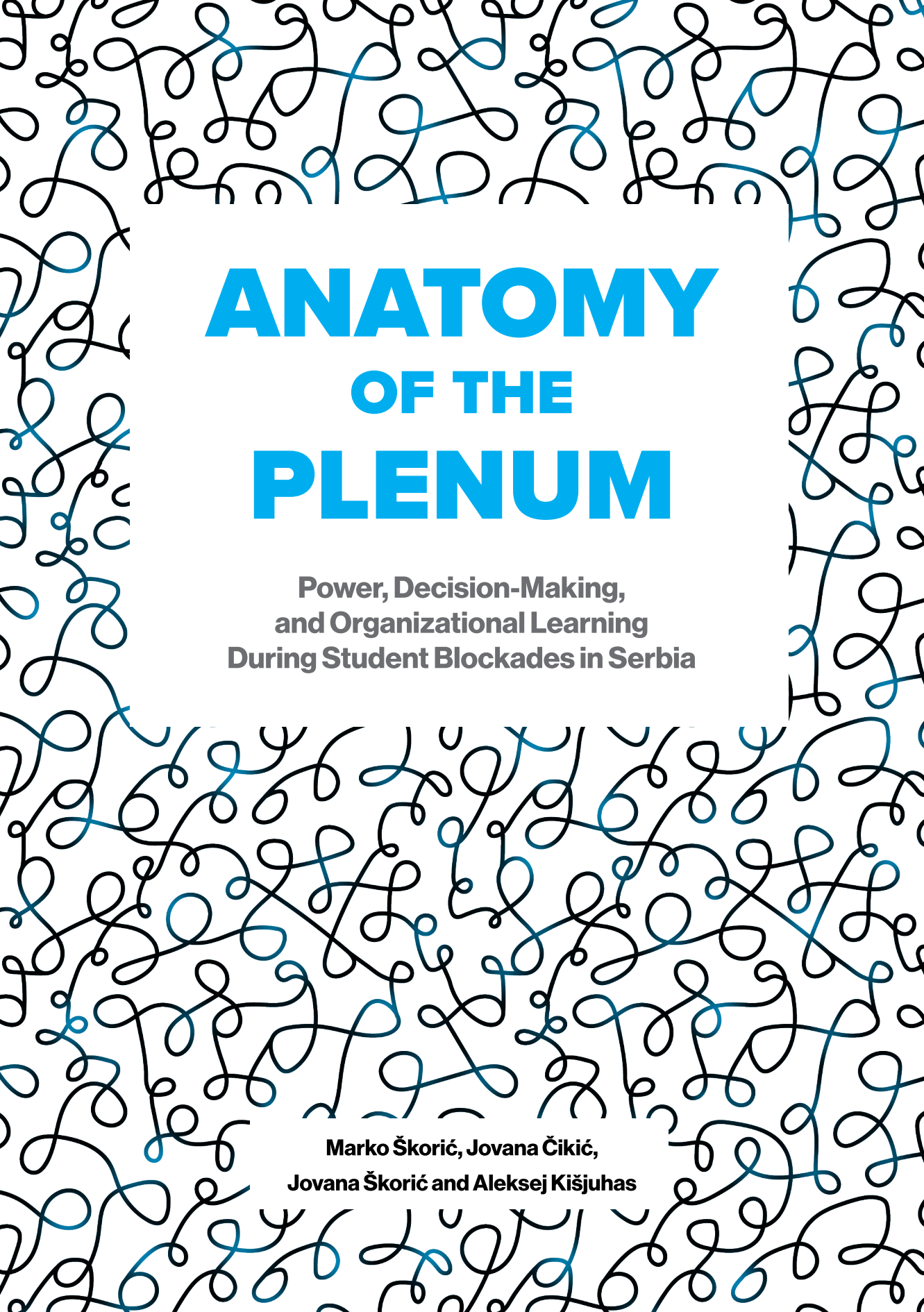

ANATOMY OF THE PLENUM

Power, Decision-Making, and Organizational Learning During Student Blockades in Serbia

Marko Škorić, Jovana Čikić,
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Anatomy of the Plenum: Power, Decision-Making, and Organizational Learning During Student Blockades in Serbia by Marko Škorić, Jovana Čikić, Jovana Škorić, and Aleksej Kišjuhas (2026)
Published by People Power Publishers

Cover design incorporates line work "147970791" by Sheunw / depositphotos.com.
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Center for Nonviolent Conflict Research
1601 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20009, USA
www.nonviolent-conflict.org

Part of the CNCR Nonviolent Conflict Special Report Series.

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ISBN: 978-1-943271-98-6

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EMERGENCE OF THE STUDENT MOVEMENT

The plenum never at any point says, "Decisions are unchangeable." No. Every decision is changeable. If you come to the plenum, state your case, and fight for something you believe in. I think that's great, and I believe that contributed significantly to the legitimacy of the decisions we made. [Sofija, student at the University of Belgrade]

Student activism often proves to be a clear indicator of deep social tensions and a driver of important political changes (Degroot 1998; Tarrow 1994/2011). In contemporary Serbia, a new wave of student revolt represented a paradigmatic example of a generational response to the years-long erosion of democratic institutions and systemic corruption. This report deals precisely with this phenomenon, analyzing interviews with students who participated in plenums and blockades of university schools during the period from December 2024 to June 2025.

The rise to power of the right-wing populist Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*) was preceded by a period of deep disappointment among citizens with the political elites who led Serbia after the democratic changes in 2000 (Greenberg 2014). Although the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime (Cohen 2002; Clark 2008) sparked high expectations of rapid democratization and economic recovery, and despite an objective increase in the standard of living, the years that followed were marked by controversial privatizations, intra-party conflicts, and the perception of pervasive corruption (Transparency Serbia n.d.). This sense of betrayed promises created fertile ground for a political turn. Riding the wave of this general dissatisfaction, the 2012 elections were won by the Serbian Progressive Party, which emerged from the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party, a party that had participated in the government during the 1990s and whose leader was convicted of war crimes at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague (Vranić 2020). Presenting itself as a reformed, pro-European force with zero tolerance for corruption, the Serbian Progressive Party, led by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić—the former a deputy prime minister in the late 1990s and the latter Milošević's notorious minister of information—successfully channeled voter anger and took power (Kmezić and Bieber 2017; Orlović 2012).

The period that followed, which continues today, is marked, according to numerous

analyses by domestic and international organizations, by a process of "state capture" (Dávid-Barrett 2023; Freedom House 2024; Reporters Without Borders 2024; Group of States against Corruption n.d.). This phenomenon refers to a systemic political corruption in which private interests significantly influence a state's decision-making processes to their own advantage, effectively repurposing state institutions for private gain rather than the public good. This process was accompanied by the open propagation of Serbian nationalism, denial of war crimes and glorification of war criminals, drastic violations of human rights, usurpation of institutions, suppression of media freedoms, non-transparent public affairs, and corruption that has penetrated all parts of society. Such a situation, on the one hand, created a climate of apathy and reinforced the inherited mistrust in institutions; on the other hand, it led to the accumulation of deep dissatisfaction.

The immediate trigger for the current massive student and civic protests was the tragedy that occurred on November 1, 2024 (Al Jazeera 2024; Radio slobodna Evropa 2024; Wikipedia 2025b), when the canopy of the railway station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing fourteen people on the spot. In the following months, two more people died as a result of their injuries. The event, publicly perceived not as an accident but as a direct consequence of systemic negligence, corruption, and incompetence, sparked massive and profound anger, which manifested through spontaneous protests and, later, citizens' assemblies across the country (CNN 2025; European Western Balkans 2024a, b; France 24 2025; Freedom House 2025; Stojanović 2024; Vasovic, Maltezou and Filipovic 2024; Wikipedia 2025a).

In this wave of protests, students from the Universities of Belgrade and Novi Sad, soon joined by colleagues from most state universities and several private universities in Serbia, initially organized traffic blockades with "14 minutes of silence" for the (then) 14 victims of the canopy collapse. After the violent disruption of one of these actions by regime supporters, students radicalized their protests and physically blocked the operation of university schools: they suspended lectures and exams, entered the university buildings, and barricaded themselves inside, as a form of protest against corruption and regime violence. The occupied buildings effectively became their second home—students slept, ate, socialized, and prepared their protest actions there.

Simultaneously, they came forward with a series of precisely formulated demands addressed to the Serbian government. In the first phase, the demands were directly focused on establishing responsibility for the Novi Sad tragedy, as well as declassifying the documentation on the station's reconstruction and forming an independent expert commission. However, as the government persistently ignored these calls, the student revolt evolved. The initial list of demands was expanded, yet given the lack of any reaction from the institutions, it eventually merged into one

STUDENT DEMANDS

1. The public disclosure of all documentation pertaining to the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station.

