREMIST ACTOR

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## Summary

In the past decade, European countries have witnessed a rise in anti-establishment extremism (AEE), which challenges the modern democratic order and offers authoritarian modes of governance as a “solution” to consecutive, overlapping crises. Unlike most European states – where AEE is primarily carried by marginal movements, fringe actors, or parties outside government, or at most minor coalition partners – in Serbia the main bearer of AEE is the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which has held power continuously for thirteen years. Serbian Progressive Party rose to power on rhetoric centred on democracy, the rule of law, and EU integration, principles also formalised in its Statute, but quickly became the key anti-system actor dismantling Serbia’s institutions and constitutional order from within and from above. Although it still publicly advocates democratic principles and the rule of law, the ruling party in practice displays all core elements of AEE: (1) The delegitimization and marginalization of state institutions and the constitutional system of Serbia, along with the creation of a parallel, extra-institutional system of governing the state and society (the so-called ‘silent coup’), which undermines the rule of law and the separation of powers as defined by the Constitution; (2) a nationalist-authoritarian ideological framework – the “Serbian World” – which homogenises society, delegitimises pluralism, and promotes political unity of the Serbian people under the leadership of Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić; (3) the legitimisation of hostile and violent acts against dissenters through conspiracy theories about “colour revolutions,” “foreign mercenaries,” “coup attempts,” “diversion,” and “terrorism”; (4) the paramilitary organisation of “loyalists,” formations with features of secret and paramilitary groups, composed of criminals, hooligans, and extremists loyal to the President; (5) hate speech and systematic violence perpetrated by the ruling party and its officials against dissenters; (6) the trivialisation of violence and the absolution of perpetrators through presidential pardons. The text provides an analytical overview of these patterns and their consequences for Serbia’s democratic order.

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, a significant rise in anti-establishment extremism (AEE) has been recorded in Western countries,<sup>1</sup> as an expression of deep-seated citizen dissatisfaction with how the political establishment and the state institutions have responded to a series of consecutive crises – from economic and migration crises to the one caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Research from 2023 showed that nearly one-third of EU citizens voted for anti-system parties.<sup>2</sup> This trend is also present in Serbia, where the *We – Voice of the People* movement, founded just six months before the elections, won approximately 5% of the vote in the 2023 parliamentary elections.<sup>3</sup> The success of this nascent movement in the elections is not, in and of itself, a peculiarity that should attract much attention. What sets Serbia apart from other European countries is the fact that the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) is the main bearer of the anti-establishment extremism, even though it nominally advocates for EU membership, rule of law, and democracy. Whilst in EU countries, AEE movements and parties are mainly on the political margins, in opposition, or, at best, part of minority governments, in Serbia, an AEE party has continuously held absolute power for 13 years.

An additional specificity of Serbia lies in the fact that neither external observers nor parts of the domestic public recognize the SNS as an AEE actor, since it declaratively – through its public appearances and Statute – advocates for constitutionalism, legality, social justice, democracy, and European integration.<sup>4</sup> However, in practice, SNS exhibits patterns of behavior characteristic of an anti-establishment extremist movement. The following text will provide a detailed analysis and explanation of why SNS is an anti-system extremist actor. First, the origins of the party will be briefly explained, followed by the ideological framework it has promoted over the past five years and the ways in which its actions undermine the democratic order and the rule of law. This work focuses on the period of November 1, 2024 to November 1, 2025, during which the extremist practises and authoritarian patterns of behaviour of the ruling party had become clearly visible in public and political spheres. For the purposes of better understanding the context and genesis of the analysed processes, the introductory section reviews the events preceding the fall of the canopy in Novi Sad. The analysis is based on available research reports, analytical studies, and relevant media sources.

## — *The fall of the canopy exposed the ruling party*

On November 1, 2024, the concrete canopy of Novi Sad's Railway Station collapsed, killing sixteen people and injuring dozens of citizens. Independent analyses have shown that the tragedy is a consequence of a deeply rooted systemic and political corruption: load-bearing cables were not adequately reconstructed, whilst the entire project was grossly overpriced and executed without actual oversight. This event has exposed the extent to which SNS has undermined the state institutions, as well as the connections of the party and state leadership with the crime which, under SNS rule, has gone more than a decade with impunity.<sup>5</sup> The tragedy became a catalyst for mass student and civic protests across the country – movements which demand political and legal accountability, as well as a return to the respect for Serbia's Constitution and laws. The government's response has been repressive: police and paramilitary forces have been deployed, pressure and disinformation campaigns and targeting of protesters and their families were carried out, and, instead of accountability, conspiracy theories were promoted.

## What is Anti-Establishment Extremism?

AEE is not a single ideology nor movement, but a framework which encompasses a diverse set of ideas, groups, and actors, united by dissatisfaction with the existing social order. Essentially, AEE expresses resistance toward individuals, groups, institutions, structures, and norms which it deems responsible for social crises and deviations. However, not every critique of the system is an expression of anti-establishment extremism.<sup>6</sup> Legitimate criticism of the system exists when it is based on facts, rather than on misinformation, half-truths, or conspiracy theories, and when it has been directed towards improving the existing system without endangering the achieved level of human rights and freedoms, democracy, security, rule of law, and social justice.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, AEE, through its actions and narratives, delegitimises and undermines the democratic order, calling for its replacement with a system that represents a regression from the contemporary democratic principles. In this context, AEE often idealises the “good old days” – a mythical and fabricated past state which stands in opposition to current values and democratic principles. Individuals and groups it deems responsible for the poor state of society are labelled as “enemies” in emotionally charged messages by AEE, which can foster a sense of threat among its followers and a willingness to resort to violence, even without an explicit call for it.<sup>8</sup> The way in which external and internal “enemies” harm the order AEE aspires to, AEE explains through numerous implausible conspiracy theories. Therefore, the defining characteristics of AEE are its opposition to the modern democratic order and the rule of law, its struggle to replace them with a system justified by disinformation and conspiracy theories, the

incitement of violence through emotionally charged, anti-system narratives, as well as overt violence against those with differing views.

