



# MANUFACTURED THREAT

THE USE OF THE “**COLOUR REVOLUTION**”  
NARRATIVE AS A TOOL OF AUTHORITARIAN  
RULE IN SERBIA

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**Publisher:**

Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

Đure Jakšića 6/5 Belgrade

[www.bezbednost.org](http://www.bezbednost.org)

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DOI <https://doi.org/10.55042/CGQN8862>

February 2026



**BCSP** Belgrade Centre  
for Security Policy

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## Executive Summary

The concept of the “colour revolution” has evolved from a term once used to describe democratic uprisings in post-socialist states into a tool of authoritarian counter-narrative and repression. Serbia’s ruling elite, drawing heavily from the Russian strategic playbook, has reframed it as a symbol of foreign subversion designed to topple the government and destabilize the country.

Since 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) under Aleksandar Vučić has institutionalized this narrative as a tool for delegitimizing anti-government protests and dissent. An essential component of the regime’s strategy has been the rewriting of historical events, particularly the October 5th, 2000 uprising, once celebrated as a democratic milestone. Protests over issues such as environmental degradation, political violence, or lucrative projects like the Belgrade Waterfront have been consistently labelled as foreign-orchestrated. By systematically branding anti-government protests as foreign-instigated colour revolutions, the regime shifts blame for domestic failures – such as corruption and infrastructural negligence – onto external actors, thereby absolving itself of responsibility. This strategy gained significant momentum following the 2024 Novi Sad railway station tragedy, which sparked nationwide student-led protests.

Legal and repressive actions, including mass detentions and the exile of activists, have followed such framing, turning dissent into a matter of national security.

The narrative’s adoption has moved beyond rhetoric into policy, cemented by formal security cooperation with Russia. The 2021 establishment of a bilateral working group between Serbian and Russian security bodies to combat colour revolutions marked a strategic shift. This institutional partnership has included joint exercises and intelligence sharing aimed at repressing protest movements. Russian state media and intelligence services have supported Serbia’s narrative by accusing protesters of fomenting unrest and publishing reports that seek to absolve state actors of violence while criminalizing protesters. The role of influential public figures in disseminating these views illustrates the depth of narrative control exercised by the regime.

The media ecosystem in Serbia plays a central role in propagating this discourse. Dominated by pro-government outlets and amplified by Russian soft power, it disseminates conspiracy theories and anti-Western sentiment. Through a mix of tabloid sensationalism, disinformation, and selective coverage, the media creates an echo chamber that criminalizes dissent, discredits independent journalism, and blames all instability on Western interference.

Despite the regime’s dominance in shaping public perception, cracks are emerging. Public opinion polls indicate that a majority of citizens support recent protests and attribute them to legitimate grievances rather than foreign interference. The student movement, in particular, has emerged as a credible counterforce, offering a civic, values-based alternative that avoids partisan or ideological entanglement. Nevertheless, the counter-narrative faces structural barriers, including limited media reach and the entrenched influence of pro-regime messaging.

Still, the pro-regime narrative remains powerful, particularly among older, rural, and less-educated demographics who rely on state-controlled television. The narrative's greatest danger lies in its ability to foster political apathy. By presenting all alternatives as corrupt or foreign-controlled, it suppresses democratic engagement and deepens societal polarization. It cultivates fear, delegitimizes protest, and portrays the regime as the last bulwark against chaos.

In conclusion, the colour revolution narrative in Serbia is less about genuine belief in foreign interference and more a strategic instrument of authoritarian control. It legitimizes repression, distracts from domestic failings, and preserves power by presenting the regime as the only safeguard of sovereignty. Despite emerging resistance, especially from youth and civil society, the regime's control of information and framing remains a formidable barrier to democratization and political change.

## Introduction

In November 2024, the collapse of a canopy at Novi Sad’s newly renovated railway station killed sixteen people. The tragedy quickly became a focal point of public outrage, not only because of the scale of loss, but because it symbolized what many citizens perceived as the cumulative consequences of corruption, institutional negligence, and the erosion of accountability in Serbia. The government’s refusal to assume responsibility, combined with attempts to downplay or deflect blame, triggered nationwide, student-led protests that rapidly grew into one of the largest waves of civic mobilization in Serbia’s recent history.

Rather than addressing the protesters’ demands, the authorities responded with escalating repression. In the months that followed, policing tactics intensified: peaceful demonstrators were met with increasing brutality, and security forces deployed a sound cannon during mass protests in Belgrade – an unprecedented measure in Serbia’s modern political history. The spiral of violence deepened as elements of the security apparatus further radicalised the situation – through intimidation campaigns, surveillance, arrests, and the mobilisation of pro-government groups that clashed with protesters, including the establishment of a paramilitary-style camp in central Belgrade. What initially emerged as a response to a concrete tragedy thus evolved into a broader confrontation between civic mobilization and an increasingly authoritarian state.

From the outset of the protests, state officials and aligned media revived the familiar “colour revolution” trope, presenting the movement as externally orchestrated rather than domestically driven. In analytical terms, the paper treats this framing as a form of strategic discourse situated within a broader system of authoritarian governance. Furthermore, the paper argues that the narrative functions as a strategic instrument for preserving the existing power structure: it casts dissent as subversion, shifts attention away from accountability for systemic failures, and justifies exceptional measures in the name of security and sovereignty.

The paper explores the reasons and mechanisms behind the entrenchment of the “colour revolution” narrative in Serbia’s political discourse and state practice, as well as its impact on democratic freedoms, civil society, and the country’s foreign policy choices. It addresses three interrelated questions: (1) how the narrative is produced, circulated and amplified through political communication and the media ecosystem; (2) how it is translated into concrete policies and practices, including legal measures, security cooperation with external actors, and repression of protest movements and civil society; and (3) how it draws on and reshapes contested political memory – most notably the reinterpretation of 5 October 2000 – while intersecting with Serbia’s geopolitical balancing and Russia’s role as an enabling partner.

The paper argues that the “colour revolution” narrative in Serbia operates as a form of manufactured threat that transforms civic mobilization into a security problem. In doing so, it legitimizes extraordinary measures against opponents, deepens political apathy, and constrains democratic agency. At the same time, the study explores the limits of

this strategy by examining emerging counter-narratives – particularly those articulated by student movements – which challenge the regime’s framing and reopen space for democratic imagination, despite significant structural obstacles.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach that combines semi-structured interviews with a structured review of secondary literature. Interviews with academics, analysts, journalists, and civil society representatives in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina helped capture situated interpretations and trace how key claims circulate across different audiences. These insights are triangulated with policy reports, investigative articles, public opinion research, and documented timelines of protest events and state responses. Together, these materials support a process-tracing approach that links discourse to institutional choices and observable outcomes over time, while positioning Serbia’s case within wider comparative debates on authoritarian governance, securitization of dissent, and the global diffusion of counter-revolutionary narratives.

### Shifting “Colour Revolution” Narratives

The term “colour revolution” refers to a broad pattern of political upheaval in post-socialist states, especially within the post-Soviet sphere. From the 2000 overthrow of the Milošević regime in Yugoslavia to the Arab Spring, these movements are marked by mass protests and civic mobilization aimed at dismantling authoritarian regimes.

In academic literature, the so-called colour revolutions are often interpreted as reactions of authoritarian regimes to the first wave of liberalization that began in the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> At that time, in many post-communist countries, electoral mechanisms were manipulated to entrench existing power structures rather than to facilitate democratic change.<sup>2</sup> Concurrently, Western governments and institutions actively promoted democratization, exacerbating tensions between entrenched authoritarian regimes and emerging pro-democratic movements.<sup>3</sup>

These uprisings often had a distinct foreign policy dimension. Nearly without exception, the political movements that came to power in post-communist countries in Europe through these protests were pro-Western, while the incumbent regimes were typically aligned against Western influence.

However, from the late 2000s – especially following Ukraine’s Euromaidan in 2014 – the narrative around colour revolutions underwent a significant transformation. Instead of being recognized as authentic demands for democracy, mass civic protests increasingly came to be portrayed by those in power as instruments of foreign interference designed to destabilize sovereign states.<sup>4</sup> According to this reframed narrative, foreign actors – working through NGOs, media, and domestic politicians and activists – engineer mass unrest with the goal of unlawfully and unconstitutionally overthrowing governments and installing pro-Western administrations.

This reinterpretation first took root within Russian security institutions and has since become a cornerstone of Moscow’s strategic doctrine and national security discourse.<sup>5</sup> Key historical episodes – such as the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005), and the Twitter Revolution in Moldova (2009) – shaped the Russian state’s narrative of colour revolutions as existential threats to regime stability.

## Embedding the “Colour Revolution” Narrative in Serbia’s Political Discourse

The Russian interpretation of the “colour revolution” concept has been readily adopted by Serbia’s political elite – most notably the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and elements of the far-right. Since coming to power in 2012, the SNS has systematically institutionalized this narrative, recasting grassroots civic mobilizations as externally orchestrated threats to national stability.

The regime under the rule of Aleksandar Vučić had routinely used accusations of “foreign interference” to suppress criticism and undermine socio-political opposition to government policies.<sup>6</sup> References to “attempted colour revolution” and “Maidan in Belgrade” were applied to a wide range of civic mobilizations, including the environmental uprisings against the Rio Tinto lithium mining project (2024 and 2021), the “Serbia Against Violence” protests (2023), the protests against restrictive COVID-19 measures (2020), the “1 of 5 Million” protests against political violence (2019), and the “Don’t Let Belgrade Drown” initiative opposing the Belgrade Waterfront project (2016).

Portrayed as foreign-funded, externally driven, and inherently illegitimate, each of these movements fits into a broader tactic of recasting genuine domestic grievances as part of a geopolitical conspiracy. This narrative, rooted in the regime’s revisionist depiction of October 5, 2000 as a Western-orchestrated coup, provides cover for suppressing democratic change.

In today’s Serbian political discourse, the term “colour revolution” resurfaced after the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy on 1 November 2024 – an incident widely attributed to state negligence and corruption that claimed sixteen lives – and has since become a central tool for delegitimizing student- and citizen-led protests, reinforcing a narrative that reframes civic mobilization as a foreign-driven threat to the constitutional order. At a February SNS rally in Sremska Mitrovica, President Vučić condemned the protests as foreign influence operations:

“...Their colour revolution has failed. Inform USAID, NED, and EED. Tell them everywhere – it’s over. Serbia has won [...] And you, who organized the attempt of a colour revolution in Serbia, I will destroy you across the world.”  
– Aleksandar Vučić, 15 February 2025.<sup>7</sup>

Following this rhetoric, legal proceedings were initiated against 28 individuals, charged with crimes against the constitutional order and state security.<sup>8</sup> Several fled the country and are currently in political exile in Croatia. Meanwhile, over 1,000 citizens were detained during the protests – though most were later released.<sup>9</sup>

The discrepancy between the rhetoric of “foreign-orchestrated destabilization” and the reality of mass detentions followed by very few formal charges suggests that these political claims were unfounded. Instead, the pattern points to politically motivated or excessive policing, a lack of evidence of actual wrongdoing, and the use of detentions as a tool of intimidation rather than a means of prosecuting genuine criminal behaviour.