2. The official identification and prosecution of all individuals reasonably suspected of physically assaulting students and professors.

3. The immediate removal from office of all public officials who participated in the assaults on students and professors.

4. The termination of all criminal proceedings and the dismissal of all charges against students arrested or detained during the protests.

5. A 20 percent increase in the national budget allocation for higher education.

6. An official investigation into the potential use of a sonic weapon (a demand added on April 5).

7. An investigation into the responsibility for the presence of the president and journalists in the ICU following the Kočani (Macedonia) nightclub fire (added on April 7).

8. The calling of snap parliamentary elections (which became the central demand on May 5).

Students from Novi Sad, where the canopy collapsed, also had an additional demand: The resignations and the determination of criminal responsibility of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia and the Mayor of Novi Sad.

STUDENT DEMANDS

comprehensive political goal in May 2025: snap, free, and fair elections at all levels.

As a model for organization and decision-making, the students soon adopted the plenum—a form of direct democracy and horizontal, non-hierarchical decision-making, inspired by the earlier student movement in Croatia in 2009.[1] The plenum became the central body of each university school, where the most important decisions regarding the further course of the blockades were made. In general, a plenary session or "plenum" is a session of a conference or deliberative assembly in which all parties or members are present. Following this model, all students of a single school had the right to attend the plenum session, and all decisions at the plenums were made exclusively by a majority support of those present. Every decision was preceded by a thorough discussion that re-examined and refined each proposal from multiple angles. Decisions made at the school plenums were then forwarded to the general or university plenum (the so-called "uni-plenum"), where the principle of majority rule also applied. This body, along with informal communication channels between delegates, served as a crucial hub for coordination and the propagation of best practices across different faculties.

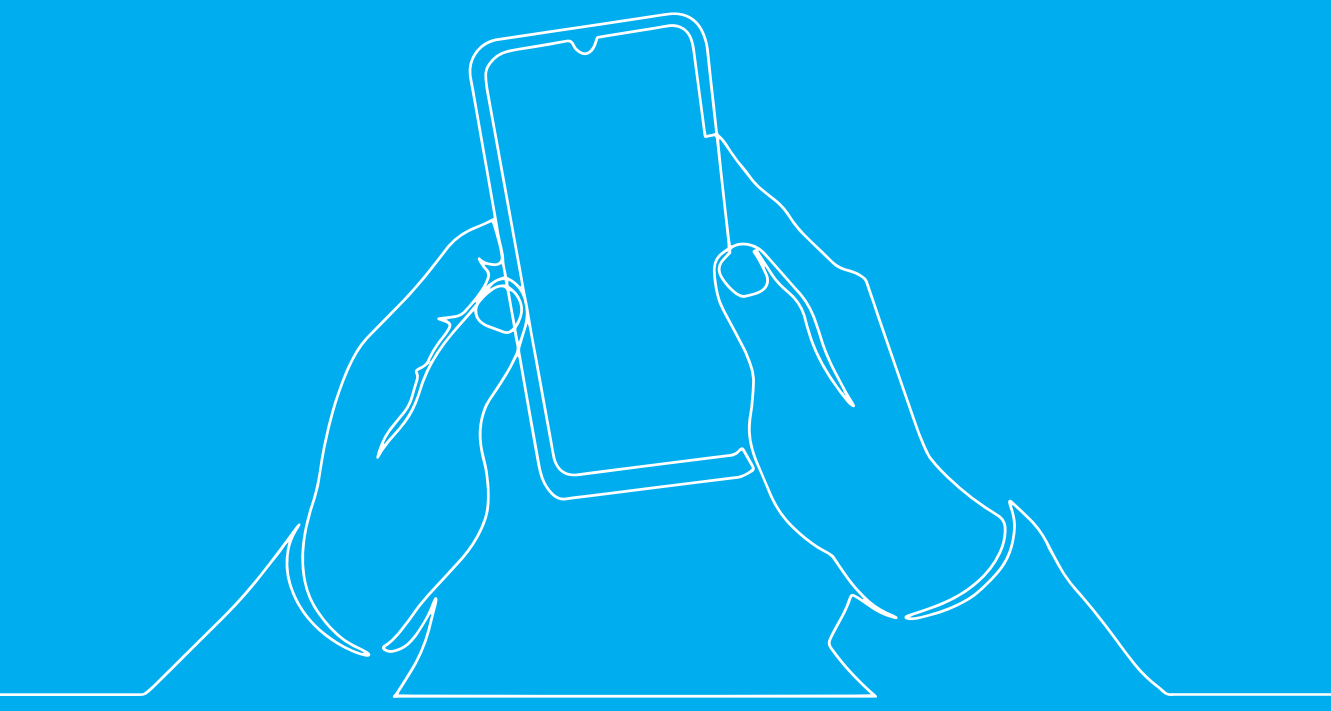
The social movement that emerged from the student blockades represents the most serious blow to the legitimacy of the current government since its establishment. From February to the end of September 2025, more than 10,700 protests were held in almost all municipalities in Serbia, including what were probably the largest demonstrations in Serbia's modern history on March 15, 2025 (European Parliament 2025). Particularly prominent were the multi-day actions of many students walking to the cities (university centers) where demonstrations were held, and the bicycle rides from Novi Sad to the EU headquarters in Strasbourg. Finally, on October 22, 2025, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution in which, among other things, it condemned the state-sponsored violence, specifically the subsequent intimidation and arrests of students in Serbia (European Parliament 2025).[2]

1. The 2009 student protests in Croatia, which began at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, represented the most significant wave of student activism since the country's independence (1991). They were initiated against the commercialisation of higher education and the introduction of tuition fees, under the main slogan "Knowledge is not a commodity!" The key method of struggle used was the blockade of classes, and the decision-making model introduced was the plenum—an open assembly of all interested students where decisions were made through direct democracy, by consensus or majority vote. This model of horizontal organisation and struggle for the public good quickly spread to other faculties in Croatia (Petrović 2011).

2. In the very strongly worded text of the Resolution, it is particularly emphasized that the Serbian leadership is responsible for the escalation of repression, the normalisation of violence, and the weakening of democratic institutions. It supports the right of students and citizens to peaceful protest, as well as the importance of civic courage, commitment to non-violence, and the engagement of young people to advance Serbia on its European path. It recalls that the Novi Sad railway station reconstruction project was carried out by two Chinese companies, bypassing standard public procurement procedures, that elections in Serbia were marked by systemic abuses, as well as the cases of several students who were victims of police brutality.

While the media and the public were primarily focused on the chronology of events, street protests, and the political demands, the subjective experience of the internal organization of the blockades remained under-researched (Jorgačević 2025). This report aims to fill that gap, answering the question: how did the student-participants understand and conceptualize their engagement? By analyzing their narratives, this report explores the development of their political agency, key motivational factors, and the ways in which they interpreted the social reality that led them to act. To provide context for these experiences, the report also offers a detailed analysis of the "nuts and bolts" of the plenum—its internal procedures and mechanisms. It argues that the movement's resilience did not stem from a monolithic ideology, but from its capacity to integrate diverse motivational pathways—ranging from moral outrage to pragmatic solidarity—while constantly navigating the tension between the ideals of direct democracy and the practical constraints of political efficacy.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA SOURCES



The functioning of the plenums and student participation in their operation were analyzed based on empirical data collected during research conducted from **early March to early June 2025**. During this period, all universities in Serbia were already under a months-long blockade, student-led blockade, and the school and university plenums had been formed and were functioning as decision-making mechanisms.

The research was designed as qualitative. The necessary data were collected using **interviews** that lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, depending on the respondents' experiences and their willingness to speak openly about them. 26 students from the three largest universities in Serbia (Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš) participated in the research. The sample was not probabilistic but voluntary, formed through the snowball method and respondent self-selection. The resulting sample satisfied the principle of data saturation, meaning that the data collection process was concluded when new interviews ceased to provide additional insights or reveal new themes regarding the research subject. Before the interviews began, all students were informed about the content and purpose of the research.

The collected data in all 26 transcripts were systematized and analyzed using thematic analysis. The researchers, who also served as the interviewers, participated in the transcription, coding, and analysis of the collected data. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their privacy. The final sample consisted of 26 students with the following characteristics:

Gender: 16 female, 10 male.

University: University of Novi Sad (17), University of Belgrade (6), University of Niš (3).

Level of Study: Bachelor Academic Studies (22), Master Academic Studies (2), Doctoral Studies (2).

Previous Activist Experience: 16 participants had prior experience, while 10 did not.