### — *Democratic order*

The democratic order is the foundation of modern society, based on the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights. It has two dimensions: the horizontal – which entails the separation of powers into legislative, executive, and judicial branches, thereby ensuring a system of checks and balances, as well as relationships among citizens founded on openness and mutual respect; and the vertical – which regulates the relationship between the state and citizens through the legitimacy of authority, the protection of rights, trust in institutions, and the role of media and science. Together, both dimensions prevent authoritarianism and ensure lawful, democratic, and transparent governance.<sup>9</sup>

## SNS - Anti-Western Nationalists (Again) in Power

In order to understand how a party which nominally advocates for democracy and rule of law, as well as Serbia's EU membership, becomes the main anti-system extremist force in Serbia, it is important to further familiarise oneself with the origins of SNS, as well as the methods by which it governs the country. Namely, SNS was founded by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić in 2008, two men who were for many years high-ranking officials of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), an ultranationalist party and the most important pro-Kremlin political actor in Serbia for two decades.<sup>10</sup> From 1998 to 1999, during the armed conflict in Kosovo and the NATO bombings of Serbia, Vučić served as the Minister of Information, during which time he had signed the notorious Law on Public Information.<sup>11</sup> That law has been remembered for its draconian punishments for the media and the closure of that media which was critical of the autocratic regime of Slobodan Milošević.<sup>12</sup> Nikolić and Vučić left SRS and founded SNS because they realised that the existing openly nationalistic politics cannot attract the sufficient support of the voters and thus that the western states would never support it. Because of this, Nikolić and Vučić adopted a more pragmatic approach, one which was focused on the struggle against crime and corruption, for the existence of which they blamed the democratic authorities which governed Serbia between 2000 and 2012. Unlike SRS, SNS also accepted the policy of Serbia's accession to the EU.

However, after the early parliamentary elections of 2014, at which SNS secured an absolute majority in the parliament, democratic reforms began to stagnate, and Vučić's style of governing began increasingly to resemble that of undemocratic regimes, such as the ones in Russia under Vladimir Putin and the one in Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko. By 2017, SNS had taken control of the key levers of state power, using them now for private interests and stifling the critical voices and political opposition, and thus erasing the division of power and undermining the constitutionality and rule of

law. Media has fallen under the absolute control of the government.<sup>13</sup> Persons close to the government lead six television channels with national coverage in Serbia (*RTS 1, RTS 2, TV Pink, Happy TV, TV B92, TV Prva*). There exist only two channels which are critical of the current government (*N1 and Nova S*), but they lack national coverage,<sup>14</sup> instead broadcasting their programmes only through cable operators, reaching at most a third of Serbian citizens.<sup>15</sup> In terms of foreign policy, Serbia has not aligned itself with the EU's key positions regarding Russia – such as the condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the introducing sanctions against Russia.<sup>16</sup>

The SNS government continues to formally advocate for the respect of democracy and rule of law, and therefore Serbia's accession to the EU, but, in practice, does the opposite, undermining democracy and rule of law, promoting nationalistic ideas, linking itself to authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China. Experts agree that the declarative commitment of the government to the EU, democracy, and rule of law is only a mask which covers the deep-seated scorn that it and Aleksandar Vučić feel towards those values.<sup>17</sup> The system of rule which SNS has established in the past 13 years of governing does not preserve the system defined by the Constitution and laws of Serbia, but rather relies upon informal connections and the relations of loyalty to the President of Serbia. In this system, what matters most is who is the closest to the President of the Republic and what tasks has he delegated upon them, rather than which formal position one might hold and what duties and authorities one has based upon it. That is why political scientists and lawyers have dubbed this state a "silent coup d'état".<sup>18</sup>

### — *Serbia in 2023 – the largest fall in democracy in ten years*

According to a 2024 report by Freedom House, Serbia has recorded the largest fall of democracy in the last 10 years, which is also the largest fall of democracy in 2023 amongst 29 transitional states in Europe and Asia which this organisation has been monitoring for years. The main reasons behind this historic fall are the significant irregularities and cheating before, during, and after the elections in late 2023, comprehensive control of media space by the government through which Vučić's regime is spreading total propaganda, as well as the rising number of attacks on journalists who are critical of the government.<sup>19</sup> This trend has continued in the following year as well.<sup>20</sup>

## A Silent Coup D'État: Anti-Constitutional Actions of the President of the Republic

One of the important features of anti-establishment extremism is dissatisfaction with the existing system embodied in the constitution, laws, i.e., governing regulations and rules of behavior in a given society. Hence, the anti-system extremists call for non-compliance with those norms and rules, and strive to impose different rules of behavior and ultimately establish a new system of organization and management. In Serbia, the most visible example of this is the behaviour of the President of the Republic,

Aleksandar Vučić, who routinely, almost every day, exceeds his competences and powers, thereby violating the Constitution, laws and other regulations of Serbia. Law faculty professor and former judge of the Constitutional Court of Serbia Svetozar Čiplić pointed out as early as 2021 that Aleksandar Vučić has violated the Constitution hundreds of times since taking office as president of Serbia. He does it daily, permanently, by taking over jobs, especially of the Government, and continuously interfering in the work of judges and prosecutors.<sup>21</sup> Today, the situation is many times worse in this regard.

What is most worrying is the fact that by way of massive and regular violation of the Constitution, Vučić established a new, parallel system of managing political, social and economic life in Serbia. Career judge Gordana Vidojković says that the Constitution of Serbia is a dead letter on paper, and that the normatively proclaimed, democratic system does not exist in reality but resembles an Eastern despotism.<sup>22</sup> The system established by the President of the Republic is in actuality an informal system of governance that functions through people who are loyal to him. For the functioning of this system, it is not as important which formal function the loyalists perform, but how close they are to the president and what role he has assigned to them in his informal management system.

For years, Aleksandar Vučić violated Article 115 of the Constitution of Serbia, which explicitly prohibits the President of the Republic from holding any other public office. His daily interference in the responsibilities of other officials and public servants led to perverse and asymmetric situations: decisions were made by him personally, whilst formal responsibility fell on those whose responsibilities he arbitrarily usurped.<sup>23</sup> Formal positions and state institutions serve loyalists as formal cover, protection and source of resources to support and finance their activities. An important feature of this system is the strong coupling of state institutions, primarily security institutions, with para-political, para-security and criminal actors loyal to the regime.<sup>24</sup> The ruling order thus becomes the exact opposite of the constitutional order, which is why experts like Mark Swilling call this disintegration of the constitutional order the “politics of destruction” and a “silent coup d’état”.<sup>25</sup>

## Delegitimisation and Criminalisation of State Institutions

An important part of unconstitutional actions and the establishment of a parallel, informal system of governance in Serbia is the delegitimization of the legitimate work of state institutions in Serbia, which has come from the very top of the ruling party and the executive branch, primarily from President Aleksandar Vučić. He has, for example, claimed that Serbia had faced an organised attempt at a “genuine coup d’état”, allegedly involving almost all state institutions – from the public broadcaster to the police and the armed forces. According to him, attempts at destabilisation were

taking place in kindergartens, schools, healthcare institutions, and energy facilities, “not to mention the police,” as he particularly emphasised.<sup>26</sup> Vučić has also levelled the gravest accusations against judicial authorities: “I’m telling you that you are a corrupt gang in the prosecutor’s offices, in most of them, and that you have as many corrupt judges under your control as you need.”<sup>27</sup> The Special Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime, which is handling the case concerning the collapsed canopy, has been a particular target.