## Russian state-backed Institutionalization of the Narrative in Serbia

The consolidation of the “colour revolution” narrative in Serbia took a decisive turn with its integration into formal state policy through bilateral cooperation with Russia. The 2021 agreement to establish a Joint Working Group for Combating “Colour Revolutions”<sup>10</sup> – initiated by the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Nikolai Patrushev, and then–Minister of the Interior Aleksandar Vulin – laid the groundwork for Moscow to more openly assist the Serbian regime in promoting this propagandistic framing.

Serbia’s partnership with Russia signalled a shift from rhetorical adoption to institutional embedding. What initially appeared as a narrative promoted through media and political speeches gradually became integrated into official policy, government communication strategies, operational planning, and areas of bilateral collaboration. This cooperation led to the expulsion of Russian (and Belarusian) dissidents and activists from Serbia, and included joint anti-terrorism<sup>11</sup> and riot-control exercises<sup>12</sup> involving Serbian and Russian special police units.

During the 2023 protests over the rigged Belgrade elections, the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Serbia actively helped disseminate the “colour revolution” narrative.<sup>13</sup> Since the canopy collapse and subsequent protest wave, such statements have become routine, reflecting an increasingly synchronized rhetorical strategy between Belgrade and Moscow.

Russian security presence and influence on Serbia’s domestic political arena are difficult to assess and independently verify, given limited transparency and the reliance on politically mediated sources. Serbia’s president Vučić and deputy prime minister Vulin have both acknowledged that Russia’s intelligence services had helped the authorities in responding to protests – statements that, according to critics, underscored the government’s growing dependence on Moscow.<sup>14</sup> These activities have primarily served to support the ruling party in its efforts to discredit civic and student-led protest movements.

Russian state security services have also attempted to justify Serbian state responses to protests, and particularly the deployment of a sound cannon during demonstrations in Belgrade on March 15. Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed to have investigated the incident and published an unsigned report on the website of Serbia’s Security Information Agency (BIA).<sup>15</sup> The report, attributed to an “FSB expert group,” aimed to absolve the regime of responsibility for suspected acts of state terrorism<sup>1</sup> and redirect blame toward protestors. However, the report was widely discredited by opposition figures and experts, who pointed out its linguistic inaccuracies, lack of official insignia, and absence of substantive evidence.<sup>16</sup> Critics described it as political pamphlet – dismissively referred to as “Vučić’s report”.

The turning point came in September 2025, when the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) publicly accused a number of Serbian independent media outlets of “brainwashing

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1 Civil society organizations – Belgrade Center for Human Rights, Civic Initiatives, Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights – YUCOM, Initiative A 11, FemPlatz and CRTA filed a criminal complaint with the Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime against unidentified persons on suspicion that they committed a terrorist offense on March 15, 2025, when they used an unidentified dangerous weapon during the 15-minute silence to disrupt a peaceful protest in Belgrade. More information at <https://cрта.rs/podneta-krivicna-prijava-za-terorizam-zbog-incidenta-15-marta/>

Serbian youth” and fomenting unrest with the goal of installing “a compliant leadership loyal to Brussels”.<sup>17</sup> The accusation labelled outlets such as FoNet, RAM Network, Vreme, Južne vesti, Slobodna reč, Boom93, Podrinska, Free Media, Inđija, SOinfo, FAR, Storyteller, and the NGO Link as “foreign agents”.<sup>18</sup>

More recent developments indicate that the repression of civil society actors is no longer confined to domestic surveillance capabilities alone. From October 2024 through late 2025, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCBP) was subjected to a sustained cyber-espionage operation conducted by two hacker groups: “Midnight Blizzard”, linked to Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and “Forest Blizzard”, connected to the Military Intelligence Service (GRU).<sup>19</sup> In parallel, a spear-phishing campaign impersonating the Belgrade Security Conference 2025 targeted officials across the European Union and North America.

Taken together, these sophisticated operations reveal a clear pattern of outsourced repression and authoritarian offshoring, whereby the suppression of civil society actors and anti-government protest movements in Serbia – routinely labelled as “colour revolutions” – is effectively delegated to Russian state-linked cyber actors.<sup>20</sup>

## Revising “October 5th”: From Democratic Transition to the “Decline of Serbia”

In academic literature, the October 5th uprising – often called the “Bulldozer Revolution” – is widely recognized as “zero colour revolution” and the starting point of Serbia’s democratic transition.<sup>21</sup> It marked the collapse of Slobodan Milošević’s regime and the beginning of a new era centred on democratization, international reintegration, and market reforms.

Over the past fifteen years, however, the interpretation of October 5th within Serbian political discourse has undergone a profound transformation. What was once framed as a democratic breakthrough is now predominantly portrayed as a historical failure – a moment of national betrayal marked by disillusionment with market-oriented reforms and susceptibility to foreign subversion. This revisionist anti-democratic narrative frames October 5th as a Western-orchestrated coup – allegedly engineered by foreign intelligence services and financed through domestic “agents” of Western influence – to install a puppet, pro-Western government aimed at undermining Serbia’s sovereignty and transforming the country into a Western satellite.<sup>22</sup>

Prominent figures in the current ruling coalition – many of whom held positions in the Milošević regime – have played a central role in promoting this reframing. Socialist Party leader Ivica Dačić declared, “Slobodan Milošević was the first victim of colour revolutions in the world and global imperialism”.<sup>23</sup> Since the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) assumed power in 2012, Aleksandar Vučić has relied heavily on a revisionist narrative – using it to weaken and marginalise his strongest opponent, the Democratic Party, and to draw the pioneers of the “colour revolution” into the SNS’s broad catch-all alliance.

As a consequence, the youth movement *Otpor* – once lauded for its role in toppling the regime – is now frequently described by regime-aligned commentators as an instrument of US foreign policy. Allegedly trained and funded by Western intelligence services, *Otpor* is depicted not as a grassroots force for change but as the origin of Serbia’s political decline and a model for exporting revolutions abroad.<sup>24</sup> The construction of this narrative was aided by segments of the post-Milošević ruling elite.

The ruling coalition continues to reinforce this interpretation as a means of absolving itself of responsibility for the 1990s, framing that decade not as a period of aggression or wrongdoing but as an era of injustice inflicted upon Serbia and the Serbs. Within this narrative, the post-2000 period is not viewed as a triumph of justice, but rather as the beginning of a “catastrophe” during which pro-Western forces allegedly “accidentally destroyed the country”.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the era following 2012 is portrayed as a time of Serbia’s true recovery. The message of this narrative is clear: any major political change would, just like in 2000, inevitably lead to disappointment and national decline. The ultimate goal is to solidify the status quo by insinuating that any substantial political transformation would only repeat the post-October 5th disillusionment and regression.

Despite real progress during the transitional period (2000–2012) – including economic growth, international reintegration, and general normalization of life – a significant portion of society remembers this period through the lens of poverty, unemployment, and, above all, unfulfilled expectations.<sup>26</sup> Many citizens who initially supported democratic change became disillusioned over time, primarily due to worsening socioeconomic conditions but also because of other structural problems in society and the state.<sup>27</sup> Frustration over the outcomes of October 5th is also prevalent among nationalist who continue to view the wars of the 1990s and their main actors in a positive light.

This frustration has been effectively instrumentalized by the current government, which leverages popular disappointment to advance the notion that democratic change inevitably leads to chaos and decline – thereby discouraging public support for student protests. This messaging has gained traction among both older citizens, who lived through the transition, and younger generations, who have only experienced it through mediated narratives.<sup>28</sup>

Marking the 25th anniversary of October 5th, a segment of the student movement – students from the Faculty of Philosophy – publicly distanced themselves from any identification with October 2000. In their statement, they noted that the dominant feeling among citizens on that date was disappointment over the failed promises of the democratic parties that the introduction of a free-market economy would bring higher living standards, economic prosperity, democratization, and European integration.<sup>29</sup> The democrats, they argued, squandered national sovereignty, impoverished the country through privatization of factories and public enterprises, and opened the market to powerful foreign capital. According to them, the change in government did not bring a change in the system, but rather a continuation of repression and fear.<sup>30</sup>

The students demanded the abandonment of neoliberal reforms implemented at the expense of socioeconomic development and called for the adoption of alternative development models – primarily an anti-colonial struggle against economic exploitation. Their concept of transformation emphasizes grassroots organizing and collective self-liberation – rejecting top-down solutions imposed by elites, capital interests, or international institutions, whose interests (they claim) are fundamentally opposed to those of society.<sup>31</sup>

The potency of the October 5th-as-catastrophe narrative is tied to deeply embedded traumas in Serbian society – including the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the 1999 NATO bombing, and Kosovo’s 2008 declaration of independence. For many, these events define the West not as a source of opportunity, but as an agent of humiliation and aggression. Consequently, narratives that depict the West as a destabilizing force – rather than a partner in development – resonate widely.

Public opinion surveys confirm this skepticism. Citizens exhibit negative attitudes toward Western powers, express low support for Serbia’s accession to NATO and the EU,<sup>32</sup> and display strongly positive sentiments toward China and Russia.<sup>33</sup> The Serbian Progressive Party has harnessed this sentiment to consolidate an anti-Western discourse, systematically portraying the West as a threat to national sovereignty and identity.

Interestingly, a significant portion of protest participants who express sympathy for Russia and Vladimir Putin simultaneously oppose domestic authoritarian practices. For these individuals, Russia is primarily perceived symbolically – as a protector of Serbs – rather than as a societal and political model to emulate.<sup>34</sup> The personal aspirations of Serbian citizens – for education, employment, and migration – remain largely oriented toward the West.