Engagement in Blockade:

- Start of participation: From the first day (19), shortly after the start (4), a few weeks later (3).
- Frequency of attendance: Every day (8), Often (10), Sometimes (1), Rarely (6), No longer attends (1).

To ensure the complete protection of the identity, privacy, and security of all participants in this research, a multi-layered system of anonymization and data qualification has been applied. This approach is designed to meet two key objectives: (1) to guarantee the complete anonymity of each individual respondent, and (2) to preserve the necessary analytical depth that allows for a meaningful comparison of different experiences and contexts within the student movement. Firstly, all personal names of the 26 respondents have been replaced with randomly assigned pseudonyms (e.g., "Sofija," "Marko," etc.). These pseudonyms are used consistently throughout the analysis to allow the reader to follow the arguments and positions of individual participants without revealing their real identities.

Secondly, simply stating the university and pseudonym proved to be analytically insufficient, as it would obscure the crucial differences in organizational cultures between university schools, which constitute a central finding of this research. Conversely, citing the specific faculty and year of study would pose an unacceptably high risk of re-identification. As a solution, a system of methodological aggregation and coded attribution has been implemented. In the text, each quotation is attributed using a standardized key in parentheses.

Example of attribution: Sofija (U, SSH, Bg)

This attribution key is to be read as follows:

1. Pseudonym: Sofija (An assigned pseudonym)

2. Level of Study:

   "U" - Undergraduate (Includes all students from the first to the fourth year, as well as final-year students who have completed coursework but not their final thesis/exam)

   "G" - Graduate (Includes Master's and Doctoral students)

3. Faculty Type:

   "SSH" - Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (Includes faculties such as the Faculty of Political Sciences, Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Law, and School of Business)

   "ST" - Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering, Math and Medicine (Includes faculties such as the Faculty of Technical Sciences, Faculty of Sciences, Faculty of Civil Engineering, and Faculty of Medicine)

4. University:

   "Bg" - University of Belgrade

   "NS" - University of Novi Sad

   "Ni" - University of Niš

Therefore, the example "Sofija (U, SSH, Bg)" identifies the speaker as an undergraduate student from a faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Belgrade, using the pseudonym "Sofija." This method preserves analytical rigor while ensuring participant confidentiality. Similarly, "Pavle (G, ST, NS)" identifies the speaker as a graduate student from a faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering, Math and Medicine at the University of Novi Sad, using the pseudonym "Pavle."

ORIGINS AND BASIC OPERATION OF THE PLENUM

The dominant pattern of students joining the blockades was a rapid and mass mobilization in the first half of December 2024, with several significant variations that highlight the different paths of entry into the protest. Besides the rapid and effective initial mobilization, there was a strong sense of urgency and readiness for action among a large number of students, as soon as the call was made. The research indicated that the **blockade** was not the work of a monolithic group, but rather a **complex ecosystem** in which deep ideological convictions, the pragmatic need to get a specific job done, and a desire for community intertwined.

> *Pavle (G, ST, NS): We all feel that everything has fallen on us now, so we're pushing through to the end because, after all, we got into this situation because of the way the country is, and we are somehow aware that there's no one else to do it.*

> *Jovana (U, ST, Bg): I'm mostly here at the faculty to help out if anything is needed when food or water donations arrive . . . and with making banners.*

The frequency of attendance at the university school during the blockade reflected a dynamic path of engagement—**from initial euphoria to later phases of exhaustion and adaptation**. An extremely high level of engagement at the beginning involved all-day, everyday stays at the school, which became the center of social life for many students—a place where they sleep, eat, socialize, work, and make decisions. This phenomenon of total involvement was crucial for building community, solidarity, and the initial momentum of the blockade.

> *Mina (U, SSH, NS): For the last two months, I've been living at the faculty. So I'm here every day and I sleep here. I don't even go home that often anymore because I realized I can also take a shower in the rectorate, that we have a shower.*

In almost all respondents, a clear initial enthusiasm could be observed, which waned over time and led to the formation of a "hard core" of the most dedicated and to the adaptation of others to the new circumstances. For many students, there were also existential pressures, namely the financial burden of paying for accommodation in university cities, forcing some students to find jobs or return home, which distanced them from being at the school (on a daily basis). A smaller portion of them cited disappointment with the plenums and their decision-making processes, as well as with the entire undertaking.

For better and more efficient organization, the plenums relied on an **organized system of working groups**. This was the operational mechanism that implemented decisions, maintained logistics, and allowed the blockade, as a system, to survive. The names and numbers of these groups varied by school, but the most important ones included groups for strategy (devising and planning protests and other actions), media and communication (responsible for

social media and public relations), security (maintaining order, safety of protesters, controlling entry to the school), donations and logistics (food, water, money), and cleaning and hygiene. Depending on personal interests, abilities, and willingness to engage, students got involved in the activities of the working groups. Most of those interviewed were involved in the work of at least one working group, and there were those who participated in the work of multiple groups.

The students in the blockade **did not constitute a homogeneous movement** in terms of participant experience; it was composed of an experienced core and new activists. A significant number of respondents possessed previous experience, but it rarely stemmed from formal political parties. Instead, it predominantly came from three main sources: student organizations, the non-governmental (NGO) sector, and previous street-level civic protests. Parallel to this experienced core, the movement was characterized by a large number of students for whom the blockade is their first-ever activist and political experience.

> *Marko (U, ST, NS): Well, not in a political context, but I am the president of a student organization. . . . [T]o some extent we were in . . . conflict with other student organizations that are a bit more inclined towards the current government, so maybe that also encouraged a bit more effort in all of this.*

> *Sofija (U, SSH, Bg): I do, I have a lot of experience and in fact my activism started in NGOs, given that I founded an NGO back in high school . . . .*

For the vast majority of students, regardless of university, school, or previous activist experience, the term "plenum" was mostly a complete unknown before the blockades began. Very few had academic or theoretical knowledge about them. Moreover, **students encountered the plenum not theoretically, but practically**—by the very act of attending the first meeting in the blockaded university building. This indicated that the plenum was not part of the established student vocabulary, nor was it part of their existing political experience or organizing practice, but was introduced as an *ad-hoc mechanism* in a crisis situation.[1] Student mobilization predominantly took place via social media and direct invitations. The Faculty of Dramatic Arts (Belgrade) was the first institution to enter the blockade and implement the plenum model. While some students mentioned *Blokadna kuharica*[2] (*The Blockade Cookbook*, a manual for plenum-oriented blockades from Zagreb) as their inspiration, it quickly became unnecessary as students developed the needed skills and established their own rulebooks.

1. In Serbia, the plenum as a form of direct democracy and a decision-making format for students in protest was present during 2011, when students at certain university schools blockaded classes, protesting against the level of tuition fees ("Knowledge is not a commodity").

2. *Blokadna kuharica* (*The Blockade Cookbook*) is available at: **https://anarhizam.info/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/blokadna-kuharica.pdf**.

> *Mina (U, SSH, NS): Blokadna kuharica, from that very blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, was a sort of guide. . . . But then, over time, we . . . developed our own, um, rulebook for the plenum and everything that goes along with it.*

Consequently, the knowledge required to conduct plenums was mainly acquired and developed organically, through word-of-mouth, learning-by-doing, and the subsequent drafting of formal written documents.

> *Pavle (G, ST, NS): We received absolutely nothing. I think the best indicator of this is what the "zero plenum" looked like, let's call it that at [my faculty], where it was chaos and a breakdown of the system. The first plenum was then again chaos and a system breakdown in a different way. So absolutely . . . it was wandering and wandering in the dark.*

The initial phase, though chaotic, was crucial as it forced students to actively reflect on and jointly create procedures, which strengthened their sense of ownership over the process. In the second, more mature phase of the blockade, **written rulebooks and rules of procedure** were independently drafted or adapted from those of other faculties to suit the specific circumstances and needs. Plenums were held in the largest room at the university school, almost always in the main amphitheater. Besides the very practical reason at first, occupying this central space also represented a symbolic act of taking control over the institution.

At the very beginning of the blockades, most faculties practiced daily plenums. However, this tempo proved to be exhausting and unsustainable. Over time, each collective found a pace that suited it. The most common model for organizing plenums was several times a week at fixed times; in some faculties, they were held once a week, while in others, flexible schedules existed, in line with needs and circumstances. In addition to regular plenums, there were also extraordinary plenums. They were organized as needed, most often as a reaction to new, unforeseen circumstances and events that require a (quick) response. Plenums were held at two levels: the **school level** (the so-called "main plenum") and the **university level** (the so-called "uni-plenum").

