

Essay

Daniela Simon / Danica Trifunjagić

Between the National Flag and the Feminist Banner Female Agency in Student Protests in Serbia

Abstract

Between the National Flag and the Feminist Banner: Female Agency in Student Protests in Serbia

The student protests that emerged in Serbia after the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy in November 2024 have become one of the largest civic mobilizations in the country's recent history. Women have played a particularly visible role as students, activists, mothers, and relatives of victims, shaping the movement's public image and moral authority. This essay explores how feminist claims, maternal identities, national symbols, and demands for political accountability coexist within the protests. It argues that these different forms of female agency are not necessarily contradictory but together contribute to the movement's broad social appeal and political legitimacy.

PD Dr. Daniela Simon

earned her doctorate and habilitation at the University of Tübingen and teaches Southeastern European history there. She is specialized in the history of Southeastern Europe, Yugoslavia, cultural diversity and hybridity in the Habsburg Monarchy, and the history of German-speaking communities in Southeastern Europe.

Dr. Danica Trifunjagić

is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for History at the Technical University of Darmstadt. Apart from the University of Novi Sad, where she obtained her PhD, she conducted research at several universities in Germany and Austria, on topics such as post-Yugoslav literature, minorities, belonging and social movements.

Contact: daniela.simon@uni-tuebingen.de / danica.trifunjagic@tu-darmstadt.de

This essay forms part of the author's joint research project "Student Protest, Media and Democratic Change in Serbia (2024–2026)." The article was completed in June 2026.

Corruption, Protest, and Visibility

“Corruption kills”, one of the most widely shared slogans of the Serbian student protests, captures the sentiment that has driven one of the largest waves of civic mobilization in Serbia’s recent history. The collapse of the newly renovated railway station canopy in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, which claimed the lives of sixteen people, quickly came to symbolize more than a tragic accident. For many citizens, it exposed a broader system of corruption, negligence, and institutional irresponsibility.

What began as mourning soon developed into a broader civic movement concerned with accountability, justice, and the future of Serbian society. Following the blockade of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade in late November 2024, some eighty faculties across Serbia joined the movement in the days and weeks that followed. Mass demonstrations followed in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Niš, drawing hundreds of thousands of participants and eventually culminating in demands for early parliamentary elections. Although the protests have since lost some of their initial momentum, they continue to shape Serbia’s political and public life.

The rapid expansion of the movement revealed that the students had touched a nerve far beyond the universities. Demonstrations attracted not only students but also teachers, artists, lawyers, pensioners, and entire families. As observers of these events, we the authors were initially interested in how the protests were represented in the media and how they compared to earlier student mobilizations, particularly those of 1996–1997, triggered by fraud in local elections.¹ Among the countless images emerging from the protests, women appeared everywhere: at the front of marches, in student assemblies, in media appearances, and increasingly among those facing intimidation and violence. Their visibility raises a broader question about the character of the movement itself. What does the prominent role of women reveal about the values, symbols, and political language of Serbia’s contemporary protest movement?

One reason for this visibility lies in the movement’s unusual structure. Unlike many earlier protest movements in Serbia, the student protests deliberately avoided producing recognizable leaders. Decisions were made collectively in student plenums, which were open to all students (but no one else), while different representatives were regularly delegated to communicate with the public. When it came to communicating with the public, the students opted primarily for social media, where they announced their demands, decisions, and activities. On the one hand, this strategy ensured that they communicated directly with the public and that their statements could not be misinterpreted. On the other hand, however, it left room for interpretation (framing) in traditional media, which is still consumed by a large portion of the (predominantly older) population.² A few media outlets (see below) were granted the “privilege” of speaking directly with student representatives, particularly in the early stages of the protests. The outlet first had to submit a request to the student assemblies, which then decided whether to grant it and which student would

1 Daniela Simon and Danica Trifunjađić, “Die Studierendenproteste in Serbien 2024/25: Zwischen Trauer, Symbolpolitik und internationaler Resonanz”, *Zeitgeschichte-online*, September 12, 2025, accessed on June 16, 2026; Same, “Threatened Orders, Contested Frames: Media Narratives of Student Protest in Serbia, 1996–1997 and 2024–2025”, in *Protests and New Democratic Imaginaries in Serbia*, ed. Florian Bieber, Gazela Pudar Draško and Igor Išpanović (Routledge, forthcoming 2026); Same, “The Framing Potential of Headlines: Student Protests in Serbia, 1996–1997 and 2024–2025”, *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* (forthcoming 2026).