The narrative portraying alleged criminals within state institutions who, under foreign influence, seek a violent change of power is further amplified by ruling party officials and pro-government national broadcasters.<sup>28</sup> The ruling party’s campaign against its own institutions is profoundly harmful: its reach is wide, and public trust in these institutions has long been severely eroded.<sup>29</sup> This reinforces the impression that the entire institutional democratic system has been compromised, criminalised, and made susceptible to outside interests. The immediate purpose of these attacks is to legitimise an informal, unconstitutional, and unlawful system of decision-making and governance concentrated in the hands of the ruling party leader and close associates. All this occurs in parallel with the regime’s efforts to (illegally) take full control of institutions by installing loyalists who will disregard constitutional and legal obligations and operate solely in line with the interests of the party leadership.

## “Serbian World” – Nationalist Ideology of the Ruling Party

Serbia’s ever-growing regression under the leadership of SNS in fields of democracy and rule of law, reliance on informal governance, and the freeze in EU integration progress, has been accompanied by SNS turning to nationalistic messages and concepts, such as the “Serbian World”. Although this term has existed for a long time in nationalistic circles in Serbia, the “Serbian World” begins to amass the attention of domestic and regional public only in 2020, when Aleksandar Vulin, the then Minister of Defence in Serbia and close associate of Aleksandar Vučić, the President of the Republic, began to use it commonly in public. For example, Vulin once stated that he hopes that President Aleksandar Vučić is creating a “Serbian World” and that Serbs have a right to be a politically unique people, and that he is the President of all Serbs, and that Belgrade should be the centre of their gathering. Later, he clarified that the “Serbian World” solves the national question of Serbs, prevents the creation of a “Greater Albania” and the genocide of the Serbian people, stressing that the process of unification began thanks to Vučić and that it is unstoppable.<sup>30</sup>

The public use of the term “Serbian World” by Serbian state officials has raised fears in neighbouring countries that it could be a sign of a revival of the idea of a “Greater Serbia”, but now with strong Russian support.<sup>31</sup> Namely, the “Serbian World” is very similar to the “Russian World” advocated by Putin’s regime. These are two almost identical projects built on the frustrations of nationalists in Russia and Serbia over the loss of

influence and the collapse of the Soviet Union, or rather the collapse of Yugoslavia.<sup>32</sup> Both concepts imply the unification of Serbs/Russians within the same cultural, media, and political space under one strong leader. Balkan security expert Ivana Stradner concludes that the “Serbian World” and the All-Serbian Assembly clearly indicate that Serbia in 2024 resembles the Russia of ten years ago.<sup>33</sup>

In recent years, the concept of the “Serbian World” has grown from an idea into concrete political, cultural and institutional practices, culminating in the All-Serbian Assembly in Belgrade in 2024. Since 2013, the regular meetings of the government of Serbia and Republika Srpska have taken on a para-institutional character, through joint projects and the framework of identity strengthening. Media such as *RTS*, *Politika*, *RTRS* and *Sputnjik Srbija* create a narrative of a unique “Serbian identity space”. A similar process is taking place in Montenegro through support for pro-Serbian parties. Joint commemorations, such as the Day of Remembrance of the Mass Victims of Serbs in the “Storm” military operation during 1990’s war and the Jasenovac Ustasha camp of the pro-Nazi Croatian regime during WWII, additionally strengthen symbolic unity through militarised tones and the presence of church and state structures. Through these events, a sense of threat is additionally produced among the citizens of the Serbian nationality, which then encourages the “tightening of ranks” and emphasises the need for national unity instead of pluralism and internal differences. In such an environment, any criticism of the government becomes unwelcome and is interpreted as an act of betrayal or support of national interests. In this way, this concept serves as an ideological basis for the ruling party’s attacks on political and social dissidents, presenting them as “enemies”, “foreign mercenaries” or “state destroyers”. At the same time, tabloid media provides an alibi for targeting and spreading hate speech against critics of the regime, thereby further narrowing the space for free and democratic expression.

## Conspiracy Theories by the Ruling Party

The nationalist-authoritarian pattern is fertile ground for a wide range of conspiracy theories that the regime systematically uses to erode the credibility and legitimacy of state institutions, experts, and science, aspiring to establish their legitimacy on emotional reactions of the citizens pushed to action by half-truths and lies crafted within the conspiracy theories.<sup>34</sup> In the past five years, but especially so after the deaths of 16 people in Novi Sad, the governing party in Serbia, faced with falling ratings and the erosion of its legitimacy, as well as that of its officials, has come to use conspiracy theories as a mechanism of political defence but also as a means of attacking dissenters, seeing as it is incapable of offering answers in a rational and institutional manner to the amassed social and economic issues. One of the most frequent and long-lived conspiracy theories promoted by the governing structure is one which centres on the work of non-government organisations, independent media, civil society, and opposition

parties as “the protracted arms of foreign interests”, primarily the West, the EU, and the USA. As part of this narrative, different social processes – from protests to media reports – are interpreted as a wider plan to destabilise the country, “hybrid warfare”,<sup>35</sup> and “colour revolution”.<sup>36</sup>