The process of compiling the plenum's agenda was neither simple nor uniform. At some faculties, the agenda was formed by directly proposing items in online chat groups (such as WhatsApp or Viber); elsewhere, it was a matter of agreement among different working groups on what important topics required a collective stance; and in other places, moderators acted as a filter for transferring proposals from students to the final agenda. The way the agenda was formed was, therefore, one of the best mirrors of the **democratic maturity and organizational culture** of each individual

plenum. For instance, highly organized collectives developed a fully transparent, bottom-up process where any student could suggest items via shared online documents days in advance, allowing for preparation and debate. In contrast, less mature plenums often relied on a more closed approach, where a small group of moderators or the "hard core" determined the topics shortly before the session, often leading to friction and accusations of non-transparency.

INDIVIDUAL DECISION-MAKING

The **motives for participating in plenums** can be classified into three key, interconnected categories: a) the appeal of direct democracy, where the plenum is seen as an ideal form of direct democracy (a critique of representative democracy, an expression of personal responsibility, a mechanism of control, a chance to express one's own stance), b) the practical need for information and influence (the desire to influence decisions), and c) personal transformation through the process itself (personal growth, skill acquisition).

The long duration of the protests, and thus the blockades, inevitably changed and redirected the initial reasons for engagement. A significant number of students, especially those who remained the most engaged, describe a clear **path from initial, often personal or even superficial reasons, to a deep sense of collective purpose and social responsibility**.

> *Dunja (U, SSH, NS): [I]n the beginning it was, let's say, on a personal level. But now that I'm deep into all this, I think it has evolved to a much higher level, and now I also consider the well-being of others. Even if some decisions and some ideas and plans are not, huh, how should I put it . . . maybe they don't personally work for me or I don't agree with them, still, if I feel it works for the majority, of course I will vote for that proposal.*

However, exhaustion, waning enthusiasm, and similar factors led some participants to a pragmatic assessment of where they would be most useful, so their motivation shifted from a deliberative to an executive function. Specifically, they concluded it was more pragmatic to focus on concrete operational tasks within the working groups—such as logistics, media outreach, or organizing security—rather than spending hours in the lengthy and often exhausting plenum debates. There were also those who became disillusioned with (seemingly) direct democracy.

> *Sofija (U, SSH, Bg): [I stopped coming] because I see that there are already little groups there that make arrangements in advance. . . . That's why I lost faith in this direct democracy . . . .*

Forming an individual stance within the dynamic and often information-overloaded environment of the plenum is not a simple act, but a complex process that combines internal values, rational analysis, and social interaction. Students most often apply a **hybrid decision-making model** based on three key variables: a) an internal compass (personal values and moral beliefs), b) a rational-analytical filter (arguments, facts, and strategic assessment), and c) a social-consultative network (dialogue with colleagues and listening at the plenum). This complex decision-making mechanism testifies to the deliberative maturity of the movement, where participants constantly balance between personal conscience, the strength of arguments, and the long-term interests of the collective.

The plenum is not just a place for expressing pre-formed stances, but also a key arena for their formation. Many come with an open mind, ready to listen to arguments and learn new information before making a final decision.

> *Filip (U, SSH, NS): It has happened several times that I had a certain stance at the beginning, but when I hear others' arguments, I sometimes change my mind.*

A particularly revealing aspect of their strategic thinking is the readiness to vote against one's own personal stance if it is assessed that the alternative proposal is better for the collective. This shows a high degree of **internalization of the collective identity**.

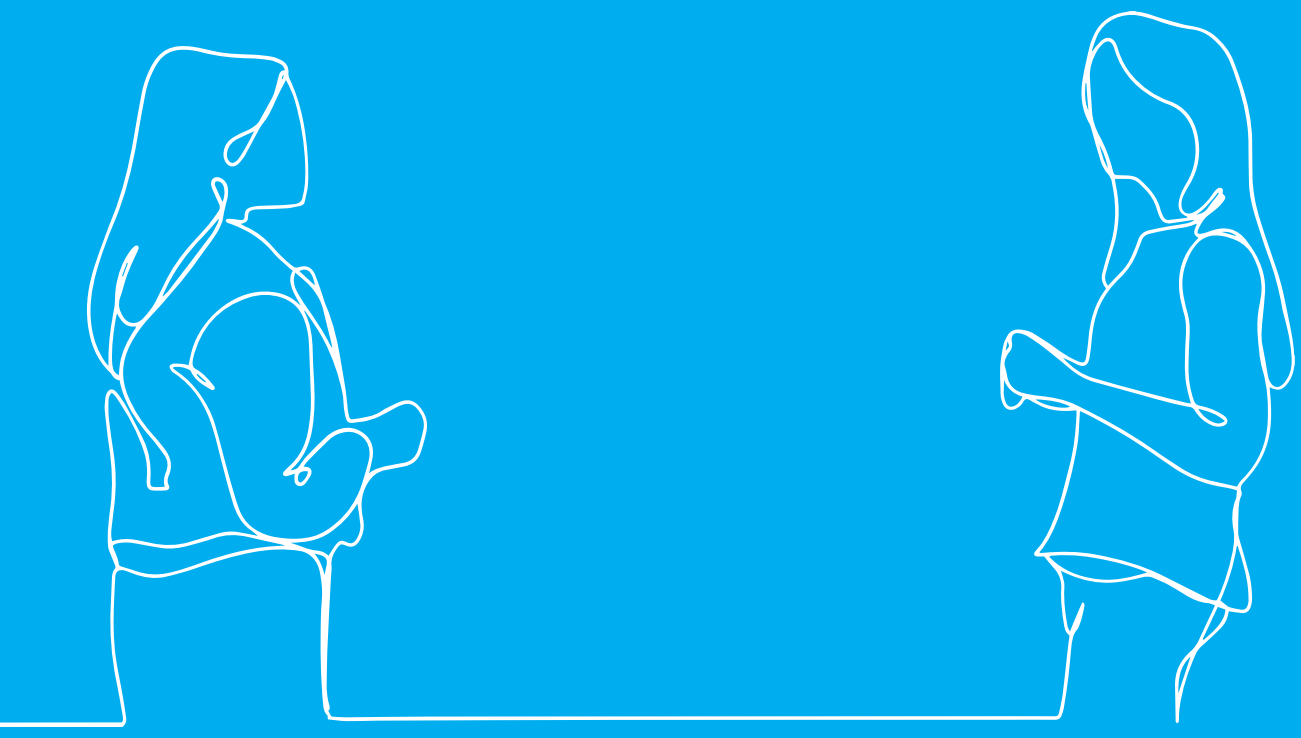
> *Dušan (U, SSH, NS): But of course, if it turns out that something I support or would like us to vote for, doesn't get passed. . . . It's not up to me to do something about it, if that's the vote of the majority.*

The most important source of information and influence on forming stances are other students within the blockade. The influence of professors and experts is mostly advisory. For example, at some faculties, so-called "meso-plenums" were held, in which students and professors participated. The importance of media and social networks should not be forgotten, as well as family and friends outside the student movement, although a clear critical stance towards information coming from these sources is noticeable.

Respondents most often say that **changing one's stance during a plenum** is a relatively common, but also expected and positively valued phenomenon. This phenomenon is not perceived as a sign of weakness or indecisiveness, but as a natural outcome of a healthy democratic process and personal openness.

> *Jovan (U, SSH, Bg): [I]f someone actually stands up and gives a new perspective, uh, on some plan, that's usually what changes my mind. Arguments for and against—more or less, but that new perspective is what I think is the main thing. . . . [S]ometimes I have completely changed the way I look at an idea.*

COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING



Plenum decision-making is not a spontaneous process, but a highly formalized one, and it is similar across all faculties. Every decision begins as a formal proposal tied to a specific agenda item. Almost without exception, no substantive proposal is put to a vote without prior discussion. This phase is crucial as it ensures that the plenum is not just a voting machine, but a **deliberative body** where stances are formed and re-examined. Discussion is therefore seen as a mandatory step that allows for information sharing, asking questions, and presenting arguments. Only after the relevant arguments are exhausted does the process move to formal decision-making. **Discussion** is opened for every agenda item, unless the plenum decides otherwise (e.g., most commonly in the case of informational items). The goal of the discussion is to reach a better, common solution or compromise through the exchange of arguments, or for one side to convince the other of the correctness of its stance.

> *Dušan (U, SSH, NS): Discussions are what always make things more interesting.*

The discussion takes place within a strict procedural framework, often codified in written rulebooks drafted and adopted by the students themselves. This framework is similar at all universities and serves to enable debate while also preserving efficiency. The entire discussion is time-limited—both for a single item (15–30 minutes) and for an individual speaker's presentation (1-3 minutes). Students developed a **sophisticated system for taking the floor**, modeled on parliamentary procedures. The most commonly mentioned are: presentation/question (to open a topic), replica (a direct response to a previous presentation), and technical objection (to correct inaccurate information or address procedural problems).