2 OSCE Mission to Serbia, “Stariji od 65 godina kao korisnici medija u Srbiji [People 65 and older as media users in Serbia]”, *OSCE Mission to Serbia*.



Demonstration on March 8, 2026 (International Women's Day): *Žene u prvim redovima* (Women in the Front Rows), Photo: <https://protesti.pics/osmi-mart-u-dva-cina>

represent them. They usually sent different representatives to prevent any leaders from emerging within the movement. Female students frequently appeared on political talk shows such as the renowned “*Utišak nedelje*” (Impression of the Week), hosted by Olja Bečković. Other notable appearances included (often feminist) podcasts, such as “*Tampon Zona*” and “*Agelast*.”³ As a result, numerous young women emerged as public faces of the movement while simultaneously challenging traditional assumptions about political authority and expertise.

Yet female visibility was not confined to media appearances. This was most evident on the streets. Women marched in the front rows, organized logistics, coordinated university occupations, and often served as spokespersons during demonstrations. Their presence did not take the form of a separate women's movement. Rather, female perspectives became deeply embedded in the protest culture itself, shaping its language, symbols, and influencing the way emotions were expressed and experienced.

Women in the Front Rows

International Women's Day 2025 offered perhaps the clearest illustration of the role women had come to play within the protest movement. Under the slogan “Women in the Front Rows” (*Žene u prvim redovima*), students and feminist organizations jointly organized demonstrations that connected the demand for political accountability with concerns about gender-based violence and social inequality in Serbia. Alongside the fifteen minutes

3 *Agelast*, www.youtube.com/@agelast; *Tampon zona*, www.youtube.com/@tamponzona.



Autonomija – granica koju su pregazili (Autonomy – A Line That Was Crossed).

Photo: <https://protesti.pics/autonomija-granica-koju-su-pregazili>

of silence⁴ (at that time, there were 15 victims of the canopy collapse; one more would die 13 days later) observed for the victims of the Novi Sad tragedy, protesters added four additional minutes to commemorate women killed in acts of femicide during the first three months of the year. The symbolism was striking. Issues often treated as separate – corruption, institutional failure, violence against women, and democratic accountability – were brought together within a single protest ritual. In doing so, participants suggested that these were not isolated problems but different manifestations of the same political and social crisis.

For many participants, the prominent role of women required little explanation. Maria Elena Natošević, a psychology student from Belgrade and member of the informal initiative “Feminism for Everyone” (Feminizam za svakoga), described female participation as something almost self-evident. Women, she argued, had repeatedly shown their willingness to stand in the front rows, protect others, and endure the risks associated with public protest. Her remarks reflected a broader reality: women were not merely supporting the movement but actively shaping it. “I think the protests are the best example of how women are just as committed, if not more so, when it comes to defending themselves, standing their ground, standing up for someone, and taking a hit – all the things we’ve seen. I think we women

4 The significance of this ritual has been recognized as a legitimization strategy. Aleksandra Salamurović, “Diskursiv-sprachliche Legitimierungsstrategien in aktuellen Protesten der Studierenden in Serbien”, in (De)Legitimation von Protest – Praktiken, Diskurse, Akteure, ed. Friedemann Vogel and Antje Wilton (Universität Siegen, in print).

have really shown our strength in these protests”, said Natošević.⁵ A single sentence, uttered during the Women’s Day demonstrations, captured this mood particularly well. Asked about the traditional symbolism of March 8, one young woman replied: “I want a revolution, forget the rose – I’ll buy it myself. That means nothing to me as long as nothing changes in the system.”⁶

The statement quickly circulated across social media because it expressed a generational shift in political expectations. The symbolic recognition traditionally associated with Women’s Day no longer seemed sufficient. What mattered was not a flower, but political change. The remark was simultaneously feminist, political, and deeply personal – an insistence that dignity could no longer be separated from questions of accountability and democratic reform. One student, Milica, recalled a plenary meeting in spring 2025 during which a male colleague jokingly suggested: “Please let the girls do everything – they are much more organized and meticulous than we are”.⁷ Her recollection captures something frequently mentioned by participants: the occupations created new forms of cooperation that often cut across conventional gender expectations.

The anecdote is amusing, but it also reveals something important. Rather than describing a concession made by men, Milica portrayed a situation in which female authority had become entirely unremarkable. Within the temporary microcosm of the blockades, traditional gender expectations did not disappear, but they often became less relevant than practical necessity. Tasks were assigned to those willing and able to perform them. Leadership emerged through participation rather than formal hierarchy.