According to Nikola Burazer, Program Director of the Centre for Contemporary Politics, “the regime may have convinced people that Russia is Serbia’s closest friend and Putin its saviour, but it has not convinced them that dictatorship is desirable”.<sup>35</sup>

By consistently framing October 5th as a foreign-orchestrated, failed experiment – and by sidelining alternative voices – SNS-aligned media effectively reinforce and sustain this narrative. However, public opinion data from CRTA (October 2025) reveals cracks in the regime’s messaging: 58% of citizens support the ongoing student protests, and 61% believe these demonstrations are driven by outrage over corruption and negligence, rather than foreign conspiracies (which only 28% accept).<sup>36</sup> Almost two-thirds of Serbian citizens see early elections as a way out of the crisis, and if given the opportunity, they would be more inclined to back a student-led list (44%) rather than Vučić-led bloc (33%).<sup>37</sup>

## Creators of the “Colour Revolution” Narrative

While foreign influence is often cited as the source of pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiment in Serbia, the architects of the “colour revolution” narrative are overwhelmingly domestic. It is Serbia’s own political elite – backed by the state security apparatus, loyal media, and sympathetic segments of civil society – that has played the central role in constructing and disseminating this discourse.

This section maps the key actors, strategies, and motivations behind the spread of the “colour revolution” narrative and Serbia’s pro-Russian orientation.

### Political Actors as Architects of the Narrative

Representatives of the executive and legislative branches (public functionaries) are the primary vectors of the colour revolution narrative, while other domestic actors – such as pro-government NGOs, media outlets, analysts, or foreign advisers – amplify and disseminate these positions.

The most visible and influential promoter of this narrative is the President of the Republic, Aleksandar Vučić. He is also the most frequently cited public official in the context of statements about “colour revolutions” and the activities of foreign actors.<sup>38</sup> His public appearances, along with the messages of Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) officials, such as former Prime Minister Miloš Vučević, define the main direction of the propaganda discourse and shape dominant interpretations of political events.

Former minister Aleksandar Vulin has also played a key role, frequently invoking the language of conspiracy, referencing alleged Western plots and glorifying Moscow’s position on global affairs. Vulin’s messaging closely mirrors that of prominent Russian figures, such as Editor-in-Chief of RT Margarita Simonyan, television host Dmitry Kiselyov, the television personalities Yevgeny Popov and Olga Skabeyeva, and Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova.<sup>39</sup>

Other key figures include:

- » Nemanja Starović, Minister for European Integration and founder of the Centre for Social Stability, a government-organised non-governmental organisation (GONGO) known for producing content targeting pro-European actors and organising rallies in support of the SNS.<sup>40</sup>
- » Speaker of the National Assembly Ana Brnabić, recently cast as a pro-European voice in the ruling coalition, but who has now shifted toward more openly pro-Russian positions.
- » MPs Vladimir Đukanović and Branimir Nestorović, as well as Saša Borojević, a conspiracy theorist and SNS municipal councillor, and Dragan J. Vučićević, the editor-in-chief of the tabloid Informer.

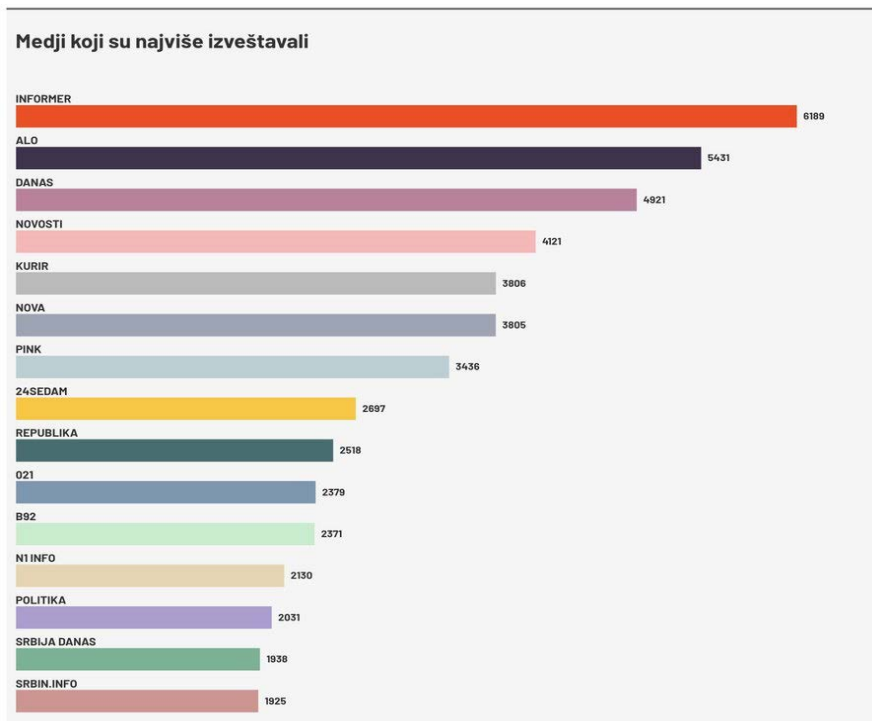
Although some opposition figures – such as members of the New Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) – do not explicitly endorse pro-Russian rhetoric, their advocacy for policies like military neutrality often overlaps with Kremlin interests. Additionally, marginal actors from far-right and ultra-nationalist circles use niche media platforms to disseminate pro-Russian narratives aligned with Russia’s geopolitical goals.

## The Media Echo System: Megaphones of the Regime

Television remains the most powerful tool for spreading pro-Russian and anti-Western content in Serbia. With roughly 80% of the population relying on TV for news, it provides a broad platform for narrative control. Among younger audiences (ages 18–30), however, the internet and social media are increasingly dominant.<sup>41</sup>

Despite this, public trust in pro-government media is eroding. Compared to 2022, trust has declined by 14%, largely due to censorship and aggressive coverage of student protests. Audience rankings have also shifted: N1 now leads viewership (17%), followed by RTS (17%) and TV Pink (11%).<sup>42</sup>

Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)’s survey of 130 media outlets found that 70,000 articles were published after the canopy collapsed.<sup>43</sup> The hyperproduction of articles by pro-government outlets was a form of “damage control,” prompted by the extensive coverage that critical media (*Danas, Nova, O21, N1 Info*) gave to social protests during the 100 days following the incident.



## MANUFACTURED THREAT

### The Use of the “Colour Revolution” Narrative as a Tool of Authoritarian Rule in Serbia

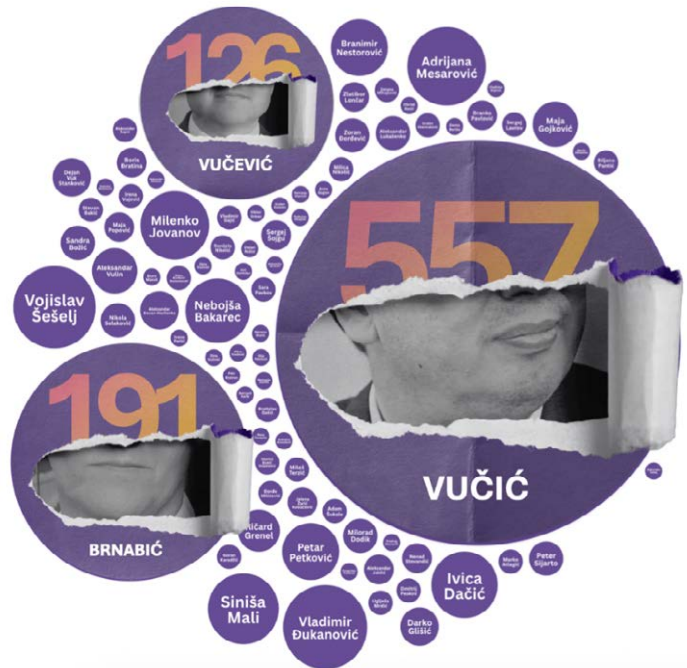
Pro-regime outlets, with *Informer* at the forefront, play a central role in constructing and disseminating the “colour revolution” narrative. *Informer* broadcast a daily live segment featuring commentators tasked with discrediting protesters. Other broadcasters employ more subtle techniques, but still conform to the broader propaganda strategy by reinforcing regime-approved interpretations.

Fakenews Tracker’s *Blockade Notebook* found, in its media monitoring for the period January–July 2025, a total of 6,420 manipulative news items, 5,773 of which originated from the outlets *Informer*, *Alo*, and *Novosti*.<sup>44</sup> In the vast majority of cases, the media themselves were the primary source of misinformation, followed by public officials – with Aleksandar Vučić standing out among them.

Through sensationalist headlines and pseudo-analytical commentary, a media echo chamber has been created. Mass anti-government protests – both domestic and abroad – are routinely framed as part of a global pattern of destabilization orchestrated by the West.

For example, the leader of the far-right Serbian Radical Party, Vojislav Šešelj, was the first to introduce claims of terrorism in the immediate aftermath of the railway station collapse.<sup>45</sup> Such theories resurfaced on 12 April during a rally organised by the President of Serbia, when Đuro Raca, the father of one of the victims, said: “The tragedy in Novi Sad was

caused by a terrorist act, both foreign and domestic... It’s no coincidence that 1 November was chosen as the date of collapse. That’s the day Catholics and the Western world observe All Saints’ Day”.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, SNS member of the National Assembly Vladimir Đukanović stated on 2 February: “I have no evidence, but I’m inclined to believe the canopy collapse was an act of sabotage. I have no proof, but I cannot shake the feeling that this was premeditated”.<sup>47</sup> The tabloid *Informer* followed up by claiming it had obtained “exclusive photos that cast doubt that the fall of the canopy in Novi Sad may be an act of terrorism and reveal the role of NGO prosecutor Slobodan Josimović in the conspiracy”.<sup>48</sup> Adding to this narrative, Parliament Speaker Ana Brnabić told TV Pink: “I don’t think the canopy collapsed on its own, nor that it was an accident, a tragedy, or any kind of result of negligent actions in that sense. I believe it was a planned act of sabotage”.<sup>49</sup> Several opposition parties have called on the competent prosecutor’s office to investigate Brnabić over her claims.