In principle, **all those present have an equal right to participate** in the discussion. The rules dictate that everyone who asks to speak must be called upon and heard, and that every vote ultimately counts the same. A complex system of discussion rules has a dual function: first, it guarantees the formal right of every individual to participate, and second, it channels the discussion and prevents it from descending into chaos.

> *Jovan (U, SSH, Bg): Over time, people realized that their voice is just as important as anyone else's.*

However, there are **practical inequalities** in the functioning of the plenums, resulting from the influence of social, psychological, and political factors. There is a recognizable minority—a "hard core"—that is the most active and vocal in discussions. These are generally more experienced, more engaged, and more verbally skilled students. The sharpest criticism of inequality comes from testimonies about plenums where political dynamics escalated into the open suppression of differing views. In such situations, the formal right to speak is rendered meaningless because dissenters are labeled as

saboteurs or lobbyists, which effectively silences them. While concerns about infiltration by regime-aligned actors were grounded in reality (a topic addressed in detail in the "Implementation and Outcomes" section), respondents suggest that these labels were also weaponized to discredit internal opponents who simply held different strategic views.

Although the "hard core" dominates, some respondents emphasize that, over time, the plenum became a **space for empowering** and including new speakers. Students who were shy and only listened at the beginning gradually shed their inhibitions and began to participate actively. At some faculties, professors and other staff can also participate in the discussions at the main plenums, but without the right to vote.

> *Dušan (U, SSH, NS): [A]s they started to open up, now more and more people are talking and expressing their opinions, which I think is great, and that's why the plenums last longer.*

One of the most original aspects of the plenum culture is the developed **system of non-verbal communication**, which has been adopted at almost all faculties. This adopted system of signs is used to express (dis)agreement without interrupting the speaker—for instance, by waving hands in the air (so-called "jazz hands") to show support, or crossing arms in an 'X' shape to signal disagreement. This drastically increases efficiency and allows for constant feedback, both to the other students present and to the discussion moderators themselves.

The tone of the discussion can vary significantly—from a relaxed conversation to a heated debate. Regardless of the (current) atmosphere of the discussion, respondents state that special care is taken to respect all participants—incidents such as swearing or personal (verbal) attacks on dissenters are strictly forbidden and sanctioned, reflecting a deliberate effort by the collective to maintain a safe environment and a constructive culture of dialogue.

When the discussion concludes, the process enters its final phase: **voting**. This act is also highly formalized. Public voting, by raising hands, is dominant, thereby promoting transparency and personal responsibility for the expressed stance, although it potentially opens space for social pressure.

> *Bojan (U, SSH, NS): The faculty . . . plenum functions on the principle of an absolute majority. . . . [D]ecisions are made by raising hands. Uh, in most cases, I think it's pretty clear which decision has been passed, so sometimes the moderators don't even have to count the hands. But when a topic is really on the fence . . . the moderators count the votes, and then the decision with more votes is passed.*

The fundamental principle of decision-making is a **simple majority**. Unlike

consensus-based models often seen in similar movements, which can lead to endless debates, this model was chosen as a clear and effective mechanism that prevents blockades and paralysis in decision-making. Within this general framework, different faculties have developed specific rules for resolving more complex procedural situations, which attests to a high degree of organizational learning. When there is a fundamental disagreement, the mechanism that resolves the dispute is always the vote and the will of the majority. The will of the simple majority becomes the final and binding decision for the entire collective, and subsequently for the delegates at the university plenum. This mechanism prevents paralysis of the system and allows things to move forward even when there is deep disagreement.

> *Jelena (U, SSH, NS): [I]t has happened that I don't agree with the decisions, but it was made. The plenum is the plenum, and that is now my decision too. Therefore, we have to adapt.*

Students are aware of the **ambivalent nature of plenum decision-making**. On the one hand, voting and the majority principle are affirmed as the only legitimate and just way to make decisions; on the other hand, participants are aware of the high price this model pays in terms of inefficiency, slowness, and the potential marginalization of the minority. Although aware of the flaws, many choose the direct democratic process over faster, but less participatory methods, viewing it as a radical break from the hierarchical and undemocratic structures they are fighting against.

> *Miloš (U, SSH, NS): [F]or me personally, it's not about the decision-making being "efficient," but about it being decided democratically. We could all appoint one representative for anything and have them decide everything arbitrarily. It would be efficient, it would be fast, but then the voice of the students would be lost. I know other faculties have had such problems with their [student] parliament.*

Despite the noted problems, the plenum can also be extremely efficient. The key factors that enable this are good preparation and a structured process, as well as competent and proactive moderators. The **moderator** is not a passive chairperson, but a central, proactive figure. Students describe a good moderator as: knowledgeable of the rules, impartial and confident, well-informed, aware of the responsibility the role carries, focused, resilient, and immune to interruptions and provocations. However, the role of the moderator is extremely stressful and demanding, and few are willing to take it on. Consequently, a small, informal circle of more experienced students often forms, rotating in this function. Also, the demanding nature of the moderator's role has led to plenums usually having two moderators (a moderator and an assistant moderator) and a minute-taker.

Jovan (U, SSH, Bg): I don't know if I mentioned it, nobody wants to be a moderator . . . because it's a huge responsibility, because there are situations where people literally yell at the moderator . . . .

Although formal **power of individuals** does not exist in the plenum, their informal power is ubiquitous, dynamic, and stems from various sources. It is based on social capital, rhetorical skills, and the level of individual engagement. While some downplay its significance, the majority recognizes that louder or more experienced students do indeed have greater influence.

Jovan (U, SSH, Bg): [S]ome people do stand out, not because they have any ambitions, but simply because they are the most active. And so they simply have the most experience in organizing actions, and people recognize them. And by virtue of that, those people usually have a bit more, as they say—clout during the plenum.

However, there are also those who believe that, despite their vocality, loud individuals do not necessarily manage to impose their opinions, and that the collective possesses mechanisms to defend itself against an excessive concentration of power. From the beginning, a suspicion towards anyone who tries to impose themselves as a leader has been embedded in the plenums.

Miloš (U, SSH, NS): But yes, again I say, there will always be some who are louder now, whether they are more powerful, I don't know, since also some of those who are louder also, uh . . . no, it's not necessarily the case that they have very great power to change the opinion of the plenum members.

The question of **pressure and lobbying** reveals the existence of dramatically different political cultures at the faculties included in the research. While legitimate persuasion through argumentation is the core of the plenum, the shift to methods not based on arguments—such as aggressive behavior, psychological pressure, using personal connections, or the organized bringing in of "voters"—represents a key test of the democratic maturity of each collective. A whole spectrum of experiences is present: from individuals who thought such occurrences were intense and problematic, to those who considered lobbying a legitimate part of plenum politics, to individuals who did not even notice any pressure or lobbying.

Furthermore, the question of **faction formation** strikes at the heart of the student movement's internal cohesion. The respondents' narratives reveal different experiences: while some testify to deep and exhausting divisions, others describe surprising unity and an almost complete absence of factions. The key finding is that, where they do exist, factions are rarely formed based on the classic ideological division of political left and right. This

is likely because the movement's broad, anti-regime and "anti-corruption" starting point was sufficient to unite participants despite their underlying ideological differences. Instead, the lines of discord are most often drawn around strategic disagreements about the future of the movement or the public perception of the movement.

The most significant division arises from the question "What now and how?" —whether to open up to other political and social actors (e.g., NGOs, opposition political parties, etc.), whether to formulate a political demand, whether to adopt more confrontational or disruptive protest tactics and the like. Namely, when it comes to the student movement, one of the main public tensions is the movement's relationship with other and already established political and social actors, where the relative autarky of the student movement —especially towards opposition political parties—is sometimes highlighted (and criticized). In a tense atmosphere, these issues are often personalized and turn into conflicts.

IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES

After making and legitimizing a decision, the plenum almost always delegates its implementation to specialized working groups (except in the case of less complex decisions that are carried out immediately). The mechanism of transferring authority allows the energy of the plenum to be effectively channeled through smaller, operational teams that have specific tasks. The success of the implementation directly and largely depends on the capacity, coordination, and autonomy of these working groups.

The question of responsibility for implementing decisions is key to transforming the democratic will of the plenum into concrete action. Students have developed a two-layered system of responsibility: a) **a formal layer**, which involves the clear delegation of tasks to specialized working groups, and b) **an informal (but essential) layer**, which rests on a strong, internalized personal responsibility and collective pressure within those groups. The formal division of tasks would not function without the strong, informal mechanism of responsibility that relies on personal conscience and a sense of belonging to the team.