The decline in the intensity of the student protests was also reflected in the demonstration held on International Women’s Day in Belgrade 2026, under the motto “8th of March Every Day” (Svaki dan 8. Mart) and “Come out and Fight” (Izađi, izbori se), indicating a fight for both women’s and civic rights. This time, the demonstrations were organized by feminist organizations, and the protesters advocated both for women’s rights and for early parliamentary elections. In Novi Sad, the protest was organized by the student movement, under the motto “Courage is Feminine” (Hrabrost je ženskog roda). The messages remained the same, but significantly fewer people took part.

What was striking about the 2026 demonstrations was the extent to which general feminist concerns and current political demands intertwined. The demonstrators commemorate the victims of gender-based violence, demand laws to protect women and girls, and criticize unequal access to healthcare and education – and they place these issues on the same level as the central demands of the student movement: an investigation into the roof collapse at the train station in Novi Sad, free elections, and independent media.

5 “Mislim da su protesti idealan primer koliko su žene jednako, ako ne i više zastupljene po pitanju odbrane kada zatreba, da stanu, da budu tu za nekoga, da prime udarac i sve to što smo gledali da se dešavalo. Mislim da smo se dobro pokazale u ovim protestima i dešavanjima.” Maja Savić, “U Bačkoj Topoli o ulozi žena u studentskim protestima: Žene su u revolucijama vidljivije i glasne, a kada se promena desi – nestanu [In Bačka Topola on the role of women in student protests: Women are visible and vocal in revolutions, but when the change happens – they disappear]”, *Magločistač*, March 8, 2025, accessed on June 16, 2026.

6 “Ma hoću revoluciju, pusti ružu, kupiću je sama. Ništa mi to ne znači dok se u sistemu zaista nešto ne promeni.” Iva Manojlović, “Ma pusti ružu – hoću revoluciju!”, *Deutsche Welle*, March 8, 2025, accessed on June 16, 2026.

7 “Ljudi, molim vas dajte devojkama da urade sve, one su toliko pedantnije i organizovanije od nas.” Manojlović, “Ma pusti ružu – hoću revoluciju!”

Between Feminism and Tradition

Yet visibility came at a price. The more women shaped the public image of the movement, the more exposed they became to hostility, intimidation, and violence. Female students often occupied the front lines of demonstrations, partly because their presence carried symbolic weight and could discourage police intervention. At the same time, this position made them particularly vulnerable whenever confrontations occurred. Women became some of the movement's most visible actors precisely at a moment when public participation carried increasing personal risks.

The growing visibility of women also revealed the diversity of female participation within the movement. Those who occupied the front rows of demonstrations did not represent a single political tradition or social background. Some spoke the language of feminism; others drew on more traditional forms of authority, including motherhood, care, religion, and national belonging. This coexistence of different political and cultural repertoires is one of the most remarkable features of the Serbian protests.

National symbols, Serbian flags, and religious imagery were common at demonstrations. While outside observers might be tempted to interpret such symbols as contradictory to feminist aspirations, the reality on the ground was often more complex. The movement brought together participants from different generations, political traditions, and social backgrounds. Rather than producing a single ideological identity, it created a broad coalition united by a shared sense of injustice.

This complexity was perhaps most visible in the movement's efforts to bridge ethnic and religious divides. Students from the State University of Novi Pazar, located in Serbia's predominantly Muslim Sandžak region, became important partners in the protests. One widely shared photograph showed a young man, Sava, carrying a Serbian flag and wearing traditional headgear (šajkača), and a young woman, Nadia, wearing a headscarf typical of the



Tražili su vatromet (They Were Looking for Fireworks). Photo: <https://protesti.pics/trazili-su-vatromet>



Protest March on Vidovdan (St. Vitus' Day), June 2025. Photo: <https://protesti.pics/vidovdan>

Muslim religion.⁸ At a time when Serbian politics is often discussed through the lens of ethnic division, the photograph offered a different narrative of belonging and solidarity, while also highlighting the prominent role of women within the movement.

The tensions between civic and national narratives became even more visible in spring 2026, when the student movement published a "Memorandum on Kosovo and Metohija."⁹ The document described Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia and presented its status as a matter of historical responsibility and national identity. The memorandum sparked debate among supporters of the movement and demonstrated that even a protest driven by demands for accountability and democratic reform could not entirely escape the enduring significance of national questions in Serbian political life. Rather than contradicting the movement's civic aspirations, the episode revealed the complex ways in which democratic, national, and social concerns remained intertwined.