At the same time, a series of conspiracy theories circulated in pro-government media outlets, alleging that countries including the United Kingdom, Germany, Croatia, and Kosovo were attempting to provoke a colour revolution. “Look who supports the colour revolution on Saturday – from Albin Kurti and the Croatian Home Guard to the Kavač clan and another clan from Montenegro... everyone supports it,” Vučić said in an interview with Radio Television of Serbia ahead of the 15 March rally.<sup>50</sup> Citing Igor Korotchenko, editor-in-chief of the Russian magazine *National Defense*, the tabloid *Informer* claimed that elements within the political and intelligence establishments of the United Kingdom and Germany were behind attempts to stage a colour revolution in Serbia.<sup>51</sup> The *Politika* opinion writer went so far as to claim that “London gathers Serbia’s foes” in Albania<sup>52</sup> – prompting a diplomatic response from the UK’s representative in Belgrade.<sup>53</sup>

The unrest in Nepal, driven by Generation Z, has caused concern among SNS cadres, particularly because protesters in Serbia have responded to it with unexpectedly enthusiastic support. For this reason, unrest in Nepal (10 September 2025) was reported using language identical to that used in coverage of protests in Serbia. Tabloid headlines serve as clear illustrations of this coordinated campaign, including:

- » “A familiar story – they’re just kids fighting corruption! Nepal in chaos, a new model of colour revolution revealed” (*Informer*);
- » “Serbia, North Macedonia, Bangladesh, Nepal... who’s next? Wherever the bloody fist appears, violence, chaos, and the attempt to break the state from within follow” (*Kurir*);
- » “Nepal in flames: experts reveal what’s happening – colour revolutions turn into internet revolutions” (*Večernje novosti*).

This narrative is further amplified by public statements and op-eds from the ruling party officials and pro-government commentators. For instance, SNS MP Nebojša Bakarec wrote in *Informer* (September 10):

“A week ago, China and India reconciled, drew closer, and signed strategic agreements. The West (EU and the USA) reacted negatively to these agreements and to the SCO Summit. Suddenly, unrest ‘coincidentally’ erupts in Nepal. [...] The West and Soros swiftly launched the red and white fist and the ‘Maidan’ – a bloody and colour revolution in Nepal!”

Scapegoating students, professors, rectors, judges, prosecutors, artists, civil society organisations and others as “foreign agents” became a recurring pattern in media reporting, used to cement the prevailing narrative. Baseless claims circulated through media outlets and social networks then served as a pretext for verbal threats and, in some cases, physical violence or other repressive measures.

For example, Vladimir Đukanović, MP from the Serbian Progressive Party, wrote on the social media platform “X” on February 10: “NVO Trag and CRTA are connected entities. They were financed by an organized criminal group, USAID, which used money from drug trafficking covering Mexican cartels. They were preparing chaos and a colour revolution in Serbia”.<sup>54</sup>

Two weeks later, 18 police officers – some of them armed – raided CRTA’s premises without a court warrant, demanding information about the organisation’s operations for inspection. On March 13, CRTA filed a criminal complaint against President Vučić and others for unauthorized handling of information and documentation seized during the raid on its premises.<sup>55</sup> This followed a media address by President Vučić on Sunday, 9 March, broadcast live on TV Informer, in which he stated, among other things: “Those who directly received money from abroad to carry out a colour revolution – there will be surprises in the coming days, you’ll see... Do you know that the organisation USAID paid €190,000, through CRTA and some other NGOs, to an organisation called ‘Da smradovi odu’”.<sup>2</sup>

Disciplinary complaints were filed with the disciplinary prosecutor of the High Judicial Council against judges Miodrag Majić of the Court of Appeal and Aleksandar Trešnjev of the Higher Court for allegedly making public statements. Both are members of the Centre for Judicial Research (CEPRIS), and Majić is also part of the informal group of intellectuals – Proglas<sup>56</sup>. The proceedings followed a pro-government tabloid campaign in which Constitutional Court judge Vladan Petrov claimed that professors associated with Proglas and CEPRIS were providing the main logistical support for the student protests.<sup>57</sup> This narrative was later reinforced by political science professor Dragana Mitrović, who described the events as containing “elements of a colour revolution”.

Like CRTA, these two organisations are a “thorn in the side” of the ruling regime because they challenge lawlessness, and their members work to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process, document electoral irregularities, advocate for electoral reform, and mobilise citizens to vote.

Serbian scholar of media studies, Ana Martinoli, and investigative journalist, Vesna Radojević, underscore that the spread of pro-Russian narratives in Serbia is not a spontaneous process but the result of a deliberate, systematic, and long-term construction of a media ecosystem that operates across multiple platforms.<sup>58</sup> This ecosystem is strategically designed to reposition such narratives from the margins of public debate to the mainstream, thereby normalizing them as legitimate political discourse. It includes editors from both Serbian and Russian outlets, talk show hosts, tabloid producers, and a regular cast of geopolitical commentators and regime-aligned politicians.<sup>59</sup>

Simultaneously, domestic, nationalist-oriented portals such as *Srbin.info* and *Nulta tačka* – though often critical of the regime – nonetheless replicate many Russian talking points, especially in their defence of “traditional values” and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric. KRIK’s 2024 research on right-wing media portals reveals that Serbia’s online right-wing media ecosystem is deeply intertwined with both Russian and domestic nationalist networks, creating a coordinated system for amplifying propaganda.<sup>60</sup>

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2 A striking example of wordplay and information manipulation involved CRTA’s support for a local organisation from Zrenjanin and its environmental campaign against major polluters, “Da smradovi odu” (“Let the stink go away”). While the slogan literally referred to industrial pollution, the president falsely labeled it to the non-existent organisation that allegedly carried a figurative meaning: namely, a call for the corrupt political elite to step down.

## Russian Soft Power: A friend in need is a friend indeed

While domestic political elites play the central role in crafting and deploying pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives in Serbia, they are significantly bolstered by Russian soft power. Through a combination of state officials, media outlets, diplomats, security professionals and ideological influencers, Russia has constructed a parallel narrative architecture that reinforces pro-Kremlin sentiment and amplifies the “colour revolution” discourse in Serbia.

Top Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu, have all publicly echoed the Serbian regime’s interpretation of recent protests. **Putin** claimed that Russian intelligence had confirmed Western attempts to engineer a “colour revolution” in Serbia.<sup>61</sup> **Lavrov** condemned Western interference in Serbia’s internal affairs, stating that President Vučić had provided evidence of such interference and reaffirmed Russia’s support for the Serbian leadership’s efforts to prevent destabilisation.<sup>62</sup> In a similar tone, Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman **Maria Zakharova**<sup>63</sup> and Russian Ambassador to Serbia **Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko** asserted that the protests were the result of foreign provocations aimed at destabilizing the country.<sup>64</sup> The Secretary of Russia’s Security Council, **Sergei Shoigu**, even claimed that two countries maintain ongoing dialogue and exchange information, including with a view to countering “colour revolutions”.<sup>65</sup>

Beyond official state channels, Russian intellectuals and ideologues have played a role in shaping discourse. **Alexander Dugin**, a controversial Russian philosopher and professor at Moscow State University, gave interviews to Serbian outlets such as *Politika*, promoting the view that Serbia is the target of globalist, left-liberal forces.<sup>66</sup> According to Dugin, these forces are working to topple Serbia’s government because it defends national sovereignty – a position consistent with his broader Eurasianist ideology.

Operating in both Serbian and English, Russian media – such as Russia Today and Sputnik Srbija – consistently frame political unrest in Serbia as part of a Western conspiracy. These outlets provide ready-made narratives that pro-government media adopt and blend with home-grown pro-Russian content.

Two examples are particularly illustrative. First, domestic portals such as *Politika* and *B92* republished an article from *RT Balkan* claiming that the United Kingdom and the EU were the organisers of a colour revolution in Serbia.<sup>67</sup> Citing the magazine *National Defence*, *RT* alleged that the ultimate goal was the violent overthrow of President Vučić.

Secondly, in the article titled “*The British Council in Serbia: Quieter than Diplomacy, Deeper than Politics*,” *RT Balkan* alleged that Britain, through educational programmes designed to foster critical thinking among primary and secondary schools students, was encouraging young people in Serbia to rise up against the government.<sup>68</sup> Shortly thereafter, *Alo* published a piece titled “*The Russians Have Banned Them, and This Organization Also Operates in Serbia: Here’s What the Infamous British Council Is Doing in Our Country*”.<sup>69</sup>

While their direct audience remains limited, their narratives are frequently lifted by Serbian outlets, especially in areas like foreign policy and the war in Ukraine, where local journalistic expertise is lacking. With limited foreign-policy expertise, few qualified foreign correspondents, and retiring experienced senior reporters, Serbian newsrooms increasingly rely on Russian sources – giving them an indirect but lasting sway over public debate.

Domestic media not only reproduce Russia’s narratives about internal Serbian affairs but also actively advance Russia’s positions on global politics – particularly in relation to the West and the European Union – amplifying Russian “soft power” in Serbia.<sup>70</sup> Promoting the Russian state and its international activities is a secondary yet crucial dimension of this process. The synergy between pro-government and Russian media creates a distinctly pro-Russian informational environment that reinforces Russian interests while marginalizing pro-European voices in the public sphere.

Russian soft power also operates through targeted media productions. In May 2025, Irish journalist **Chey Bowes** released an English-language documentary on RT titled *The Shadow War*, which claimed to expose a vast network of NGOs in Serbia allegedly financed by foreign donors and tasked with orchestrating a “colour revolution”.<sup>71</sup> The documentary’s framing was consistent with Kremlin propaganda and was quickly picked up by domestic media aligned with the ruling party.

At times, Russian media and officials have even criticized the Serbian regime – particularly in relation to arms exports to Ukraine or cooperation with NATO.<sup>72</sup> However, these critical stories are often downplayed or filtered out by domestic pro-government media to protect the image of alignment between the Serbian and Russian governments.<sup>73</sup>

For example, articles published in the weekly magazine of the Russian Ministry of Defence (*Zvezda*)<sup>74</sup> or statements by Kremlin spokespersons Dmitry Peskov and Zakharova criticizing Serbia’s role in arming Ukraine were selectively quoted – or completely omitted – in Serbian tabloids.<sup>75</sup> A similar pattern was evident in coverage of Dugin’s interview with *Sputnik Srbija*, in which he argued that prevailing public sentiment in Serbia suggested President Vučić had lost legitimacy and that his political career is effectively over.<sup>76</sup> This editorial gatekeeping creates the illusion of perfect diplomatic harmony while masking real policy divergences.

The alignment between Russian and Serbian media narratives is not entirely organic. It reflects a deliberate political strategy designed to maximize regime stability, deflect Western criticism, and appeal to a segment of the Serbian electorate that harbours pro-Russian sentiments.

While the regime benefits from Russia’s rhetorical support, it does not blindly follow the Kremlin’s line. Instead, it performs a careful balancing act: using pro-Russian narratives to maintain domestic legitimacy and suppress dissent, while continuing economic cooperation with Western countries and avoiding full geopolitical alignment with Moscow.

This approach underscores the instrumental nature of Russian soft power in Serbia. It does not operate in isolation but is integrated into a broader hybrid regime strategy – one that mixes authoritarian governance with selective engagement with both East and West.