Unto the central thread of this conspiracy theory is attached an entire series of claims which further “argue” and bolster it. It is within this context that claims of alleged attempts of assassinating the President of the Republic frequently appear, which he himself announced in his speeches or which were “discovered” by pro-regime media. The number of such cases has long ago reached double digits. At the same time, the pro-regime media and party officials continuously warn of alleged attempted coups d’état and of the violent undermining of the constitutional order, as attempted, according to their claims, by foreign intelligence agencies, primarily those of the West and from neighbouring Croatia.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most extreme and most toxic conspiracy theories revolves around the claim that the fall of the canopy of the train station in Novi Sad was the result of intentional sabotage and a terrorist attack, and not the consequence of systemic corruption and negligence.<sup>38</sup> This narrative has been intensely promulgated via pro-regime media and social media, where actors close to the government have speculated on a possible “diversion” without any material proof or confirmations produced through investigations.<sup>39</sup> Further legitimacy was provided by statements made by government officials, amongst which the most explicit one was made by the President of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić, who said that she is “convinced” that the canopy of the train station in Novi Sad “did not collapse accidentally” and that she believes that it is a “planned diversion” or, rather, the “beginning of a colour revolution”.<sup>40</sup> Other government officials, such as the President of the Republic and the parliamentarian Vladimir Đukanović, were not so explicit in their endorsements but did, in their statements, clearly insinuate that the fall of the canopy was a result of diversion, in which manner they additionally encouraged and promoted conspiracy theories in the public space.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to these general claims, specific accusations of sabotage as the cause of the fall of the canopy have also appeared in the public. The pro-regime media claimed that the canopy was collapsed with the help of a tool which produces vibrations of specific frequencies, whilst at the same time insinuations that opposition politician Miša Bačulov was involved in the collapse were also being spread, due to the fact that the cameras at the station recorded him passing by just before it collapsed.<sup>42</sup> In the spread of such insinuations were also actively involved even the highest government officials, as well as prominent members of the governing party, further cementing the narrative of an alleged sabotage. It was they who insisted on this “exclusive” information, despite the fact that Bačulov claimed after the collapse that he had passed through and that he himself could have been a victim as well.

By the promulgation of and steadfast insistence upon conspiracy theories, the governing party aspires to redirect their answerability unto actors who criticise the party and call for accountability. The core issue of such a practice, however, lies in the fact that by spreading allegations of undermining the state, diversions, and terrorism, the government and that media which is close to it garner an atmosphere of fear, hate, and intolerance of those who represent those who partake in the “conspiracy”. In this way, conspiracy theories grow into tools of political stigmatisation and legitimisation of verbal – and potentially physical – violence on those citizens and organisations critical [of the regime]. Conspiracy theories are thus an important factor that encourages supporters of the extremist movement to move from words to actions.

## Hate Speech Aimed at Critics of the Regime

An integral part of any violent extremism is the targeting, insulting, dehumanising, and criminalising of dissenters and political opponents, followed by hate speech aimed against them. These messages and narratives usually precede the physical attacks on opponents, serving to incite and legitimise them. There are almost none who hold the highest public offices in Serbia who have not sent such messages and promoted such narratives as relating to the students and citizens protesting against the government. Aleksandar Vučić, the President of the Republic, Ana Brnabić, the President of the Assembly, Miloš Vučević, the former Prime Minister and the now President of the ruling SNS, and Vladimir Đukanović, lawyer and official of SNS, all took the lead in this. They labelled the protesting students and citizens, as well as opposition politicians, as “extremists”, “terrorists”,<sup>43</sup> “blockaders”, “people who create chaos”, “people who are destroying Serbia”, “foreign mercenaries” and “a good-for-nothings”,<sup>44</sup> while they declared the protests the dirtiest “colour revolution” in the history of humanity and claimed that foreign countries had invested three billion Euros towards regime change of the Serbian government.<sup>45</sup>

### — *Hunger strike of grieving mother – target of attacks and hate speech*

Dijana Hrka, the mother of one of the victims killed in the collapse of the Novi Sad canopy, began a hunger strike in early November, demanding truth and accountability for the death of her child and the other victims. Instead of compassion and dialogue, the authorities responded with a campaign of hate speech – the highest officials and pro-government media labelled her a “foreign mercenary” and a “destroyer of the state”, attempting to discredit her act of desperate protest. During the strike, loyalists spent days playing offensive songs that mocked the death of her son, such as “Pošla majka sina da potraži” [“A mother went to look for her son”], with the aim of humiliating her and breaking her psychologically. At the same time, regime supporters from the paramilitary camp (the so-called “Ćacilend”) physically attacked citizens who came to

support her, while the police failed to intervene, thereby revealing the complete moral degradation of the authorities and their readiness to use violence and humiliation to silence even those who mourn.<sup>46</sup>

At the beginning of the student protests, at a meeting of his supporters, the President of Serbia told the protesting students and citizens: “And you who organized an attempt at a colour revolution in Serbia, I will destroy you in the whole world...”<sup>47</sup> He later said of the students: “You are not dealing with irresponsible and unserious people, but rather with people who wish this country, state, and people ill, but that shall not be allowed”.<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Đukanović went even further, making a call to action against the students: “A fight must be waged against the anarcho-terrorists, the false communist intellectuals, the pseudo elites which rage across Serbia with anti-Serbian attitudes. It is time to stand in the way of such social dregs. In every place and at every step. Foremost in every discussion and, God forbid, physically, if we must”.<sup>49</sup>

### — *The pattern: from hate speech to physical attacks*

In most verbal and physical attacks on opponents of the current government, the pattern is almost the same: the top state and party officials begin, pro-regime media intensify, and party loyalists carry out the attack.

Those holding the highest public offices, as well as SNS officials, regularly direct hate speech towards the media as well. The President of the Republic went so far as to label the work of news channels *N1* and *Nova* as “terrorism”.<sup>50</sup> A target of his attacks was also a journalist from the state-owned *RTS*, who was reporting on the protests in Niš – due to the fact that reporting was not to the President’s liking, he called her an “imbecile”.<sup>51</sup> Siniša Vučinić, member of SNS’ Central Committee, aimed insults and slander at the editorial offices of *N1*, *Nova*, *Danas*, and *Vreme*, as well as at the multi-awarded *Vreme* journalist Filip Švarn. In these announcements, Vučinić labeled the aforementioned newsrooms as “terrorist and fascist media” which “promote and incite evil”, proceeding to call Švarn a “proven Ustasha and pedophile” and called for “resistance against the blockaders and the pro-NATO opposition”, calling them “traitors of the Serbian people, potential murderers, Ustasha, and terrorists”.<sup>52</sup> The President of the Republic did not hesitate to also target the Members of the European Parliament who attended a protest in Novi Sad, whom he called “scum” 14 times in a single address: “Go destroy your own countries. Do not destroy Serbia, you scum. And you’re not even scum, you’re worse than that...”<sup>53</sup>

### — *Intimidation of dissenters through fake bomb threats*

Ahead of a major commemorative gathering marking the anniversary of the deaths of 16 people in the Novi Sad canopy collapse, “Srbijavoz” announced that, due to an anonymous bomb threat against all trains and railway lines, it was suspending rail traffic across the country. This is already the third time that a mass bomb alert has occurred on the eve of large commemorative or protest

gatherings, which provides reasonable grounds to assume that loyalists of the ruling party are using false bomb threats both to prevent people from the rest of the country from attending such events and to intimidate citizens with the prospect of possible bomb attacks.<sup>54</sup>