> *Ljiljana (G, SSH, Ni): Well, I think we all carry that dose of responsibility within us, and then, for example, in that specific group it was—if I don't show up, I know it will fall as a burden on someone else. . . . We are all here for one goal, and so I think we all internalized it somehow that if I don't do something, the group or another individual might suffer.*

However, this model has one critical weakness: the problem of **diffuse responsibility** when the engagement of the wider collective is expected, rather than a specific team. Without strong internal cohesion and a sense of group belonging, collective responsibility can in practice become **no one's responsibility.** This happens with decisions that require mass participation, where a "bystander effect" is created—everyone assumes that someone else will take on the burden. Students, therefore, did not establish a classic, top-down system of control and punishment. Instead, they developed **a sophisticated, multi-layered system of self-regulation** that is not based on coercion, but on a combination of high transparency, a public reporting mechanism, strong social pressure, internalized personal responsibility, and prior detailed deliberation.

The **decision-making process is not linear** (plenum decides → working group executes), **but cyclical** (plenum decides → working group executes → working group reports to the plenum). Reports from the working groups are a standard and mandatory agenda item at plenums in almost all faculties. After every major action or protest, a detailed and often fiery discussion is held at the plenum about what was done well and what was done poorly. This collective evaluation serves as a direct mechanism of control and learning.

Sofija (U, SSH, Bg): [T]he agenda . . . must have its integral parts, such as, for example, reports from the working groups and reports from the delegates [from the university plenums].

Jovan (U, SSH, Bg): After a big action, there are usually huge arguments about whether it was good or not, what the mistakes were. That can get quite fiery. There was a huge discussion about the 15th [of March].

The implementation of the plenum's decisions was a complex process that, while ultimately leading to many successful actions (as noted later in the text), was not without significant hurdles. These **challenges can be divided into two basic categories**: a) internal, organizational challenges stemming from the nature of the movement itself (lack of professional experience and expertise, logistical problems, communication failures, diffused responsibility), and b) external, unpredictable challenges that come from interaction with a complex and often hostile environment (unplanned external circumstances, threats, and violence).

Dušan (U, SSH, NS): [There were problems], but again, that's all due to inexperience. That's how I'll put it.

Nataša (G, SSH, Ni): For example, when the protest was in Niš on March 1st, it was simply challenging to carry out the logistics and coordination of it all . . . .

Despite numerous challenges and internal tensions, the student movement has produced a whole series of **successfully implemented decisions**. These successful actions are not just a demonstration of organizational capability, but also a key source for maintaining morale, strengthening internal cohesion, and affirming the movement's legitimacy in the public eye. Some of the successful actions included protest walks across Serbia between major cities (e.g., those toward Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Niš, and Novi Pazar), large-scale local protests in urban centers, and the organization of cultural events and panel discussions.

Finally, one of the significant tensions marking the student movement is its **relationship with "politics"** in the narrow sense—that is, political parties and political solutions. At the very beginning of the student blockades, students actively distanced themselves from "politics," demanding only criminal-legal responsibility for the canopy collapse in Novi Sad and responsibility for the violence against students. For these reasons, they were initially very skeptical of "political" solutions to the crisis, such as an expert and/or transitional government, although there are reasonable doubts that such "anti-political" sentiment was, in fact, actively stoked by regime proxies aiming to alienate the movement from opposition parties and discredit political engagement altogether. Over time, and

after this research was conducted, the student demands were (re)formulated into explicitly political ones, namely the calling of snap elections.

The fear of infiltration and internal **sabotage** is a constant and inevitable feature of any social, anti-regime movement. Students are not only aware of this threat, but have also developed sophisticated ways to recognize, define, and defend against it. Some point out that the plenum's rules themselves, especially their transparency, represent a good mechanism of protection against sabotage, which is why they often testify that they are not overly concerned about these challenges.

Students have developed a multi-layered defense system against perceived sabotage—from recognition and crystallization, through democratic out-voting and procedural protection, to direct sanctions and a so-called "blacklist."[1]

> *Mina (U, SSH, NS): [W]e had a colleague who was proven to be a member of the Serbian Progressive Party. Yes. And she was put on the faculty's blacklist and can no longer enter the blockade, and we assume that information was leaking from her, directly from the plenums.*

Interaction with external actors (the school administration and professors) is a key indicator of the student movement's real impact, legitimacy, and strength. An extremely heterogeneous picture of their reception was identified, ranging on a wide spectrum from open support and cooperation to silent resistance and open hostility. Reactions differ drastically, not only between different groups but also from school to school, reflecting specific local power relations and political cultures.

> *Jovana (U, ST, Bg): Well, the administration supports us completely. And the professors, they are all for it, we even had a plenum with professors in which they stated their opinions, and they really are with us. You rarely find someone who is against it. Honestly, I'm not even sure if I know of any professor who doesn't support us.*

> *Bojan (U, SSH, NS): [A] few days ago, there was a physical altercation between a [student] security girl and a professor who refused to state her name at the entrance [to the faculty].*

The **perception of student blockades and the movement in the general public** is also polarized. In direct interactions—on the street, during walks, through donations, in independent

1. Colloquially known as the "black list," it is actually a list of individuals (students, teaching and non-teaching staff) whom the blockading students, for various reasons, banned from entering the university school. These reasons most often included violent behavior at the plenum, active opposition to the blockades, and the like.

media—students most often experience enormous support and encouragement. In contrast, a large part of the media and online space is filled with criticism of the blockades, coming from the public service broadcaster, other media with national frequencies, pro-regime tabloid media and portals, etc., as well as from a segment of the public that does not support the protest methods. Specifically, pro-regime media and members of the pro-regime public, using the supposedly offensive label "blockaders," most often label the student movement and/or protest as "traitorous," destructive, funded from abroad, or "satanistic." The term "attempted color revolution" is commonly used.[2]

Mina (U, SSH, NS): It's very polarized. With the distinction that people who support us approach us more in person, while those who don't support us do so more online.

Although it essentially constitutes an internal decision-making mechanism within the student blockades, the plenum is perceived by the vast majority of students as a phenomenon with a profound and multifaceted **influence that extends far beyond the boundaries of the academic community**. This influence is not perceived merely as direct political pressure, but primarily as a cultural and democratic "radiation" or emanation—a process by which ideas, models of organizing and action, and, most importantly, a sense of hope and the possibility of change are transmitted to the wider society.

2. The term "color revolution" denotes a series of resistance movements from the early 21st century, predominantly in post-communist countries. They are characterized by the use of nonviolent methods, such as mass protests and civil disobedience, in response to authoritarian regimes and electoral fraud. The name stems from the symbolic use of colors or flowers (e.g., the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia in 2003 or the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004).

REFLECTIONS

For the vast majority of students, participation in the plenum represents one of the **most intensive and important learning experiences** of their lives. The plenum functions as a living laboratory and an informal school that has provided students with lessons which, in their words, they could not have learned from books or lectures. The learning process unfolded on three key, interconnected levels: a) individual, b) social, and c) political. The first case involves **personal transformation** and the development of practical skills.

> *Milica (U, SSH, NS): Well, somehow I stopped being afraid to express my opinion. Yes, that's it.*

> *Jelena (U, SSH, NS): And I actually learned to argue my thoughts in a short amount of time before someone . . . cuts me off. Or something like that. And above all, to be patient.*

The plenum was also a unique **school of social skills**, where students learned how to function as part of a large and heterogeneous collective. The key lesson learned is the importance of listening to and respecting others' opinions, even those that are diametrically opposed, and of separating the idea from the person.

> *Katarina (U, SSH, Bg): I learned that even people who may not be on my side ideologically . . . have a lot of smart things to say . . . and that everyone has their own, let's say, perspective that must be respected for this to be an optimal way for everything to continue functioning.*

Finally, the plenum provided deep, practical **lessons on the nature of (political) power, organization, and democracy itself**. The romanticized notion of direct democracy was quickly replaced by a realistic understanding that it is a slow, bureaucratic, exhausting, and often frustrating process. Despite all its flaws, for some, the plenum experience was a crucial confirmation that **democracy**, even in its imperfect form, **can work** and is fundamentally better than authoritarian models. Likewise, for some, the plenum was a path out of political apathy.