## The Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) plays a significant symbolic and political role in reinforcing pro-regime and pro-Russian narratives. As one of the most trusted institutions in the country, the Church wields substantial influence over public opinion, particularly among socially conservative and younger segments of the population. Its frequent engagement with Russian religious and political institutions further amplifies shared messaging between Belgrade and Moscow.

During a 2025 visit to Moscow, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church publicly described the ongoing student-led protests in Serbia as a “colour revolution,” claiming that “Western centres of power seek to dismantle the identity and culture of the Serbian people”.<sup>77</sup> This statement – delivered in a conversation with President Vladimir Putin – signalled alignment with the regime’s framing of domestic unrest.

However, the Patriarch’s remarks were met with strong criticism within Serbia, including from theologians, civil society, and even segments of the Church itself. Religious scholars and commentators emphasized that his statements reflected a personal, politically motivated viewpoint rather than the official position of the SOC.<sup>78</sup> Some members of the clergy expressed open support for the student protests, highlighting internal divisions within the Church regarding its political alignment.

Despite these fractures, the Church leadership is widely perceived as closely tied to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. Since ascending to his position in 2021, the new patriarch has worked to consolidate his power and centralise decision-making at the expense of the Orthodox Church’s autonomy, while suppressing criticism from clergy and theologians directed at both the Serbian and Russian regimes.

More recently, the Serbian Orthodox Church has initiated an ecclesiastical court case against two prominent Serbian theologians, owing to their endorsement of student-led anti-corruption protests against the government.<sup>79</sup> One of the theologians, Blagoje Pantelić, received an indictment requesting his permanent exclusion from the church community – a decision widely seen as the patriarch’s personal retaliation for Pantelić’s criticism of the Church leadership and the Church’s approach to the ongoing social events. Unlike progressive voices, hardline bishops and priests regularly travel to Russia, maintain strong ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, and openly subscribe to theories about foreign-led “colour revolutions” aimed at destroying Serbia’s traditional values.

In addition to religious institutions, influential public figures from Serbia’s cultural and media spheres also contribute to the normalization of pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives. Well-known film directors, writers, actors, and journalists such as Emir Kusturica, Boris Malagurski, Miloš Biković, Nikola Pejaković, and Ljiljana Smajlović, among others, often use Serbian or Russian media platforms to echo government rhetoric and reinforce pro-Russian attitudes among wider audiences.

## International Voices Echoing the Regime

Like-minded leaders tend to support one another in stifling criticism and amplifying the perceived threat of a Western-backed “colour revolution”. In January, several Serbian tabloids ran similar headlines, including: “Slovakia and Serbia under attack, Hungary next in line! Colour Revolutions as a ‘remedy’ for freedom-loving countries” (*Informer and Alo*); “Identical protests in Slovakia as in Serbia: Attempts at a colour revolution based on the same principle” (*Večernje Novosti*).<sup>80</sup>

This narrative was echoed in early April by Hungary’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó, who, commenting on anti-government protests in Hungary and Serbia, stated: “I think it is an orchestrated, externally organized and led rally against our governments”.<sup>81</sup> He added that Slovakia’s Prime Minister Robert Fico, Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić, and Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán are the leaders and key figures of patriotic movements in Europe.

The Serbian leadership did not rely solely on (pro-)Russian voices to delegitimize the protests; rather, a range of Western figures amplified the regime’s narrative. Notably, Efraim Zuroff, an American Jewish historian, intervened with a commentary for *The Jerusalem Post* titled “Beware of Symbols Used by Hamas – Comment”, which stirred controversy.<sup>82</sup> In the article, Zuroff portrayed student protesters as Hamas sympathizers due to their use of the “bloody hands” symbol – a claim that triggered strong backlash from demonstrators, political opposition leaders, scholars, and members of Serbia’s Jewish community. The protestors responded with satire and defiance, holding banners that read: “We’re not Hamas, we’re Angry Mamas”.<sup>83</sup>

Support for the Serbian government’s interpretation of events has also come from Richard Grenell, former U.S. Special Envoy under President Donald Trump. During the height of the protests, Grenell posted on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter):

“We [the United States] do not support those who undermine the rule of law or violently seize government buildings.”

Although the post was later deleted, it was widely interpreted as an endorsement of the regime’s narrative. Such interventions – whether strategic or misguided – lend additional legitimacy to the government’s efforts to frame the protest movement as illegal and externally orchestrated.

## Motives and Interests of Political Actors Behind Pro-Russian Narratives

Pro-Russian narratives are less the result of spontaneous ideological alignment or direct foreign influence and more a calculated political strategy. These narratives are instrumentalized by ruling elites to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and create a framework that justifies authoritarian governance. By manipulating public opinion through a combination of fear, nationalism (identity myths), and anti-Western sentiment, the regime secures both political stability and voter loyalty.

At the heart of this strategy is the portrayal of the “collective West” as decadent, aggressive, and hostile to Serbian sovereignty. Western institutions and values are framed as existential threats – foreign forces that aim to destabilize Serbia through covert operations, cultural subversion, and political interference. This depiction serves several purposes:

- » Delegitimization of opposition – Civic actors, independent media, NGOs, and student movements are branded as foreign agents or traitors;
- » Deflection of accountability – Systemic issues such as corruption, repression, or state negligence are reframed as consequences of foreign meddling, not government failure;
- » Suppression of criticism – By portraying all dissent as externally orchestrated, the regime justifies censorship, arrests, and other repressive measures;
- » Hampering democratization and Serbia’s accession to the European Union.

Pro-Russian messaging helps create an ideological environment where democratic pluralism is delegitimized, and the consolidation of power is presented as a patriotic defence of the nation.

In addition, the pro-Russian narratives promote strong leaders – Putin, Xi Jinping – thereby indirectly strengthening Vučić’s position in the eyes of voters. In doing so, they reinforce an authoritarian model of rule and cultivate a personality cult – positioning Vučić as a “Serbia’s Putin”. What emerges is not simply admiration for Russia, but admiration for the *style* of leadership embodied by Putin. This allows the regime to construct a political reality in which no alternative to Vučić is seen as viable – neither within the Serbian Progressive Party nor in the broader political spectrum.<sup>84</sup>

The “colour revolution” narrative also serves to demonize regional actors and reinforce nationalist tropes. Political leaders and nations in the Balkans – especially Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – are portrayed as adversaries aligned with Western intelligence services. Historical traumas are invoked to reframe present-day opposition as a continuation of past betrayals.

For instance, National Assembly Speaker Ana Brnabić claimed that student protests were modelled on a “foreign strategy” tied to Croatian interests:

“How did these protests and blockades begin? [...] Since they do not have a majority in the student parliament, they follow a recipe from the *‘Blockade Cookbook’*, they establish a structure of student control over the faculty – a plenum. Hence the plenum; we do not have that here, it is a recipe from the *‘Blockade Cookbook’*. [...] Thus, from the *‘Blockade Cookbook’* we have arrived at the overthrow of Aleksandar Vučić, and at the same time this coincides with the strategic objective of Croatia.”

– Ana Brnabić, December 2024.<sup>85</sup>

This rhetoric has real-world consequences, including bans on entry for public figures like Croatian pop star Severina and journalists from Croatia and Slovenia, and deportation of both EU and non-EU citizens who supported student protests (students, NGO representatives, a physician, Italian pianist Davide Martello<sup>86</sup> and Russian artist Yar Bulavin).

Simultaneously, this rhetoric and retaliatory actions stoke nationalist sentiment in neighbouring countries. Consequently, ethnically charged incidents against Serb minority in cities like Split and Zagreb are seized upon as evidence of a hostile international environment – reinforcing the claim that a strong, “protective” leader for Serbs across the region is both justified and necessary.

Pro-Russian narratives are also a convenient political tool for securing the regime’s core electorate – primarily older, rural, socially conservative citizens with strong anti-Western views. As the regime’s broader support erodes due to economic hardship and social unrest, this loyal bloc becomes essential for electoral survival. As Milan Igrutinović aptly observes, these voters represent “a hill to die on” – the regime’s last bastion.<sup>87</sup>

On the international front, the prevalence of pro-Russian narratives supports Serbia’s strategy of geopolitical balancing between East and West. While Serbia continues to receive Western investments and engages in diplomacy with the EU, the regime resists alignment with EU’s political requirements and foreign and defence policy priorities – particularly on key issues like judicial, electoral, and media reforms, and sanctions on Russia. This approach allows the authorities to safeguard domestic political stability and preserve the existing power structure, yet it simultaneously constrains prospects for genuine democratic transformation and deeper alignment with EU policies.

This ambivalence serves Russia’s strategic interest: to prevent Serbia’s full integration into Western institutions. A Serbia that remains “in between” – non-aligned but dependent – is geopolitically useful to Moscow. As journalist Vesna Radojević notes, Serbia is increasingly becoming an isolated island surrounded by EU and NATO member states.<sup>88</sup>

Clear economic incentives also underpin the persistence of the pro-Russian narrative. Segments of the energy sector remain under the influence of Russian companies, while Serbian media outlets that disseminate pro-Russian content often enjoy financial advantages through government subsidies and privileged access to state resources. This dynamic fosters a clientelist network linking political, business, and media actors, thereby reinforcing entrenched patterns of dependency and loyalty. In the long term, such interconnections severely constrain the emergence of a genuinely pluralistic and independent media landscape. This narrative and dynamic could shift, however, if the government were to impose sanctions on Russia or assume full control of the Gazprom Neft oil company NIS.

## Target Audiences

Messages about the “colour revolution” are carefully tailored to different audiences, both domestic and international. The narrative operates on two levels: Domestically, it consolidates loyalty and suppresses dissent by activating the emotive frame of “defending the state”. For foreign audiences, it seeks to maintain a diplomatic balancing act between East and West by projecting stability and control.

## Preaching to the Choir

The primary domestic target audience of this narrative is the Serbian Progressive Party's electoral base – particularly elderly citizens (pensioners), rural populations, individuals with lower levels of education and qualifications, party loyalists and public sector dependents. Interlocutors note that the regime's rhetoric also resonates with socially isolated individuals and those with limited critical-thinking and digital/media literacy, who lack capacity to verify information or cross-check alternative sources on social platforms.<sup>89</sup>

Consequently, surveys indicate that almost 40% of SNS supporters think the deaths of sixteen people in Novi Sad were the result of sabotage by foreign intelligence services.<sup>90</sup>

The narrative also targets a specific emotional group: citizens disillusioned with the post-2000 democratic transition, as well as younger, more conservative cohorts who are born after 2000 and whose perceptions are shaped largely by regime-controlled media and conservative institutions.<sup>91</sup> The aim is to persuade both groups that change brings instability and disappointment, thereby discouraging mobilization and support for the protests.<sup>92</sup>

A peculiar phenomenon within the opposition spectrum is the presence of far-right actors who, while hostile to Vučić and accusing him of “selling Kosovo,” still embrace the regime's framing of the student protests as Western-sponsored.<sup>93</sup> This paradoxical alignment enables the government to reinforce the narrative through voices outside the ruling party and exploit ideological confusion within nationalist circles.