## Physical Attacks Incited by Hate Speech

Research by the Media Diversity Institute – Western Balkans shows that the government systematically uses hate speech to deal with opponents, which simultaneously encourages and normalises physical violence.<sup>55</sup> The pro-regime media took messages and narratives of hate speech, further amplifying them in order to cause a strong negative emotional reaction in the audience towards students and citizens protesting against the government.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, these media continuously advocate for the harsh reactions and repressive measures imposed upon the students. Given that over 60% of citizens trust the pro-regime media,<sup>57</sup> the consequences of such negative reporting have naturally spilled over into the real world. Numerous verbal and physical attacks were recorded against the protesters and members of the media, as incited by the hate speech perpetuated by the government and aligned media. The knife attack on Natalija Jovanović, the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, is the one most well-known to the public. The perpetrator told the court that she was under the influence of the content of the *Informer* channel, which, as she put it, she “had watched a thousand times”.<sup>58</sup>

After the President had labelled the journalists of *N1* and *Nova* as “terrorists”, a significant growth in attacks on journalists of this media was recorded. The organisation *Reporters Without Borders* documented 34 physical attacks on media professionals reporting on the protests in the period lasting less than two months. This number grew past the total yearly data on physical attacks recorded in Serbia from at least 2020 onward. One of the most violent attacks on Serbian journalists during the summer occurred on the 13<sup>th</sup> of August. Whilst reporting from a protest in front of the local SNS headquarters in Novi Sad, chief editor of the portal *Razglas*, Žarko Bogosavljević, and a journalist from *Novi Sad 192*, Nikola Bilić, were attacked and beaten with metal pipes by supporters of SNS.<sup>59</sup>

Whilst reporting from a protest, an older man physically attacked Verica Marinčić, editor of *IN Media*, based in Inđija, as well as her colleague Miodrag Blečić; he struck the phone out of their hands and threatened them, calling them “Ustashas”. It has become commonplace for members of the ruling party and the proregime media to label protesting students and citizens “Ustashas”.<sup>60</sup> Ustashas committed numerous atrocities and genocides against the Serbian people on the territory of the Nazi Independent State of Croatia during World War II and thus, by labelling somebody an Ustasha in Serbia, one can cause great negative emotions in a great number of people.

The examples showcased here represent only the most characteristic examples of the impact of hate speech on physical violence.

Similarly numerous are the verbal attacks on independent journalists and media, which have only increased in frequency, commonality, and aggression as officials of the governing party have intensified their hate speech aimed at dissenters and critical media. We list only the most drastic examples of attacks on *N1* via messages. One of the messages stated: “We must, as quickly as possible, march on N1 and kill this scum, and burn it to the ground”, whilst another said: “You NDH<sup>61</sup> sandwichers should be shot”. The most disturbing threat recommends that “... as an obvious organiser of this attempt at a civil war, all should be murdered, together with your families, because you’re not even animals but monsters, whose seed ought to be crushed at the very root!”<sup>62</sup>

## Paramilitary Organizing of the Regime

### “Loyalists” – Extremist, Pro-Russian Faction of the Governing Party

The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, notified the public in late 2024 that a firm faction exists within SNS, whom he labelled as “loyalists”. According to his own words, this group presents the “guardians of the flame” and consists of approximately 17,000 members, who have symbolically made a blood oath of loyalty to the current government. Vučić describes them as overwhelmingly pro-Russian: “When I say pro-Russian, I mean that they are for a free and independent Serbia, but, if they must pick, they will always be more pro-Russian, and especially against those who would conduct a colour revolution”.<sup>63</sup> According to his explanation, loyalists are strongly against “the powers which come from the Western intelligence sector”.<sup>64</sup>

This faction, according to the President, is ready to call for the accountability of every member who has, since 1<sup>st</sup> of November – the date when the collapse of the canopy of the main train station in Novi Sad killed sixteen people – betrayed the party principles. The faction largely consists of men of firm political beliefs, whose level of radicalisation is of such that even the President labels them as an extreme faction. Amongst them, as Vučić noted, are his brother, Andrej, and another member of his family.<sup>65</sup> As described by Vučić, these loyalists do not bear only the marks of extremists, but, more importantly, the characteristics of a secret and paramilitary organisation. Article 55, paragraph 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia explicitly states that “secret and paramilitary organisations are forbidden”.<sup>66</sup> Despite this, neither the police nor the prosecutor have started any sort of investigation into this faction.

## Loyalist Paramilitary of the President of the Republic

Amongst the 17,000 loyalists, there are people of different profiles and roles, who all together enable the survival of Aleksandar Vučić and SNS as the government. The most visible part, however, of the loyalists consist of the individuals ready to utilise different forms of violence against the opponents of the regime. On the streets, they are recognisable by their black baseball caps and clothes, with masks which hide [their faces and] their identities. Most are members of criminal and hooligan structures, as well as members of martial arts clubs. Investigative journalists have determined that these loyalists are organised into a few main groups.<sup>67</sup> One of these groups is led by Milan Radoičić, the yearslong de facto leader of the north of Kosovo, known for his close ties to the highest echelon of the government. Proceedings and investigations against him are currently being conducted for a number of serious criminal acts, amongst which are the murder of the opposition politician Oliver Ivanović and the armed attack in Kosovo during which four people died, and which had nearly turned into a serious armed conflict between Serbia and Kosovo.<sup>68</sup>

### — *Failed proposition to ban hooligan groups*

In 2009, Slobodan Radovanović, the then Public Prosecutor of the Republic (RJT), filed a proposal to ban the work and activities of fourteen fan subgroups and to erase them from the register, stating that their work is “aimed at the violent undermining of the constitutional order, violation of guaranteed human and minority rights, and the incitement of racial, national, and religious hate”. Members of those groups were actively involved in criminal acts.<sup>69</sup> The proposal of the RJT failed, however, most likely, because of the strong connections of those groups to the Serbian Radical Party, which was then the strongest opposition party. From SRS, there came SNS, which has kept those ties with hooligan structures to this day.<sup>70</sup> Leaders of those very groups have been frequently seen at rallies recently organised in support of President Vučić.<sup>71</sup>

The second group is led by Luka Bojović, a criminal linked to the Zemun clan, whose members participated in the murder of the first democratic Prime Minister of Serbia, Zoran Đinđić, in 2003. Bojović is accused of murders, attempted murders, and organised crime in several countries, and nowadays he is linked to the Montenegrin Škaljar clan. The third group is led by the Hoffman brothers, namely Miljan and Ljuban Vidović, known for their videos of arrogant and violent behavior, as well as for accusations of abuse, torture and brutal violence. The fourth group is led by Vladimir Mandić, a former handball player and now controversial businessman associated with the illegal financing of political parties in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as with numerous election manipulations. Also connected to Mandić is a group led by Dane Šijan, which organises loyalists through the private security firm *T&M Group Solutions*. Journalists reported that violent SNS loyalists often wore the uniforms of security firms *Sparta*

*Security and Atlas Security*.<sup>72</sup> Finally, according to some reports, the network of loyalists in Novi Sad is organised by Bojan Terzin, the godfather of SNS president Miloš Vučević, and Damir Zobenica, a high official of that party.<sup>73</sup>

These groups of violent loyalists are those most visible to the public because they regularly participate in the attacks upon students and demonstrators, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section. They operate under the political command of the ruling party and structures close to it, with the aim of breaking up protests, causing incidents, and intimidating participants and critics of the regime. Even though many of them belong to criminal and hooligan circles, they function as an instrument of the regime in dealing with opponents of the government, thus forming an organized and violent extremist formation together.