As the protests expanded beyond the universities, another female figure became increasingly visible: the mother. Unlike earlier student movements, the demonstrations of 2024 and 2025 were not dominated exclusively by young people. Entire families joined the marches. Parents accompanied students on long protest walks across Serbia, prepared food for occupied faculties, and offered logistical support. In this broader social mobilization, motherhood emerged as a recurring symbol. Handwritten banners carried by demonstrators reflected this development. Some simply declared: "Mom is with you" (*Mama je uz vas*).¹⁰ Others combined support with humour and political criticism. "Mom did not give

8 Irfan Ličina (photo), *BBC*, accessed on July 6, 2026.

9 "Studenti u blokadi", *X.com*, accessed on July 6, 2026.

10 www.facebook.com/bukamagazin/photos/mama-je-uz-vas-pi%C5%A1e-sa-druga-strane-transparenta-na-kojem-je-crvenim-slovima-isp/1293619449480590/, accessed on July 6, 2026.



Anti-ćaci poster, Belgrade 2025. Photo: Sadko, Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license

birth to a ćaci" (Nije mama ćaci rodila),¹¹ one sign read, mocking the government's supporters indicating their basic illiteracy.¹² Another banner proclaimed: "Auntie has arrived from Canada" (Stigla tetka iz Kanade), alluding to a well-known political scandal involving one of President Aleksandar Vučić's ministers, who, when asked how he had paid for an apartment worth 100.000 euros, replied that he had borrowed the money from his wife's aunt in Canada.¹³

These messages reveal how the movement increasingly imagined itself as a moral community connected through care, responsibility, and intergenerational solidarity. Mothers, aunts, and grandmothers became part of the protest narrative itself. Their presence linked the students' demands to broader questions about the future of society and the responsibilities of one generation toward the next. No figure embodied this moral dimension of the

11 <https://autonomija.info/foto-video-protest-srednjoskolci-uz-studente-u-novom-sadu/>, accessed on July 6, 2026.

12 The banner refers to a graffiti ("Ћаци у школе / Ćaci u školu") that Vučić's supporters had written at the entrance to Zmaj-Jovina High School, which was actually intended to urge students to return to school. However, since the letters Ć and Đ look very similar in the Cyrillic alphabet (Ћ and Џ), "ćaci" (ћаци) was accidentally written instead of "đaci" (ђаци), suggesting that they did not know the difference between the letters Ć and Đ. The term "ćaci" subsequently became established as a label for Vučić's supporters and implied that they were illiterate.

13 Bojana Pavlović, „Hronologija slučaja tetke iz Kanade [Chronology of the case of the aunt from Canada]", *KRIK*, May 10, 2018, accessed on July 6, 2026.

protests more powerfully than Dijana Hrka, the mother of Stefan Hrka, one of the sixteen victims of the Novi Sad railway station collapse. She supported the student movement from the very beginning and regularly took part in the students' actions. Some of the students even called her "Mother" and stood by her side during the painful moments that occurred during the protests. She frequently gave speeches at the protests, demanding the prosecution of those responsible and the fulfilment of the students' demands.

What made her presence so remarkable was the way she transformed private grief into public action. Again and again, she addressed crowds at protest gatherings, demanding that those responsible for the deaths be held accountable. In doing so, she spoke not only as a bereaved mother but also as a citizen challenging the legitimacy of institutions that had failed to protect their people.

This symbolic role became even more visible one year after the tragedy. On 1 November 2025, as commemorations marked the anniversary of the canopy collapse, Hrka announced that she would begin a hunger strike.¹⁴ Too much time had passed, she argued, while accountability remained elusive and legal proceedings continued to face obstacles. A few days later she carried out her decision near the Serbian parliament in Belgrade (or rather, a few dozen meters away from it, since she was not allowed to approach the building), turning her own body into a site of political protest.

Particularly striking was the group of war veterans, supporting student protests from the very beginning, who remained by her side during the hunger strike, watching over her day and night. The scene appeared almost theatrical in its symbolism. A mother who had lost her child and was now fighting for justice stood at the centre, while former soldiers assumed the role of protectors. The image evoked deeply rooted cultural ideas about motherhood, sacrifice, duty, and protection, and fully embodied traditional gender roles. Even for Vučić's propaganda machine, such a powerful image was hard to deal with. After all, even their own voters and supporters found it difficult to condemn a mother mourning her deceased child.