As journalist Vesna Radojević observes, even those who distrust Vučić sometimes adopt regime talking points, believing he is a “Western pawn” but still blaming protests on Western influence – thus inadvertently legitimizing government propaganda.<sup>94</sup>

While socio-demographic factors may influence the effectiveness of propaganda, the key difference lies in how attitudes have been shaped over decades by the media, as well as in individuals' susceptibility to such pressure.<sup>95</sup> Older, rural, and less-educated citizens who primarily consume pro-government television are more likely to accept the regime's narrative at face value.<sup>96</sup> By contrast, urban, educated, and digitally connected citizens – with access to independent platforms such as N1, Nova S, and social media – tend to be more resistant. This divide illustrates that perceptions of political reality in Serbia is largely shaped by the media sources people consume.

For example, viewers of Pink, Happy, or Informer are inclined to believe that the protests are part of a geopolitical conspiracy, whereas viewers of N1 are more likely to view protests as the public outrage over corruption and negligence.<sup>97</sup> The most striking evidence of this dynamic is the case of a retired woman who threatened to kill and stabbed the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, Natalija Jovanović. She told the court that she had been misled by watching Informer, which had targeted the dean for her firm support of the students during the blockade.<sup>98</sup> Unfortunately, this incident is not unique. A woman from a rural area near Kragujevac assaulted volunteers distributing aid after a major wildfire with a sickle, shouting: “Anyone who goes against Vučić – I have bullets for all of them.”

According to CRTA’s Executive Director, Raša Nedeljkov, regime-controlled messaging reaches virtually every household via national frequencies and influences all strata of society.<sup>99</sup> As a result, the government’s framing of key events is often accepted as fact unless citizens have access to alternative sources.

## Playing Both Sides

Serbia’s ruling elite has mastered the art of strategic ambiguity. The “colour revolution” narrative is a key tool in this dual communication strategy, used to curry favour with both Moscow and Brussels, depending on the audience.

To authoritarian regimes like Russia and China, Serbia casts itself as a frontline state resisting Western “colour revolutions” and the alleged subversion of national identity. Government officials use language familiar to these regimes – referring to protests as externally organized, illegitimate, and a threat to constitutional order.

For instance, following Serbia’s controversial export of ammunition to Ukraine, regime figures travelled to Moscow to reaffirm alignment with the Kremlin. In these meetings, Serbian representatives repeated the claim that the protests were orchestrated by foreign intelligence services and were part of a larger attempt to destabilize the region. This framing appealed to Russia’s own security doctrine, which sees “colour revolutions” as Western plots designed to weaken sovereign states.

Although Serbian decision-makers more often turn to Russia as their primary partner in advancing this propagandist narrative, China remains an important auxiliary factor for the country’s leadership amid the ongoing political crisis. Shortly before the canopy collapse and ensuing anti-lithium protests in August 2024, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a report outlining global “colour revolution” tactics.<sup>100</sup> Serbia appeared repeatedly in the document, with independent organisations like N1 and the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy explicitly identified. This report was then amplified by Serbian pro-government media, reinforcing an existing narrative of foreign interference.<sup>101</sup>

By December 2024, Vučić deepened this framing, saying on a pro-government talk show on TV Happy that Chinese officials had personally warned him about an impending “colour revolution”.<sup>102</sup> This public alignment with Beijing’s rhetoric underscores how China’s discourse is being instrumentalised within Serbia’s domestic political arena.

Yet after the canopy collapse, Beijing refrained from public comment, and Chinese companies involved in renovating the Novi Sad station canopy faced limited public scrutiny, having swiftly shifted responsibility to a Serbian subcontractor.<sup>103</sup> As Novi Sad mourned the victims, then-Prime Minister Miloš Vučević travelled to Shanghai in an apparent effort to temper public outrage toward the Chinese firms, particularly as Western media began linking the incident to the corrosive capital associated with the Belt and Road Initiative.

In the months that followed, Belgrade’s leadership continued to frame its relations with Beijing through the lens of political loyalty. At the military parade in Moscow, President Vučić told Xi Jinping that he had defeated “a coloured revolution,” a remark clearly intended to underscore Serbia’s reliability as a partner. President Xi responded by emphasising the need to “stay focused on our strategic partnership, strengthen our ironclad friendship, and deepen our mutually beneficial cooperation”.<sup>104</sup> By September, during a parade in Beijing, Vučić reinforced this narrative domestically, posting on Instagram that China had “always stood by Serbia, especially in difficult moments”.

Beijing’s measured rhetoric throughout this period suggests a deliberate balancing act: maintaining a strategic partnership with Serbia while avoiding direct association with the political fallout of the Novi Sad incident and nationwide student-led mass protests it triggered.

In parallel, the regime communicates a very different message to Western policymakers. By selectively highlighting certain protest symbols – such as Orthodox imagery (flags bearing the image of Christ Pantocrator) or slogans claiming Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo (“No surrender – Kosovo is Serbia”) – Serbian officials use diplomatic channels to portray the demonstrations as being dominated by radical or nationalist groups connected to Russian paramilitary or intelligence services.<sup>105</sup>

The goal is not necessarily to convince Western observers of this narrative’s truth, but to neutralize foreign criticism of domestic repression and buy time, as well as sow confusion among Western diplomats unfamiliar with the local context or focused primarily on geopolitical stability. By presenting itself as the “lesser evil” in a polarized political environment, the regime seeks to maintain Western support – or at least indifference – while continuing domestic repression.

Despite the regime’s authoritarian drift and repressive actions, EU officials and Western governments have often remained silent or cautious in their public criticism. This restraint does not indicate acceptance of the regime’s narrative, but rather stems from geopolitical interests that outweigh democratic concerns. Chief among these interests are limiting Russia and Chinese influence, securing key supply chains (such as lithium and arms exports) and maintaining strategic cooperation on regional political and security issues, especially Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As long as Serbia remains a reliable economic and geopolitical partner, Western actors are often reluctant to challenge its internal policies. This creates a permissive environment for the regime’s anti-democratic behaviour – despite growing awareness in European institutions that such tactics threaten long-term regional stability.

While the “colour revolution” framing helps the regime maintain internal control and manage foreign audiences, it carries real risks. Constant alignment with Moscow in rhetoric – even if not in policy – may eventually raise doubts among Western investors and increase Serbia’s perceived political risk.

Experts warn that Serbia should not be viewed merely as a puppet of either Russia or the West, as it has its own motives and agency to manoeuvre both sides.<sup>106</sup> It is rather an autonomous authoritarian regime that skilfully manipulates both camps to preserve power and maintain a clientelist criminal network.<sup>107</sup> For this type of regime, any support is welcome – regardless of whether it comes from Moscow or Berlin.

## A Struggle to Remain in Power

At its core, the “colour revolution” narrative functions as a mechanism to preserve political power. It serves to delegitimize protest movements, criminalize dissent, and position the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and President Aleksandar Vučić as the sole protectors of constitutional order and national sovereignty. By framing civic mobilization as foreign subversion, the regime seeks to legitimize internal repression as national self-defence and dissuade public participation in democratic processes.

Professor Filip Ejdus points out that the government’s primary aim is to stay in power, with the narrative serving as a means to discredit the opposition as an extension of foreign powers that, against the will of the people, seeks to install a puppet regime that would “weaken Serbia’s sovereignty,” “recognize Kosovo,” “brand Serbs as a genocidal people,” “abandon the Republika Srpska,” “allow Vojvodina and Sandžak to secede,” “impose sanctions on Russia” – and anything else the authorities choose to include in the narrative as needed.<sup>108</sup>

According to Ana Marković, a psychologist specializing in digital media, SNS leadership systematically weaponizes fear by drawing on myths from the 1990s that portray Serbia as a country under constant siege from internal and external enemies.<sup>109</sup> Vujo Ilić, research associate at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade, adds that the narrative is designed to exploit the fears of the “losers of the transition” – those who felt betrayed by post-2000 democratic reforms.<sup>110</sup> The regime’s implicit message is: if you support the protests – by attending demonstrations, offering (non)material support, or voting – you’ll be used as pawns in a Western conspiracy and discarded again – just like after October 5th.<sup>111</sup>

Some sources observe that President Vučić is equating himself with the state, thereby recasting any criticism as a personal attack. For years, he portrayed himself as the target of an international plot, collapsing the roles of perpetrator and victim.<sup>112</sup> Two days after the large commemorative gathering in Novi Sad, President Vučić appeared on the talk show “Ćirilica”, where he revealed that security forces were “chasing two snipers who are in Belgrade. We haven’t been able to find them for three days now”.<sup>113</sup> As this narrative unfolded, it served to heighten a sense of insecurity and reinforce the image of Vučić as a besieged leader under constant threat.

As many intellectuals observe, Vučić no longer separates his private fate from his grip on office and cannot conceive of life beyond the machinery of power.<sup>114</sup> This personalization of rule renders any opposition inherently illegitimate and reinforces the claim that the regime must be defended at all costs.

In line with the above, the authorities seek to prevent mass mobilization from translating into electoral change. To achieve this, they spread disinformation suggesting that demonstrators are attempting to stage a “Maidan in Belgrade,” “violently overthrow the regime,” “destabilize Serbia,” or even provoke a “civil war”. Such securitization of the opposition actors echoes the policies of Russian President Vladimir Putin and serves the same objectives – suppressing the opposition, pluralism, and democracy.

The regime employs inflammatory rhetoric and newspeak – often echoed across multiple media outlets – to dehumanize, disqualify and criminalize its opponents.<sup>115</sup> Protesters are labelled as “blockers,” “terrorists,” “Islamic fanatics,” “Soros’ children,” “Nazis,” “Ustaše,” “Shqiptar” (a slur for Albanians), “anarcho-communists,” “Bolshevik plenists,” “separatists,” “the mob,” “vermin,” etc. This securitized language transforms peaceful protestors into existential threats, creating moral and legal justification for state-led crackdowns.