### — *Paramilitary loyalist camp between the Presidency and the National Assembly*

Even before the outbreak of mass and long-lasting protests caused by the collapse of the canopy in Novi Sad, loyalist groups were already active in the intimidation and physical attacks on political dissidents. The culmination of their mass and public activity took place at the beginning of March, when in the Pionirski Park – the space between the Presidency and the National Assembly buildings – they erected dozens of tents and established a camp. Journalistic reports indicated that some participants were equipped with weapons, as well as with military and police equipment, which further strengthened the public's belief concerning the militarised character of this gathering.<sup>74</sup> In such circumstances, Pionirski Park was thus effectively transformed into a paramilitary camp, with controlled access and infrastructure that allowed for a longer stay of a larger number of people. Media estimates indicated that several hundred loyalists stayed in the camp immediately before the large anti-regime protest in Belgrade on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March.<sup>75</sup> The camp continued to function after that event, with occasional filling and emptying in accordance with the regime's assessments of the political necessity of its maintenance.<sup>76</sup>

## Organized Physical Attack on the Regime Opponents by Loyalists

Physical violence against students and citizens protesting against the government was not only spontaneous, caused by the hate speech of officials of the ruling party and that media close to them, but it was also organised from the very beginning of the protest. The Centre for Investigative Journalism created a Map of attacks on participants in protests and blockades, which recorded 96 physical attacks in the period lasting between November 22, 2024 and June 9, 2025.<sup>77</sup> Of these, as many as 45 attacks were cars crashing into protesting students and citizens, in which dozens of people were seriously or lightly injured. Amongst these attacks there are several cases that are more well-known by the public. The first is a physical attack on the students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, who were paying their respects to the victims of the canopy collapse in front of aforesaid Faculty, when several people with ties to the ruling party first attacked them verbally and then physically. In another case, a man [deliberately] crashed his car into members of the Belgrade Philharmonic, who were paying their respects to the aforementioned victims, resulting in four of them winding up in the ER.<sup>78</sup> In a third case, Milica Stojanović ran over and injured two stewards with her car at a protest.<sup>79</sup> One of the most brutal attacks took place in Novi Sad, when four SNS activists attacked students with batons, breaking one student's jaw and seriously injuring others.<sup>80</sup>

### — *Vehicle-ramming attack as an act of terrorism*

According to the Criminal Code, terrorism is, amongst other things, an attack on the life, body, or freedom of another person with the goal of seriously intimidating the populace or endangering and harming the basic constitutional, political, economic, or social structure of Serbia.<sup>81</sup> The Prosecution has, however, qualified the intentional driving of a car into a group of people as causing general danger and attempted murder, despite the fact that most attackers were linked to the ruling party and therefore possessed a political and not personal motive for the attacks in question. Additionally, vehicle-ramming attack or vehicle as a weapon attack executed upon a group of people represents a relatively new method of terrorism, one used more and more frequently in the past 15 years due to the fact that it is relatively inexpensive, vehicles are widely available, its execution does not demand any great skill, and it is difficult to prevent.<sup>82</sup>

At first, these attacks appeared to be spontaneous acts of angry individuals, unsatisfied with the fact that the students and citizens are blocking the intersections for fifteen minutes at a time as a way of honouring the lives lost with the canopy fall. The repetitive pattern, however, the frequency and the method of execution, as well as the fact that a great number of the perpetrators are sympathisers and activists of the governing party or are tied to it, indicates otherwise. With time, further evidence has confirmed this, as

the attacks on protesting students and citizens became more organised, with the attackers often acting in groups and appearing similarly dressed – black baseball caps, masks, and black clothing. Attacks on protesters occurred at the same time in multiple locations. Particularly illustrative is the attack on students of the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Čačak, who were attacked by a group of 25 loyalists, who injured five students and two persons who had come to their aid.<sup>83</sup>

### — *Abductions and physical abuse*

In late August, in the centre of Belgrade, a student, Marija (pseudonym), was abducted by masked loyalists of the authorities. As she was walking down the street, a man exited a grey vehicle without licence plates, pulled a hood over her head and forcibly pushed her into the car. After a short drive, they took her to an improvised paramilitary camp of sympathisers of the President of Serbia, known as “Ćacilend”. There she was met by a group of masked men who threw her to the ground, kicked her, slapped her and insulted her. The fact that they were familiar with her health condition further convinced her that she had been previously targeted and surveilled. This was not an isolated incident, as the opposition Green-Left Front (ZLF) had already warned the public about similar cases of intimidation and violence against young women by the same structures.<sup>84</sup>

Amongst the most drastic examples of recent use of loyalist paramilitary structures in the service of the governing party is the incident which had taken place in September 2025. Namely, during a football game between Serbia and England, persons close to Milan Radoičić physically attacked fans and their children after the majority of those present in the audience began to sing the song “He Who Doesn’t Jump is a Ćaci”<sup>85</sup> and chant against President Aleksandar Vučić.<sup>86</sup> A similar model of pressure was registered before the rally of the ruling party in Kosjerić, a place with approximately ten thousand residents. Radoičić, followed by security and local party officials, according to the locals, insulted and attempted to frighten the participants of the protests against the local and national government. Witnesses allege that members of the entourage had in several instances directed threats and insults to the those present.<sup>87</sup> Analogous patterns of control of the public space have been recorded during *Eurobasket* in Letvia as well, where, according to reports, loyalist groups were sent to Riga with the aim of preventing Serbian fans from publicly criticising the President of the Republic.<sup>88</sup>