Vulnerability and Resistance

As women became increasingly visible within the protest movement, they also became increasingly vulnerable. Until the protest on St. Vitus Day on 28 June 2025, the student movement had insisted on peaceful protests and a peaceful response to provocations. However, during that demonstration, police forces reacted with unexpected violence, without significant provocation from the protesters.¹⁵ Dozens of people were beaten and arrested, including women. In the days that followed, in response to these sudden and violent actions, people organized roadblocks in all major cities across Serbia. At one point, there were approximately 80 roadblocks in Belgrade alone. The student movement that drew its strength from symbolism and moral authority has been caught in a spiral of violence and counter-violence since early summer 2025. One of the most widely discussed cases involved Nikolina Sindelić, a student activist from Belgrade. After being detained following a protest, she reported threats of sexual violence and abusive treatment while in custody. Rather than remaining silent, she chose to make her experience public. The

14 www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6sp2mQ45Ls, accessed on July 6, 2026.

15 Andrei Ivanji, „Vidovdan protest: Eight quick conclusions“, *Vreme*, June 29, 2025, accessed on July 6, 2026.



Srbija, da li se čujemo? (Serbia, Can You Hear Us?). Photo: <https://protesti.pics/srbija-da-li-se-cujemo>

institutions failed to respond, but pro-government media mercilessly misrepresented her, often resorting to sexist insults and even revenge pornography.¹⁶

The immediate reaction was a wave of solidarity. Under the slogan “We are all Nikolina, we are not afraid” (Nikolina svi smo, uplašeni nismo),¹⁷ students and activists transformed an individual experience into a collective statement of solidarity. The case resonated because it touched on one of the movement’s central emotions: fear. In that moment, Nikolina Sinđelić embodied what philosopher Judith Butler describes as vulnerability as a condition of agency – the ability to draw political action from vulnerability.¹⁸ By speaking publicly about her experience, Sinđelić challenged the expectation that violence should be endured privately and quietly. Her testimony exposed the personal costs of political participation while simultaneously reinforcing the movement’s commitment to public accountability.

Nikolina’s case was not an isolated incident. In 2025, the feminist organization FemPlatz published documentation of 48 cases of serious physical or psychological violence directed against female protesters.¹⁹ The reported incidents ranged from physical assaults and threats to sexual harassment and degrading treatment during detention. The release of this data marked a turning point in public discourse. For the first time, figures, quotes, and

16 Ekipa politike, „Onli fens lažljivica ‘Oće centrala da pogreši jednom, ali opet teško ... Blokaderka pokušava dva puta da ‘progura’ istu laž [Onlyfans liar ‘The central office might make a mistake once, but hardly ever again ... The blockaderka tries to ‘push’ the same lie twice]”, *Informator*, accessed on July 6, 2026.

17 Sanja Sovrlić, “Nikolina svi smo, uplašeni nismo”: Protest u Beogradu u znak podrške studentkinji maltretiranoj u garaži Vlade [‘We are all Nikolina, we are not afraid’: Protest in Belgrade in support of the student abused in the Government garage], *N1*, August 19, 2025, accessed on June 16, 2026.

18 Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance”, in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Duke University Press, 2016), 12–27, here 22–24.

19 Nevena Petrušić, Kosana Beker and Biljana Janjić, “Između megafona i tišine: Eksplorativno istraživanje o ličnim iskustvima, izazovima i otporima žena na protestima u Srbiji 2024/2025 [Between the megaphone and silence: An exploratory study of the personal experiences, challenges and resistances of women at protests in Serbia 2024/2025]” (Pančevo, 2025), 78, online available.

legally admissible documentation were available to prove that the suppression of women's participation in protests is not a side effect, but part of a deliberate strategy.²⁰ Particularly alarming are the accounts of verbal humiliation, which was often gender specific. Several female students reported being sexually harassed during their arrest, confronted with remarks such as "watch where you're going" (*pazi kuda ideš*) or "what are you doing here? Go home!" (*Šta ćeš ti ovde, idi kući*). This language, which links violence to gender and is often sexually offensive, exposes the patriarchal logic behind the repression.²¹

For many activists, these experiences reinforced the conviction that violence against women could not be separated from broader questions of democracy and political accountability. The struggle over corruption, institutional responsibility, and free elections was also a struggle over who is allowed to appear, speak, and act in public. In that sense, the treatment of female protesters became a revealing indicator of the deeper conflicts unfolding within Serbian society.