The regime’s messaging often provokes ridicule among students and citizens rather than fear. As Professor Filip Ejdus notes, students increasingly view the narrative of foreign conspiracy as absurd or cartoonish. Yet Professor Ejdus cautions that mockery should not obscure the seriousness of the threat: this is a dangerous disinformation campaign backed by deeply authoritarian policies that further entrench authoritarian rule and legitimize a wide range of repressive actions.<sup>116</sup>

Defamation campaigns tend to peak during politically sensitive moments – such as local elections or large demonstrations. These claims are strategically inserted into the public discourse to generate fear, anger, and confusion – diverting attention from protestors’ core demands: fighting corruption, ensuring accountability and transparency, and securing free elections.

This nationalist and anti-intellectual narrative also serves to consolidate and mobilize the SNS core electorate and allied groups (pensioners, the military, the SOC, conservatives). By claiming that protests lead to chaos and civil war, the authorities cultivate a siege mentality in which the “nation” and the “state” are allegedly endangered, not a corrupt authoritarian regime.<sup>117</sup> The result is a defensive esprit de corps: supporters recast themselves as patriots shielding Serbia from foreign “centres of power,” not as backers of a corrupt regime. This logic has culminated in initiatives such as the “Ćacilend”, a paramilitary camp in downtown Belgrade, marketed as patriotic defence.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the saturation of state-controlled media with regime narratives, the propaganda is showing signs of weakness. The significant turnout at protests – especially among young people – and the lacklustre attendance at SNS rallies reveal a disconnect between official messaging and lived reality.

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3 Ćacilend is an illegal encampment set up by the SNS in March in Pionirski Park, located adjacent to both the Presidency and the National Assembly. It has since become a paramilitary-style base for hooligans, criminals, and mercenaries, from which protesters are regularly intimidated, harassed, and sometimes physically attacked.

Pro-government rallies, though often poorly attended, are portrayed as mass shows of support. In reality, attendance is frequently manufactured through busing in public sector employees, offering per diem payments and mobilizing party infrastructure. The contrast with spontaneous, high-turnout student protests is stark – and highlights the regime’s growing struggle to present itself as a genuinely popular movement.

## Resistance to Change: Effects of Pro-Russian and “Colour Revolution” Narratives on Society

In Serbia, the “colour revolution” narrative – amplified through pro-Russian rhetoric – functions not merely as political messaging, but as a powerful ideological framework that obstructs democratic development. Its primary effect is not physical repression alone, but the creation of an environment in which political change becomes unthinkable, thus prolonging the political hegemony of the ruling party.

The narrative effectively obscures the internal causes of civic protest and enables the regime to externalize blame for domestic crises. Rather than acknowledging systemic failures and addressing the underlying causes of discontent – such as the corruption that led to the Novi Sad canopy collapse – authorities cast unrest as the work of “foreign agents,” thereby avoiding accountability, delegitimizing protestors and suppressing reform-oriented discourse. This tactic also reinforces anti-Western sentiment, which the regime uses both as a mobilizing tool and as a pretext for resisting alignment with European democratic standards.

As Raša Nedeljkov, Executive Director of CRTA, explains: “Citizens don’t have to openly support Russia – it is enough that, when asked about EU accession, they answer: ‘I don’t know.’”

This ambiguity allows the regime to argue that it cannot impose sanctions on Russia or adopt key EU reforms because “the people aren’t ready”. By cultivating this doubt, the regime maintains the geopolitical status quo and diminishes Serbia’s prospects for EU accession: appearing committed to EU membership on paper, while avoiding actual convergence with EU policies and practices – an outcome that aligns Russia’s regional policy.

In the battle of narratives, the pro-European block – civic associations, independent media, and certain political parties – is losing ground; its messages seldom penetrate audiences already shaped by ideology and made deeply distrustful by systematic defamation.

By branding protests as tools of ‘foreign sponsors’ – from the Open Society Foundation to Western embassies – pro-government media seed distrust among social groups and opposition parties. This strategic conspiratorial framing fragments the opposition and leaves society less able to mount effective democratic resistance, i.e. weakens democratic pushback. As a result, authoritarian rule becomes more entrenched and the idea that Serbia faces outside enemies – requiring a “strong leader” – is reinforced.

By labelling protests as violent foreign-backed coups the regime legitimizes a wide range of repressive actions, including mass arrests and surveillance of protestors, dismissal of

educators, raids on NGOs, financial cuts to universities, and the suppression of free speech and assembly.<sup>118</sup> Under the banner of “defending the state,” civil liberties are reframed as threats and criminalized – making public participation dangerous and punishing dissent.

The most dangerous effect of the narrative is democratic paralysis. Even among citizens who are dissatisfied with the government, the perception that all alternatives are foreign-controlled, corrupt, or naive discourages political engagement. This leads to widespread voter apathy, civic disengagement and belief that no meaningful change is possible.

As Milan Igrutinović from the Institute of European Studies notes, the key variable in future elections may not be who supports the democratic opposition – but who stays home. Voter demobilization, encouraged by fear and disinformation, is a cornerstone of regime strategy. The assessment is that, with high turnout, the ruling party loses – hence propaganda messages deliberately encourage apathy and discourage electoral participation.

Beyond geopolitical alignment, pro-Russian narratives function to advance anti-democratic worldviews and erode public confidence in democratic governance itself. Western liberal democracy is depicted as a “decadent” and externally imposed model, while Russia’s so-called “traditional values” are framed as more authentic and better suited to Serbian national identity. In this way, the legitimacy of liberal-democratic institutions is systematically undermined: elections lose significance, judicial independence is disparaged, and free media are stigmatized.

This worldview has been further reinforced by the return of Donald Trump to power, whose centralisation of authority and weakening of institutional checks and balances have accelerated the erosion of liberal democratic norms.<sup>119</sup> Simultaneously, the promotion of the MAGA movement – built on the notion that the United States was once “great” but has declined due to foreign influence – mirrors and amplifies similar anti-liberal narratives abroad.

On the contrary, students articulated demands that stand in clear opposition to authoritarian governance. According to Raša Nedeljkov, ‘the awakening of students and their transformational impact on citizens have, for the first time, created a significant advantage for democratic tendencies over the iron fist.’<sup>120</sup> He argues the messaging wasn’t meant for student supporters or new converts, but for the ruling party’s core voters – to consolidate and mobilize them.

Long term, pro-Russian propaganda shrinks the space for critical thinking. The intention is not primarily to alter convictions but to arrest scrutiny of facts. Continued exposure to propaganda forecloses alternative interpretations of reality, suppressing dialogue and pluralism. In outlets that promote pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian, and anti-Western narratives, dissenting views are excluded and message saturation – often overlapping and conflicting – dulls people’s ability to reason and think critically.

Conspiracy theories additionally foster beliefs that “nothing is as it seems” and that “no one can be trusted,” heightening susceptibility to manipulation and discouraging civic engagement. The foregoing dynamics erode cultural dialogue and deepen social polarization, while the degradation of education drives a broader decline in functional,

media, and digital literacy. As a result, society’s capacity for rational debate and informed decision-making deteriorates. In such circumstances, political apathy grows and confidence in the possibility of change diminishes – prompting withdrawal from public life or emigration. These trends leave profound and enduring effects on the population’s mental and physical health.

## Counter-Narrative as a Response to the “Colour Revolution”

According to Nikola Burazer, Programme Director of the Centre for Contemporary Democracy, “everything happening on Serbia’s streets constitutes a counter-narrative. There are so many actors, messages, and social groups in flux that it is difficult to single out one element. Instead, a broader picture of society emerges – beyond parties, movements, or specific ideologies – raising its voice against systemic injustice, authoritarianism, and what many experience as an abnormal situation. In this sense, the ongoing protests dismantle the regimes’ ‘colour revolution’ narrative on a daily basis”.

Despite the dominance of state-backed messaging, there are growing efforts to challenge the “colour revolution” narrative and offer a credible alternative. This emerging counter-narrative – driven largely by civil society, independent media, and student movements – seeks to reclaim the space for democratic discourse and expose the regime’s disinformation tactics.

However, while individual voices and organisations push back, a cohesive and sustained communication strategy that could rival the state’s propaganda machine remains underdeveloped.

One of the greatest challenges facing opposition forces is their lack of access to national media channels. Unlike the regime, which controls outlets with nationwide reach, civil society groups rely on fragmented platforms – websites, podcasts, social media, and independent TV stations with limited coverage.

Without mass media access, their messaging remains fragmented, and risk being lost in a sea of propaganda and largely confined to digitally literate audiences. This restricts their ability to build broad-based consensus or counter the deep penetration of state-aligned narratives in rural areas and among older populations.

Despite structural limitations, public trust in pro-government media is eroding, while confidence in independent outlets – above all N1 – is on the rise, signalling a growing need for critical reporting. Platforms such as KRIK, Raskrinkavanje, Radar, BIRN, CINS, Radio Free Europe, and Nova ekonomija, among others, are playing a critical role in fact-checking disinformation, exposing pro-Russian propaganda, and elevating alternative viewpoints. These organizations provide the public with investigative journalism, contextual analysis and verification of regime claims. Although their reach is still modest, their influence is growing – particularly among urban, educated, and younger demographics.

## Students as the Leading Voice of Resistance

Among all actors, the student movement has emerged as the most coherent and impactful counter-force to the regime’s narrative. By building broad coalitions across ideological and demographic lines, it now represents the strongest challenger to the catch-all SNS coalition.<sup>121</sup>

Over the past year, students have initiated nationwide actions such as “A Student in Every Village”,<sup>122</sup> general strike, organised protest marches across Serbia and produced high-quality digital content (explainer videos, podcasts and educational series) succeeding to mobilize a significant portion of the population and foster a sense of solidarity among people from different regions.<sup>123</sup> They also made efforts to engage EU institutions through creative actions – cycling to Strasbourg and running a marathon to Brussels – articulating the values for which they stand.

The students’ demands centre on core democratic principles – such as the separation of powers, transparency and accountability, the fight against corruption, media freedom – directly challenging regime’s discourse that seeks to delegitimise any criticism. Most of the students’ demands enjoy exceptionally high levels of public support, which creates the potential for further expanding support for the protests.<sup>124</sup>

By focusing their message on lived realities – like corruption, inequality, and systemic neglect – rather than geopolitics, the students have successfully re-centred the national conversation on domestic accountability. Consequently, 44% of citizens perceive corruption as the key problem Serbia faces, which further legitimises the students’ message.<sup>125</sup>

Despite sustained criticism, the student movement’s communications strategy is notable for its restraint and strategic neutrality. Students have avoided alignment with opposition parties and NGOs, declined to take explicit position on contentious foreign policy topics and focused on shared civic values rather than ideological agendas. This non-polarizing approach has allowed them to build legitimacy across a wide swath of society and sidestep regime attempts to weaken the movement and portray them as foreign-backed. It has also helped to maintain internal cohesion and broad public support.