### — *Possible loyalist terrorist attack during a peaceful public gathering*

During a peaceful protest held on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2025 in Belgrade, Serbia, at which more than 300,000 people had gathered to demand accountability for the deaths of at that time 15 people as caused by the collapse of the canopy of the Novi Sad train station, an incident occurred during the minutes of silence. An unidentified crowd control device caused a panic and a stampede, during which several thousand people were injured. Witnesses spoke of a “loud sound, as if that of an aeroplane” and a wave of heat, whilst nongovernmental

organisations labelled more than 3,000 cases of physical and psychological consequences.<sup>89</sup> Police admitted to having 16 acoustic devices of the LRAD 450XL and LRAD 100X variety, but denied their use during the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, pointing out that the use of LRAD is not legally allowed.<sup>90</sup> Anonymous police sources also insisted that the police had not used the acoustic tool, leaving the door open for speculations regarding the illicit use of such or similar device by an informal group. The speculations of the public focused on the so-called loyalists – an extremist, pro-Russian group which had sworn a blood oath in the halls of a church to defend the President's reign.<sup>91</sup> The incident involving the unidentified acoustic device contains the elements of multiple possible criminal acts – from causing general danger and the abuse of power to torture and the prevention of public gatherings. Nevertheless, according to legal experts, the elements of this event are most fitting to that of terrorism. According to the Criminal Code, terrorism is, amongst other things, an attack on the life, body, or freedom of another person with the goal of seriously intimidating the populace or endangering and harming the basic constitutional, political, economic, or social structure of Serbia.<sup>92</sup> Instead of the state prosecutor's office, a criminal complaint for terrorism was filed by a group of nongovernmental organisations.<sup>93</sup>

## Protection of Violent Loyalists

The current government has created a system in which the violence of loyalists against dissenters of the regime is not only tolerated but also encouraged through institutional protection and public justification of attacks on citizens. Instead of sanctioning the perpetrators, the regime releases them of all responsibility, trivialising their acts, whilst using the police for their protection. In this manner, an atmosphere of a lack of punishment is garnered in which violence enacted upon dissenters is seen as a permissible tool of politics, causing government institutions to lose their purpose and their credibility.

## The State Leadership Downplays Violence Against Dissenters

The President of the Republic, as well as officials of the governing party, have trivialised and justified physical attacks by party loyalists on protesting students and citizens many times, including vehicle-ramming attacks and attacks resulting in bodily harm. Vučić said that those seeking the arrest of the driver who rammed his car into a man during the “Serbia, Stop” protest because he would not let the driver pass, proceeding to carry the protester on the hood of his car, were “not in their right mind”: “It was in Loznica, on some Fabia, somebody jumped on his hood, because the man had wanted to pass through, and so people are saying that we should arrest the driver. How are you going to arrest a man who did not break the law? The man was merely going along his own way. Are you in your right minds, douse yourself with cold water, rub your

eyes, clear the sleep crust away”.<sup>94</sup> Vučić, reacting to the knife attack on the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, said that the “injuries [are], by the way, almost like those of when you are cutting cucumber or onions. According to the information I’ve received, there are no injuries, they are absolutely surface-only. But it all had to play out...”<sup>95</sup> Representatives of the government also called the SNS activists who broke the jaw of a student far from the spaces of SNS “heroes” who were protecting property and defending their spaces.<sup>96</sup> These are but the most characteristic examples of the numerous cases of trivialisation of violence which illustrate the way and manner in which the government has actively induced violence, instead of punishing it.

## Freedom for the Violent Loyalists

The current government has promoted the violence of its own activists by releasing of all responsibility even those who are most violent and who had had criminal proceedings against them. The President of the Republic, Aleksandar Vučić, himself did so at least twice, first, when he pardoned a woman who rammed her car into a group of protesting students and, second, when he pardoned the four SNS activists who beat students with metal pipes and broke a student’s jaw.<sup>97</sup> This decision does not only turn the work of the courts and the police nonsensical but also sends a message that brutal physical violence enacted upon the young people who are protesting can go unpunished if such violence benefits the regime.

Despite the fact that these proceedings of the President of the Republic are formally in tandem with the Law on Pardoning, because the law provides not only the possibility of pardoning a person convicted of a crime but also the release from criminal persecution (so-called abolition and amnesty), they represent at their core a gross abuse of power with the aim of fulfilling political goals.<sup>98</sup> This is because the institution of pardoning is meant to allow for the removal of injustices which cannot be removed by way of legal proceedings. For example, when somebody is found guilty in a legally binding way but it turns out that they are not guilty and there is no legal remedy. Additionally, pardoning represents an extreme measure of mercy meant for those convicts who find themselves under particularly difficult life circumstances – old age, debilitating illnesses or unjust convictions. By way of this pardoning, the President of the Republic has sent a message to his loyalists, that they may continue on with their violence against opponents of the regime without fear of criminal prosecution or accountability, and a message to judicial organs that there is no point in processing loyalists who violently defend his regime. Further evidence pointing towards this as a political act is the fact that there have been no abolitions in Serbia in recent history.

## Police Protects Loyalists

There have been recordings of incidents in multiple towns and cities, amongst which are Kraljevo and Novi Sad, during protests in front of SNS offices, in which masked groups of loyalists have attacked citizens using different objects – bats, bottles, water sprayers and stones. In most cases, the police did not react to these attacks, even after police officers were hit. When it did interfere – as was the case in Novi Sad, where loyalists targeted demonstrators – what followed were disciplinary consequences: the police chief of the Police department of Novi Sad, Goran Radonjić, was replaced because he had ordered action against the violent supporters of SNS.<sup>99</sup> A similar formula emerged after an incident which took place during a concert of the “Beogradski sindikat” in Futog, when loyalists attacked the band and audience with paint. The police officer who intervened and arrested one of the attackers was quickly suspended, which further proved the trend of punishing officials who act against the violence groups tied to the ruling party.<sup>100</sup> It is important to note as well the fact that the police has been guarding the paramilitary camp settled between the buildings of the Presidency and the National Assembly for months, and has not acted against the loyalists in camp, despite their being armed, as reported by professional journalists many times.<sup>101</sup>

## Conclusion

Although the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) had, since coming to power in 2012, occasionally exhibited elements of anti-establishment extremism, it is only over the past five years that this pattern has become the dominant and recognizable form of its political activity. The tragedy in Novi Sad, in which sixteen people were killed when a concrete canopy collapsed, fully exposed the anti-system, violent, and extremist character of the ruling party. After more than a decade in power, SNS and its (now informal) leader Aleksandar Vučić act in clear contradiction to the principles of democracy and the rule of law, displaying key features of anti-establishment extremism, including the usurpation of institutions and the elevation of political loyalty as the sole criterion for exercising public authority. Serbia’s governance system today rests on an informal network of personal loyalty to the President of the Republic, while formal institutions serve merely as a façade for decisions made outside the constitutional framework. Such an order – described by experts as a “politics of destruction” and a “silent coup d’état” – is reflected in the daily and systematic violation of the Constitution and laws by the president, prompting legal experts to conclude that the Constitution has become little more than a “dead letter.”