> *Dunja (U, SSH, NS): [The] fact [is] that I am no longer apolitical . . . . Now I am much more interested and I care about who actually holds those specific positions for us. Who leads our country. Who makes what decisions and in what way.*

> *Bojan (U, SSH, NS): I actually learned how democracy can function. Because for a while, I had been of the opinion that democracy wasn't the best option for a social order. But I think this form of direct democracy can function. It has its flaws, of course, because the meetings last a long time and are exhausting, but I think it could function better.*

Beyond political strategy and organizational learning, the persistence of the plenum—despite its exhaustive nature—can only be explained by the profound **emotional dynamics of the blockade**. Participants describe the plenum not merely as a decision-making body, but as a space of collective therapy and intense emotional bonding. The "slog" of long meetings was counterbalanced by a visionary experience of solidarity, where the school became a "second home". This shift from seeing oneself as an individual to a member of a collective was a transformative journey; it required "affective labor" where the fear of letting the group down became a more powerful motivator than personal comfort. Even when facing the frustration of inefficiency or the discomfort of being overruled by the majority, the overarching sense of moral duty and the "visionary" feeling of reclaiming their agency acted as an emotional anchor, keeping the movement cohesive.

For most, the change in perspective on the decision-making process was not a naive adoption of ideals, but the development of a **realistic and critical optimism**. Although aware of all the shortcomings of collective decision-making, they emphasize that they learned through practice that the fundamental values of this process—equality, transparency, participation, and the ultimate legitimacy of the decision—are more important than its efficiency.

> *Jovan (U, SSH, Bg): I think it's a relatively good system and that so far, regardless of what we've done and how things have happened, the will of the students has been represented. Which is the most important thing.*

The question of the **plenum's efficiency** as a decision-making model in the student context elicits ambivalent and layered responses. Students interpret the efficiency in two, often opposing, ways. If efficiency is measured by democratic legitimacy, inclusivity, and the quality of the decision, the answer is predominantly YES. If efficiency is measured by speed, time consumption, and operational agility, the answer is predominantly NO.

> *Katarina (U, SSH, Bg): I believe plenums are a very efficient way of making decisions . . . . It might sound like they are very demanding, especially since ours were held daily, but . . . they are . . . very important precisely because every student has the right to vote.*

> *Petar (U, ST, NS): The efficiency itself isn't very high. . . . Because a plenum simply has to be scheduled. Over 100 people come to the plenum, [it takes time] until everyone expresses their opinion, until we reach an agreement. And it simply takes time. It's not. It's not an efficient way to make decisions.*

Most respondents ultimately adopt a synthetic, pragmatic stance. They simultaneously recognize and affirm **the**

democratic value of the plenum while criticizing its operational inefficiency. Many conclude that, despite all its flaws, there is no better, fairer, or more legitimate way to make decisions in the given context.

> *Mina (U, SSH, NS): I'm not sure [if plenums are an efficient way to make decisions], but I have no better idea.*

The question of the **plenum model's applicability to the wider society** forces students to extrapolate their intimate, localized experience to the complex reality of an entire country. There is deep division and caution on this point. A minority sees potential for the wider application of plenums and believes this should be done through citizen assemblies. On the other hand, the majority expresses serious doubt that the plenum model can be successfully scaled to the level of society.

> *Zorica (G, SSH, Ni): Ugh, the very idea of these assemblies that exists, I think it is quite applicable, it just needs to be developed further . . . for decisions to be devolved to lower levels, so that everything actually comes from the bottom up, not from the top down.*

A synthetic stance, reached by a significant number of students, holds that the plenum and assemblies are not a sustainable replacement for representative democracy at the national level, but they can be an excellent supplementary and corrective mechanism at the local level.

> *Zorica (G, SSH, Ni): [When all that is arranged] those assemblies, even at the municipal level, can much more easily . . . contribute to creating, in fact, a just, productive, and sustainable society.*

Finally, students' narratives about the effectiveness of the plenum, compared to the beginning of the blockades, reveal a deeply ambivalent but predominantly affirmative stance. Almost everyone recognizes that in the later stages of the blockade, the plenum became significantly different, often weakened and burdened by problems compared to the initial enthusiasm. However, despite all the flaws and erosion, the majority still sees it as an irreplaceable, fundamentally effective, and the only legitimate mechanism for making collective decisions, at least out of necessity. Abandoning it would mean abandoning the basic principle for which the movement was created.

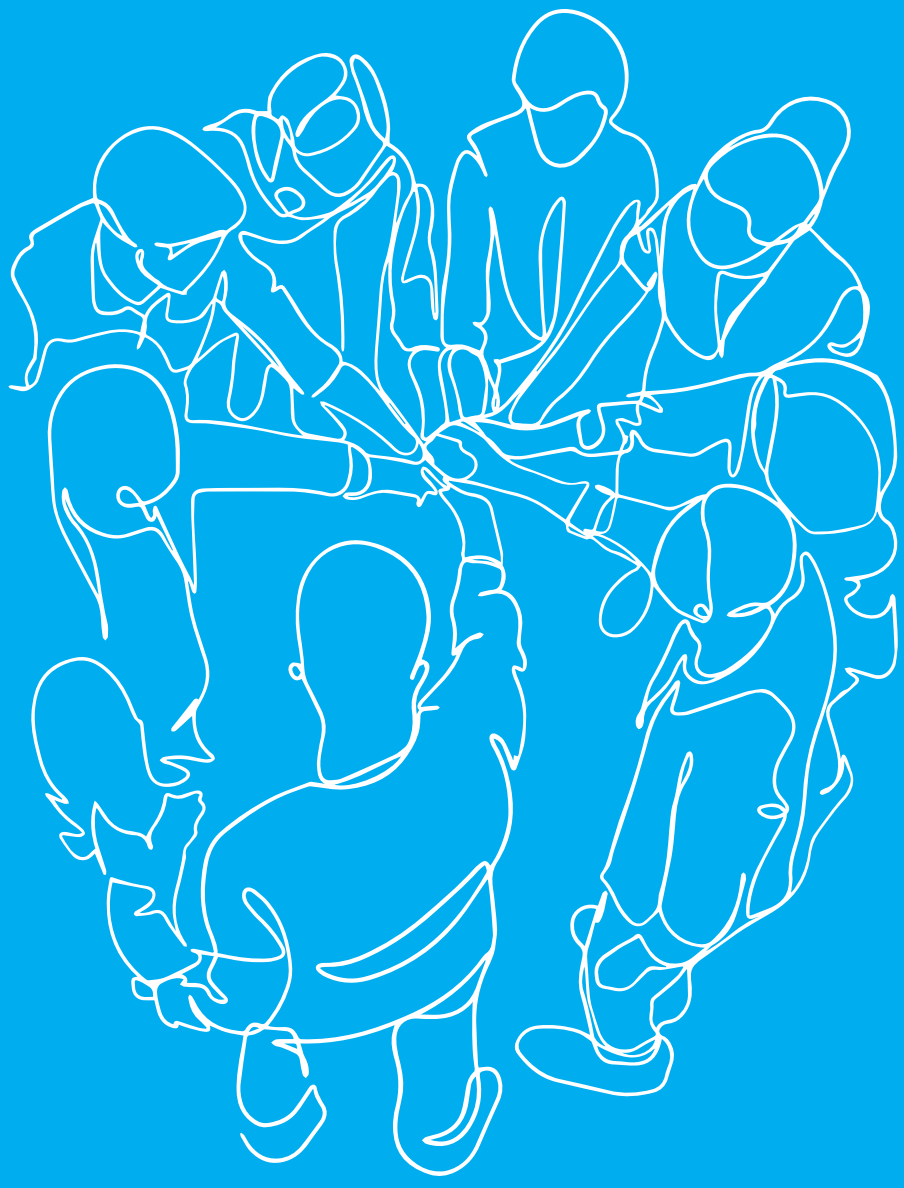
> *Zorica (G, SSH, Ni): [I] believe it is the only valid and legitimate way we chose from the start, and we must be consistent in our decision-making.*

The **future of the plenum** is uncertain and a subject of intense debate within the movement. There is no consensus; instead, three different visions are crystallizing. The optimistic vision of institutionalization implies the plenum formally replacing or becoming a permanent control body for student parliaments, which are often perceived as illegitimate,

non-transparent, and politicized as a result of negative experiences.[1] In contrast, a pessimistic, or in the opinion of its proponents, realistic perspective holds that the plenum is unsustainable outside the "state of emergency" of the blockade. The logic behind this position is that only an existential threat and a clear common goal can generate the enormous energy required for the plenum to function. Between these two extremes, a third, hybrid vision emerges. It recognizes the plenum's inefficiency as a permanent governing body but seeks to preserve its **democratic and participatory spirit**. This diversity of perspectives suggests that plenum participants are still "searching" for the optimal model of functioning and decision-making, as well as actively thinking about it.