At first glance, the women who have shaped Serbia's student protests seem difficult to reconcile within a single narrative. Some speak the language of feminism and women's rights. Others appear as mothers, caregivers, or symbols of collective grief. Some march under feminist banners, others carry national flags or religious symbols. Apart from the national flag, which is often seen and does not necessarily contradict feminist ideals, female protesters were spotted carrying various religious symbols that evoke a particular set of national(ist) historical events, including the Battle of Kosovo, St. Vitus' Day, and the Serbian monarchy. Yet reducing these differences to a conflict between "traditional" and "progressive" forms of female participation would miss what is perhaps most remarkable about the movement.

What unites these different forms of female participation is not a shared ideology but a shared claim to dignity, responsibility, and justice. The authority exercised by women within the protest movement rarely derives from formal leadership positions. More often, it emerges from lived experience, moral conviction, and public trust. In this sense, the women helped define the language through which the movement understands itself.

Instead of a Conclusion

To understand the role of women in Serbia's contemporary protest movement, it is helpful to place these developments within a broader historical perspective. Women's political participation in the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav space has never followed a single model. Feminist activists, intellectuals, workers, mothers, and civic campaigners have entered public life through different – and sometimes contradictory – repertoires of action. The current protests continue this tradition of plurality rather than replacing it with a new, unified form of female political engagement.

What makes the present movement particularly remarkable is not the existence of feminist voices nor the persistence of more traditional gender roles. Both have long histories in the

20 M.B., "Žene pokazuju veliku hrabrost i odlučnost, a stepen ženske solidarnosti je veoma visok", kaže Biljana Janjić ['Women are showing great courage and determination, and the level of female solidarity is very high', says Biljana Janjić], *Mašina*, December 10, 2025, accessed on July 8, 2026; Petrušić et al., "Između megafona i tišine."

21 A.M., „Patrijarhat sa značkom: Seksistički komentari policije na protestima [Patriarchy with a Badge: Sexist Comments by the Police at Protests]", *Mašina*, July 7, 2025, accessed on July 8, 2026; Petrušić et al., *Između megafona i tišine*, 105.

region. More striking is the fact that these different forms of female agency coexist within the same movement and often reinforce rather than undermine one another. The debates surrounding the movement's position on Kosovo further demonstrate that civic, social, and strongly nationalist narratives were often intertwined rather than mutually exclusive.

A similar dynamic has been observed in studies of the Belarusian protests of 2020. Rather than choosing between feminist and more traditional forms of activism, many women combined different repertoires and strategically moved between them. As Natallia Paulovich has argued, women often engage in forms of political negotiation that allow gender stereotypes to be reinterpreted and used to their advantage.²² The Serbian protests suggest a comparable process. Traditional and feminist forms of female participation do not necessarily stand in opposition; they may instead broaden the range of political strategies available to the movement.

From a historical perspective, the protests therefore challenge simple narratives of social progress or emancipation. They do not reveal a linear transition from "traditional" to "modern" forms of female participation. Instead, they demonstrate how different understandings of womanhood can become politically meaningful at the same historical moment. Historians are often tempted to ask whether a protest movement represents rupture or continuity. The women of Serbia's protests suggest that the answer may be both.

At the same time, the reactions directed against female protesters reveal the persistence of older patterns. As the experiences of Nikolina Sinđelić and many other activists demonstrate, women who occupy visible political roles continue to encounter forms of hostility that are explicitly gendered. The struggle over corruption, accountability, and democratic institutions is therefore also a struggle over who has the right to speak, act, and appear in public.

Perhaps this is why the sentence heard during the Women's Day demonstrations resonated so strongly: "Forget the rose – I want a revolution." The statement was never simply about feminism, nor was it merely a rejection of tradition. It expressed a broader impatience with symbolic gestures that fail to address deeper social problems. Whether voiced by a student activist, a grieving mother, or a woman standing silently in the front row of a protest march, the message was ultimately the same: dignity requires more than recognition. It requires change.

Seen from this perspective, the women of Serbia's protest movement are not standing between the national flag and the feminist banner. More often than not, they carry both, while demanding a different future for the society around them.

22 Natallia Paulovich, "How Feminist is the Belarusian Revolution? Female Agency and Participation in the 2020 Post-Election Protests", *Slavic Review* 80, No. 3 (2021): 38–44.