The backbone of the ideological legitimation of this order is the nationalist concept of the “Serbian World,” which promotes the idea of the political unification of Serbs in Serbia and across the former Yugoslavia under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić.

Within this model, the survival of the Serbian people is portrayed as dependent on unconditional loyalty to the leader, thereby creating an ideological basis for the homogenisation of the population, the militarisation of society, and the erosion of political pluralism. In practice, this narrative is used to stigmatise and persecute domestic opponents, who are routinely labeled as “foreign mercenaries,” “state wreckers,” or “haters of Serbia.” In this way, the ideological matrix of SNS becomes an instrument of political violence and controlled mobilisation, further confirming the anti-system nature of the regime. This type of nationalist ideology also provides fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy theories, dominated by narratives of a “hybrid war” against Serbia, “colour revolutions,” and “foreign agents.” State and party officials, as well as pro-government media, have gone so far as to describe the Novi Sad canopy collapse as an act of “diversion” and a “terrorist attack.” Through the propagation of such conspiracy theories, the authorities not only shift responsibility away from themselves to its critics, but what is even more dangerous, with accusations of “destabilization”, “diversion”, and “terrorism”, they systematically generate an atmosphere of fear, hatred, and intolerance toward designated “conspirators,” thereby creating a broader context for hate speech and physical attacks on dissidents.

In the past year, hate speech in Serbia has sharply intensified, led by the highest state and party officials – Aleksandar Vučić, Ana Brnabić, Miloš Vučević, and Vladimir Đukanović. They consistently employ insulting and aggressive narratives directed at students, citizens, and the political opposition, labeling them as “extremists,” “terrorists,” “foreign mercenaries,” “a gang of layabouts,” or “people who seek to harm their own country.” Journalists, as well as European politicians critical of the government, are subjected to similar treatment: Vučić has called journalists of *N1* and *Nova* “terrorists,” referred to an *RTS* reporter as an “imbecile,” and labelled Members of the European Parliament “scum.” Pro-government media systematically amplify these messages, thereby institutionalising and normalising hate speech. The consequence has been a marked increase in verbal and physical violence against journalists and critics of the regime – following the labelling of media as “terrorists,” *Reporters Without Borders* documented 34 physical attacks on journalists in under two months, surpassing all annual totals since 2020.

Physical violence against students and citizens protesting against the government has not been spontaneous but rather organised and encouraged by the hate speech of SNS officials and pro-government media. According to the Center for Investigative Journalism, in the first six months of the protests, 96 physical attacks were recorded, 45 of which involved deliberate vehicle-ramming incidents, resulting in dozens of injuries. Although these incidents initially appeared as isolated outbursts, their frequency, similar execution patterns, and the attackers’ links to the ruling party indicated coordination. Attackers frequently appeared uniformed – dressed in black, wearing caps and masks – confirming the presence of a coordinated loyalist group engaged in suppressing civic protests.

The existence of paramilitary party structures has been openly acknowledged by the President of Serbia himself, who has spoken publicly about the “loyalists” – a hard-line faction within SNS numbering approximately 17,000 members, pro-Russian in orientation, who have symbolically sworn a “blood oath” to the regime. They are predominantly men with radical political beliefs, among whom, according to Vučić, are members of his own family. While loyalists include individuals of various profiles, the most visible segment consists of violent groups – men in black, masked, and linked to criminal and hooligan networks – who operate under the political command of ruling structures with the aim of breaking up protests, provoking incidents, and intimidating critics of the regime. One of the most striking incidents occurred during the Serbia–England football match, when loyalists physically assaulted fans with small children who were chanting against the president. Although violent loyalists operate nationwide, they maintain a permanent presence in a paramilitary camp positioned between the buildings of the Presidency and the National Assembly, functioning as a logistical centre for organising attacks on critics of the regime.

State and party officials consistently downplay and justify loyalist violence against protesters. President Vučić publicly defended a driver who hit a demonstrator with his car, minimised the severity of the knife attack on the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, and referred to the attackers who injured a female student with batons as “heroes.” He has also personally pardoned the perpetrators of two serious attacks – the driver who rammed into a crowd of students and SNS activists who beat demonstrators. Meanwhile, the police rarely intervene against loyalist violence, and officers who acted in accordance with the law have been disciplinarily punished. In this way, the authorities have institutionalised impunity and sent a clear message that politically motivated violence against opponents of the regime is acceptable.

This analysis clearly demonstrates that the Serbian Progressive Party has become the central actor of anti-establishment and violent extremist activity in Serbia. Throughout the past year, the regime has openly eroded the fundamental pillars of the constitutional order – democracy and the rule of law – using state institutions and public resources as instruments of political control and repression. Serbia is unique in Europe in this respect: whereas anti-system forces in other countries are typically marginal or part of minority coalitions, in Serbia it is the ruling party itself that has embodied and institutionalised anti-establishment extremism from the very centre of power for thirteen consecutive years.

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## Abbreviations

AEE – Anti-establishment extremism

EU – European Union

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

RJT – Public Prosecutor of the Republic

RTRS – Radio Television of the Republic of Srpska

RTS – Radio Television of Serbia

USA – United States of America

SNS – Serbian Progressive Party

SRS – Serbian Radical Party

ZLF – Green-Left Front

## About the Author

Predrag Petrović has worked at the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy since 2006. Throughout his career, he has focused primarily on researching the formal and informal relationships between security and political power, as well as on new and understudied topics such as the privatization of security, security sector reform, and violent extremism. He is one of the authors of the first comprehensive study on violent extremism in Serbia, *Extremism Research Forum – Serbia Report*, as well as a study on Russia's influence on the extreme right in Serbia which is part of a broader study *Russia and the Far-Right: Insights From Ten European Countries*. The publishing house Rowman & Littlefield released Petrović's case study on security sector reform in Serbia in the anthology *Handbook of European Intelligence Cultures*, which examines security and intelligence services in more than 30 European states. He obtained his PhD in 2021 from the Faculty of Political Sciences with a dissertation titled *Security Intelligence Reform in Serbia*. E-mail: [predrag.petrovic@bezbednost.org](mailto:predrag.petrovic@bezbednost.org).

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