1. The crux of the problem lies in the Law on Student Organising (Official Gazette RS, 67/2021), which grants student parliaments the exclusive right to formally represent students. This legal monopoly, combined with chronic apathy and the absence of a quorum for voter turnout, allows small but disciplined groups close to the authorities to easily take control. Once elected, they use their statutory legitimacy not to represent the interests of the student majority, but rather to delegitimize and marginalize any authentic, informal form of student rebellion, such as blockades or plenums. Parliament representatives also have a role in the faculty's governing bodies.

AFTERMATH AND STRATEGIC REORIENTATION



The analysis, conducted several months after the start of the student blockades, indicates that the student movement in Serbia possessed exceptional enthusiasm, solidarity, and faith in the **power of direct democracy**. During this initial phase, the plenum functioned as the central deliberative arena—a space where open discussion fostered the formation of collective identity, articulation of demands, and decisions were made with a high degree of legitimacy. Although burdened by relative inefficiency and lengthy debates, the **plenum did represent an authentic expression of the aspiration for participatory and transparent action**.

However, the period following what was likely the largest street protest in Serbia's modern history, on March 15, 2025, marked a key turning point. This protest represented the zenith of the movement's initial strategy: mass mobilization based on broad, non-partisan outrage against corruption and negligence. The inability to translate the energy of the protest into a concrete political outcome forced the movement to reassess and strategically reorient itself. Over time (in May), the original student demands were reformulated into an explicitly political demand for snap parliamentary elections. This strategic shift was further intensified after the protest on Vidovdan (St. Vitus Day), June 28. The decision to mobilize around this date, a cornerstone of Serbian national identity and mythology, was a deliberate attempt to co-opt nationalist sentiment and broaden the movement's base. Instead of unifying the movement, this protest exacerbated internal rifts and solidified the presence and influence of an increasingly assertive right-wing faction. The movement's focus quickly shifted from internal democratic processes to personnel and programmatic discussions related to the future electoral list.

The mentioned events and the changed internal dynamics inevitably left a deep mark on the movement's human capital. The initial core of activists, which carried the first months of the blockades, has largely withdrawn, exhausted by the prolonged struggle, internal conflicts, and burnout. Their withdrawal leaves room for new actors, but also raises the question of possible infiltration by government-aligned elements aimed at obstruction and further slowing key political processes. Current affairs indicate that new topics emerge—for example, the importance of plenums today, following the end of students' blockades; potential novelties in organization and functioning of plenums; students' perceptions and feelings about the protest now, especially after the blockades ended; the broader impact of plenums beyond students' blockades and protest. The research can be expanded to include the latest dynamics in students-citizens' relations (e.g., perspectives on the protests, cooperation with the opposition parties, electoral list).

On November 1, 2025, at the commemorative gathering in Novi Sad marking the anniversary of the collapse of the railway

station canopy, around 110,000 people from the city and across Serbia were present. It is believed to have been the largest gathering ever held in Novi Sad, with students playing a central role in its organization (021 2025; Washington Post 2025). On December 28, students across Serbia conducted a campaign to collect citizens' signatures demanding snap elections. According to their official statement, approximately 400,000 signatures were collected in Serbia, with an additional 20,500 collected in the diaspora (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2025; N1 2025).

Ultimately, the student movement today finds itself in a paradoxical position. Born from a critique of party politics and alienated representative institutions, it has tied its future almost entirely to participation in the electoral process. Once proactive and agile, it has placed itself in a relatively **passive position**, where its future courses of action and its very survival depend on an external factor—the regime's decision on whether to call elections. The path from open plenums to closed negotiations within the student movement over candidates for the electoral list, and open animosity towards opposition parties, testifies to a **painful maturation**, but also to bitter lessons about the nature of power, organization, and the price every social movement pays in a prolonged collision with a complex political reality.

CONCLUSION: KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The analysis of the student blockades in Serbia offers significant implications for the broader study of social movements that combine direct action with direct democracy. Three key takeaways emerge regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and replicability of this model.

First, the research highlights that the hybrid model of physical occupation and deliberative decision-making is a powerful tool for rapid mobilization and deep political socialization. The "plenum" was not just a voting mechanism, but a space for "learning by doing," where participants acquired political agency not through theory, but through the practice of procedural democracy. For future movements, this suggests that the spatial dimension (the school as a "second home") is crucial: shared living space creates the "emotional glue" necessary to sustain the exhausting deliberative process.

Second, regarding strengths, the movement demonstrated that legitimacy can act as a stronger cohesive force than efficiency. Despite the frequent frustrations with the slowness of the process, students remained committed because they valued the "voice of the students" over speed. This confirms that in high-trust environments, "inefficiency" is often a calculated price participants are willing to pay for ownership of the process.

Third, the primary weakness identified is the vulnerability to burnout and the lack of transitional mechanisms. The reliance on a "hard core" of activists and the intense energy required for daily plenums make this model difficult to sustain over long periods without institutionalization. The movement's struggle to transition from an "anti-political" protest group to a political actor capable of engaging in elections suggests that future movements must develop strategies for this transition earlier, to avoid the "painful maturation" characterized by internal divisions and exhaustion.

Ultimately, the Serbian case proves that while the plenum model is exceptionally effective for disrupting the *status quo* and building internal solidarity, its long-term survival depends on its ability to evolve from a "state of emergency" mechanism into a sustainable organizational form.

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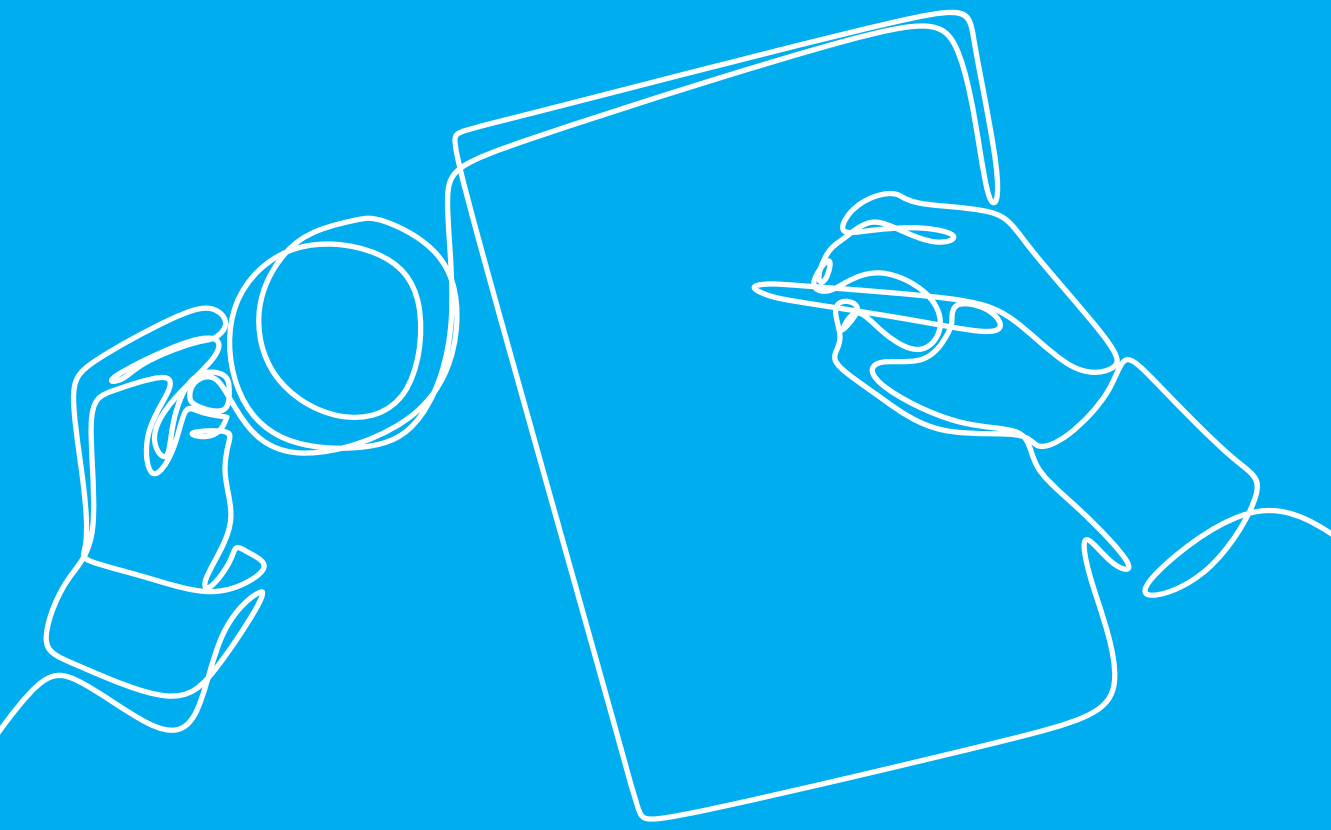

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