

Social Media as a Tool of Democracy - Case Study of the Serbian Student Movement

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Abstract

How can pro-democracy movements use social media to circumvent media capture in hybrid regimes? This paper examines this question through the case of Serbia's Student Movement, which emerged following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy in November 2024 and developed into a nationwide protest movement. Serbia provides a valuable case because much of its traditional media environment is shaped by political influence over ownership, funding and regulation, limiting the space available for government-critical information. The paper examines how the Student Movement has used its own social media accounts within this environment. It argues that these accounts are more resilient than traditional media to several mechanisms of media capture, while allowing the movement to communicate directly with citizens. They are used to counter political consequences of media capture by presenting alternative accounts of political events, responding to government and media narratives, demonstrating the size and strength of protests, constructing a collective identity and encouraging participation. The paper also examines the particular importance of social media for reaching and mobilizing young people and its potential role in changing how citizens assess pro-government media. Combining existing survey evidence, analysis of the movement's Instagram communication and comparison with traditional media, the study identifies mechanisms through which social media can help pro-democracy movements operate in environments where access to independent information is constrained.

Introduction

In November 2025, after months of protests against Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarian regime, the Serbian Student Movement's Instagram accounts gained hundreds of thousands of followers within days. The movement described this activity as a "bot attack" (studenti_u_blokadi, 2026a), suggesting an attempt to trigger Instagram's enforcement systems to suspend or remove the accounts. This episode raises a question. Why would the movement's opponents seek to disable its social media accounts?

To answer this question, this paper examines the importance of social media to the Student Movement and pro-democracy movements more broadly. It argues that social media can help movements circumvent media capture in four ways. First, movement-controlled accounts are more resilient to capture than regime-critical traditional outlets. Second, they can mitigate wider

political consequences of media capture, including disinformation and political apathy. Third, they can mobilise young people, which is crucial for circumventing media capture. Finally, they can weaken the effectiveness of propaganda by reducing trust in pro-regime outlets.

This matters because most of the world's population now lives in autocracies (Nord et al., 2026), while autocratic regimes have become increasingly resilient to pro-democracy protest (Chenoweth, 2020). This development is associated with the rise of informational autocrats, who maintain power by controlling the production and circulation of information (Guriev and Treisman, 2019), making research into new movement strategies necessary.

Existing scholarship finds that social media can provide alternative information and facilitate participation in pro-democracy protests (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012), but also enable autocratic governments to expand information control (Gunitsky, 2015). Less attention has been paid to how contemporary movements use social media under media capture. Addressing this gap, the paper asks how pro-democracy movements can use social media to circumvent media capture in hybrid regimes. It firstly introduces Serbia's political and media context, reviews existing scholarship, and then develops the four arguments outlined above.

Aleksandar Vucic, the Student Movement and Instagram Reels: The Case of Serbia

Since the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) took power in 2012, Aleksandar Vučić has consolidated control over media through privatisation, regulatory capture and financial and political pressure.

This pursuit reflects the importance of media in providing, filtering and interpreting information (McQuail and Deuze, 2020), all of which enables the media to become a “watchdog” by scrutinising, questioning and investigating government activity (Bennett and Serrin, 2005). This “watchdog” role enables the media to strengthen political accountability and government responsiveness while helping to constrain corruption (**Besley & Burgess, 2002; Brunetti & Weder, 2003; Snyder & Strömberg, 2010**), which is why autocrats have an incentive to restrict media freedom (**Bieber, 2018**).

The SNS pursued this ambition through legislative changes promoting privatization of media outlets, regulatory capture of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) and control over state advertising. This enabled people close to SNS to acquire popular television channels, exert pressure on local media, award national broadcasting frequencies and advertising contracts to loyal television channels and appoint the board members of the national broadcaster, Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), thereby influencing its reporting. These measures collectively altered the conditions under which both public and private media operated and enabled the governing party to shape media narrative and disseminate propaganda.

The Student Movement emerged after the Novi Sad station canopy collapse killed 16 people and gained traction after an attack on students in November 2024. Initially demanding accountability, it later adopted a broader agenda centred on democracy and the rule of law. However, pro-government outlets portrayed students as foreign agents and participants in a “colour revolution” (Reuters, 2025b; CIVICUS Monitor, 2025). This conflict became visible during mass protests outside RTS in January and a two-week blockade demanding a new REM Council selection

procedure in April (Associated Press, 2025; RFE/RL, 2025). The movement therefore had to rely on social media for communicating with the people.

Research shows that social media can help social movements with framing, networked news production, real-time coordination and recruitment (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013; Lotan et al., 2011; Earl et al., 2013; González-Bailón et al., 2011), but says less about movement-controlled accounts in captured media contexts. Since protests began, trust in pro-government media has fallen, youth political engagement has risen and SNS electoral support has reached a multiyear low (IRI, 2022, 2025; KOMS, 2025; CRTA and Democracy Action Lab, 2026). These trends do not establish causation but justify examining how social media may have contributed to them.

The importance of Social Media to Pro-Democracy Movements: Overcoming Media Capture

The Student Movement is the most politically consequential pro-democracy movement to emerge under Aleksandar Vučić. Although *Serbia Against Violence* and *One in Five Million* mobilized substantial support, they did not produce durable changes in Serbia's political landscape. Only the environmental protests of 2021 and 2024 achieved a comparable result by temporarily delaying the Jadar project. Earlier failures have been attributed to strategic attrition by the government, narrative control and hostility towards the opposition, all enabled by media capture (Spasojević & Lončar, 2023; Pollozhani & Bieber, 2025). These barriers prevent movements from becoming politically consequential, understood as producing changes in the political environment (Giugni, 2008), by limiting their ability to sustain attention, establish legitimacy and broaden support. The following analysis therefore examines social media as a means of circumventing these barriers.