## Obstacles to Scaling the Counter-Narrative

While students and independent media have made impressive gains, main challenges that remain are limited outreach to rural, older, and regime-loyalist demographics, lack of infrastructure for sustained political engagement and difficulty transforming protest energy into electoral momentum.

Without access to national frequencies, the counter-narrative risks becoming trapped in an echo chamber – preaching to those already convinced, while leaving others vulnerable to regime propaganda. Experts argue that improving outreach to the roughly 40% of regime loyalists will require targeted messaging tailored to skeptical audiences, use of trusted community voices (e.g., local teachers, activists, priests, professionals) and strategic alliances with actors who can reach beyond traditional activist circles.

Ultimately, scaling the counter-narrative will depend less on message quality than on the movement’s ability to penetrate new social environments and build durable, trust-based channels of communication.

Indications that a shift in power may be possible emerged during several local elections – in Kosjerić and Zaječar (June), as well as in Negotin, Mionica, and Sečanj (November) – where student-endorsed lists and candidates captured a substantial portion of the vote, challenging the near-total dominance of the SNS in rural areas.

## Regional Reverberations of the “Colour Revolution”

Once established in Serbia, the narrative is quickly echoed by media outlets in neighbouring countries, aided by a shared language, overlapping media ownership, and cross-border political affiliations.<sup>126</sup> Because Serbian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin media operate in mutually intelligible languages, the narrative circulates across borders with minimal adjustments. In some cases, Serbian media groups maintain ownership or operational ties in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, further facilitating this transfer.

Although many mainstream media outlets in these countries report objectively and accurately on student actions in Serbia, dominant media outlets that propagate pro-Russian narratives are Montenegrin portals Borba, IN4S, and Alo Online, and RS-based public broadcasters such as RTRS, SRNA and ATV.

In Montenegro, the narrative resonates in the context of political polarisation (pro-Montenegrin vs pro-Serbian identity) and external influence (EU/NATO vs Russia/Serbia). Media aligned with pro-Serbian or pro-Russia positions use the “colour revolution” frame to depict protests or reforms as part of a Western agenda rather than purely domestic. A notable example is the Montenegrin portal Borba, which adopts and amplifies the Serbian narrative of an alleged “colour revolution” for domestic audiences in Montenegro. One of Borba’s founder is Dražen Živković, who also serves as editor-in-chief of Prva TV Montenegro.

Between March and August, Živković authored 25 opinion pieces on the protests in Serbia, some of which were reprinted in pro-government Serbian outlets such as *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, *Kurir*, and *Alo*. These columns consistently conveyed support for President Vučić. The title alone – *Aleksandar Vučić – Vučić’s Miniature of a Brilliant Manoeuvre: From “Leader Under Siege” to People’s Leader!* (*Politika*, 13 April); *The Final Act of a Grand Chess Game: Vučić’s Quiet Checkmate, Students Shatter the Opposition to Pieces!* (*Alo*, 22 May) *Aleksandar Vučić, a Phenomenon in Global Politics: A Leader Without a Day of Peace in a Country Without War!* (*Večernje novosti*, 6 July); and *The Last Pillar in the Defence of Serbia’s Sovereignty* (*Kurir*, 9 August) – illustrate not only an uncritical endorsement of the Serbian regime tactic to crackdown protests, but an active amplification of regime’s framing of the protests.

According to a former editor of *Vijesti* Srdan Kosović, the scale and coordination of this kind of media alignment is unprecedented. He argues that “some editors of Montenegrin editors and journalists have tied their fate so closely to Vučić that they are willing to disseminate certain narratives on his behalf”.

By contrast, Montenegrin politicians of Serbian origin have been cautious in addressing events in Serbia and have avoided invoking the “colour revolution” narrative. Their restraint likely stems from the political lessons of October 2024, when an attempt by part of the ruling majority, led by Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, to introduce a “foreign agents law” provoked significant backlash from local NGOs and prompted concerns from the United States and the European Union.

In Bosnia’s entity Republika Srpska, the “colour revolution” narrative dovetails into existing political frames of external interference in domestic affairs. Within this narrative, opposition figures are often portrayed as “agents of foreign powers”. Local Serb nationalist leaders use it to resist judicial and institutional reforms and to frame interventions from international courts, the UN High Representative, or the EU as acts of Western interference.

Milorad Dodik is the primary proponent of this narrative, which he deploys to rally constituencies around a “defence” of national sovereignty or existing leadership. The invocation of a “colour revolution” narrative in BiH has served as a tool in the struggle between Bosniak, Croat and Serb political elites. It has allowed some Serb nationalist leaders in RS to frame any threat of international judiciary action, or significant reform authorised by the Bosnian state or external actors, as part of a “plot” rather than genuine accountability. This fosters political rhetoric that emphasises external “enemies”, undermines trust in institutions, and reinforces the ethnic-entity divide. For Bosnia’s complex state structure, it deepens fragmentation: each entity may interpret “reform” or “protest” differently depending on the narrative of external threat, hampering unified state-level responses.

According to some sources, student protests in Serbia are largely ignored by media under the control of the RS regime. When coverage is unavoidable – as in the case of clashes in Novi Sad – the narrative presented by Serbian pro-government tabloids is simply reproduced. The narrative migrates into the Bosnian media space via high-level statements of Serbian and RS officials originally aired in Serbia or disseminated by Serbian-aligned outlets, then localized to resonate with the Republika Srpska audience. In the Bosnian context, the narrative gains traction by tapping into fears over national sovereignty and framing the Serbian protests as connected to broader threats against Republika Srpska. Vučić has claimed that foreign powers are organising a “colour revolution” in Serbia aimed at weakening the country so that Republika Srpska can ultimately be “destroyed”.<sup>127</sup>

Unlike in Montenegro, individuals in Republika Srpska who publicly support the protests face serious repercussions. Milan Miličević, the mayor of Teslić and former president of the SDS; Ljubiša Petrović, the mayor of Bijeljina, also from the SDS; and Nebojša Vukanović, an MP from the opposition List for Justice and Order in the National Assembly of Republika Srpska, are the three politicians who openly backed the protests in Serbia. In response, President Vučić sent his cousin and unofficial envoy to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Adam Šukalo, to warn them of potential consequences.<sup>128</sup>

One month later, Miličević was arrested on corruption charges, and the SDS has been in disarray ever since. According to media reports, Belgrade directly requested his arrest from the Republika Srpska Prosecutor’s Office.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, the police had earlier arrested Bijeljina mayor Ljubiša Petrović on corruption charges. Meanwhile, Nebojša Vukanović’s car was set on fire twice within six months – acts widely believed to be linked to his public support of the protests.<sup>130</sup>

Ultimately, the diffusion of the “colour revolution” narrative across the region reveals a coordinated ecosystem in which political elites and aligned media mutually reinforce each other, transforming a Serbian domestic storyline into a tool for constraining democratic space, discrediting reform, and consolidating power throughout the Western Balkans.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the “colour revolution” narrative in Serbia has evolved into a central pillar of the ruling regime’s strategy for maintaining power. Originally associated with democratic mobilization in post-socialist societies, the concept has been systematically reframed by Serbia’s ruling elite – above all by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Aleksandar Vučić – to delegitimize civic dissent and recast domestic grievances as externally engineered threats. This shift is neither accidental nor merely rhetorical: it is embedded in state institutions, amplified through a tightly controlled media ecosystem, reinforced by external actors, and strategically deployed during moments of political crisis or popular unrest.

One of the most consequential findings concerns the revisionist reinterpretation of October 5, 2000. By reframing the democratic overthrow of the Milošević regime as a Western-orchestrated catastrophe, the current leadership has weaponized collective disappointment and post-transition disillusionment to argue that political change inevitably leads to decline. This historical reframing serves as a powerful deterrent against contemporary mobilization, particularly among citizens who associate democratic transition with socioeconomic hardship rather than institutional progress.

The research further shows that Russian state actors, media outlets, and security-linked cyber operations play a supportive role in reinforcing this narrative. Crucially, its primary architects and drivers remain domestic political elites, who instrumentalize foreign alignment to consolidate power rather than to pursue genuine ideological commitments.

The analysis reveals that the narrative operates on several mutually reinforcing levels. Domestically, it securitizes protest and political opposition by framing them as attempts at unconstitutional overthrow, thereby justifying repression, mass detentions, surveillance, and the criminalization of civil society actors. At the same time, it externalizes responsibility for corruption, institutional failure, and state negligence in the case of the Novi Sad canopy collapse, enabling the regime to evade accountability while redirecting public anger toward imagined foreign conspirators. This narrative is further reinforced through an anti-Western, conspiratorial framing that weakens Serbia’s EU trajectory while cultivating the kind of

geopolitical ambiguity the regime can exploit. This discourse also fosters political apathy by cultivating the belief that all alternatives to the current leadership are either foreign-controlled or inherently destabilizing. Finally, it institutionalizes disinformation through coordinated political, media, and security structures that normalize propaganda and narrow the space for democratic dialogue.

This narrative has far-reaching consequences for Serbia’s democratic processes: it entrenches authoritarian governance while shrinking the space in which political change can be imagined, encouraging citizens to believe that viable alternatives are either unattainable or inherently dangerous.

Despite the dominance of this narrative, the research also identifies meaningful points of resistance. Student-led protests, supported by segments of independent media and civil society, have articulated a counter-narrative grounded in accountability, anti-corruption demands, and lived experience rather than geopolitics. Public opinion data suggests that a majority of citizens increasingly reject the regime’s claims of foreign orchestration and recognize the protests as responses to domestic injustice. Nevertheless, structural constraints – especially unequal access to national media and persistent propaganda saturation – limit the reach and durability of this counter-narrative.

Future research could further explore the long-term psychological and social effects of conspiracy-based governance, the role of digital platforms in both propagating and resisting the narrative, and the regional diffusion of Serbia’s disinformation strategies. Comparative studies with other hybrid regimes – particularly those influenced by Russian security doctrine – may illuminate broader patterns of how “colour revolution” narratives function as tools of authoritarian resilience.

Overall, the findings indicate that the “colour revolution” narrative is designed to normalize repression, erode democratic institutions and civil liberties, and preserve an entrenched power structure. The Serbian case also shows that the battle over narratives is inseparable from the struggle over democratic institutions themselves. Challenging this discourse is therefore not only a matter of correcting misinformation, but a necessary condition for restoring democratic agency, rebuilding trust, and safeguarding the integrity of Serbia’s political future.

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for Security Policy

February 2026