Methodology

This paper uses an explanatory case-study design conducted in two stages. First, it compares central, movement-controlled social media accounts with traditional outlets across ownership, funding, regulatory control and intimidation. This mechanism-based comparison identifies which forms of media capture are less effective against movement-controlled accounts.

Second, it examines how the Student Movement's Instagram communication may have mitigated media capture's political consequences, mobilized the youth and influenced broader trust in media. It combines process tracing, mechanism-based analysis, temporal comparisons of existing survey results and a review of the movement's central Instagram account. The review identifies recurring communication patterns, including how the movement framed issues, presented itself and responded to government narratives, rather than treating isolated posts as evidence of strategy. These patterns are considered alongside changes in media trust, youth political interest, protest participation and support for the movement.

The analysis does not claim that social media alone caused these changes. Instead, it identifies the mechanisms through which social media may have contributed to them.

The Resilience of Social Media to Media-Capture Tactics

Media capture occurs when governments or interests connected to political power control news media (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2012). It operates through ownership, financial incentives, censorship,

self-censorship and regulatory capture (Stiglitz, 2017; Stigler, 1971). Although these mechanisms differ, each makes news production or distribution dependent on political actors, who need not directly own an outlet to influence its content (Maršić, 2022).

Movement-controlled social media accounts are comparatively resilient, meaning that they preserve direct communication when traditional media are politically constrained. The central distinction is whether political actors can use ownership or distribution infrastructure to prevent citizens from encountering critical reporting. For example, in April 2025, N1 and Nova S were removed from Total TV after Serbia's largest satellite provider was acquired by majority state-owned Telekom Srbija (Vreme, 2025). The decision left 180,000 households without access to either outlet (Zekić, 2025). Furthermore, the 2014 media laws created similar vulnerability locally by requiring publicly owned outlets to be privatised. City-owned broadcasters were sold to SNS supporters, while private outlets became dependent on local-government project co-financing (Dragojlov, 2026; Damjanovski, 2025). Amendments in 2023 also allowed Telekom Srbija to establish outlets competing with struggling local channels.

In the cases of N1 and Nova S and local outlets, the government combined pressure through ownership and financial leverage to restrict their reach. However, since the use of social media is free, while account administrators and content creators are members of the movement, movement accounts can be operated at little cost. Therefore, they are comparatively resistant to ownership, since governments cannot force a change of ownership of social media accounts, and financial pressure, allowing them to reach nationwide audiences amid political control of regulation and funding.

Their reach nevertheless remains limited among older and less-educated citizens, who constitute much of rural Serbia, and are also most likely to support Vučić (CRTA, 2023a, 2026). This raises questions about how organized social-media communication can reach these groups and alter the political environment. However, only citizens over 65 rely predominantly on traditional media, while younger groups consume both traditional and social media (CRTA, 2023b). Social-media content can also reach non-users when relatives or community members show them posts or repeat their interpretations in conversations. Users who do not follow the Student Movement may similarly encounter movements content when it is shared through their networks. Moreover, 72% of CRTA respondents reported receiving information through conversations with family and friends (CRTA, 2023b), while earlier research identifies relatives as the most trusted information source of people in Serbia (Logar and Bogosavljevic, 2001). Social media therefore need not replace traditional media or reach citizens directly to matter. Users can provide non-users with alternative information against which to assess broadcasters' claims. This competition matters because even weak frames can influence opinion when presented alone, while alternative-source consumption is associated with greater scepticism towards mainstream media (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Social media also provides some protection from intimidation and violence through anonymity. Serbian journalists and activists face insults, SLAPP lawsuits, questioning over social media posts, spyware surveillance, physical abuse and attacks on property (Waisbord, 2020; Farrington & Zabrocka, 2023; Južne vesti, 2025; 021.rs, 2025; Bokić, 2024; Krstić, 2026; studenti_u_blokadi, 2026), which can encourage journalists to self-censor or soften reporting (Clark & Grech, 2017).

The organisational structure of movement-controlled social media increases its resilience to intimidation. While traditional media face heightened attacks during political uncertainty (Reporters Without Borders, 2025), the anonymity of the Student Movement's administrators makes targeted pressure difficult. Also, because movement accounts are managed collectively, targeting individual administrators is less effective as another student can readily assume the role, whereas traditional media may struggle to replace an experienced journalist. Intimidation may therefore raise the personal costs of participation without disrupting communication, making these accounts more resilient to insults, threats, SLAPPs and physical violence.

Taken together, free access and inexpensive production reduce movement accounts' dependence on politically allocated resources, while anonymity and collective organisation make intimidation less effective. This was seen when reporting continued across more than fifty student-led Instagram accounts despite arrests and intimidation of student activists. However, this resilience alone does not explain why some movements achieve political success while others do not. An equally important question is whether movement-controlled accounts can actively mitigate media capture's political consequences. The following section examines these broader political functions in captured-media environments.

Revitalizing the Political Sphere: Using Social Media to Combat the Effects of Media Capture

In order to succeed, social movements must attract people to participate in protest action. They can do so by making people feel injustice towards the movement's cause, identify with the movement or believe that the movement can make a difference (van Zomeren, Postmes and Spears, 2008). Media capture and propaganda can, however, make this harder by distorting statistics, shifting blame, excluding issues from public attention, fostering political apathy (Alyukov, 2022) and producing political cynicism. Because of this, people might be less likely to participate as propaganda weakens the perceptions of injustice (Rosenfeld and Wallace, 2024), changes the direction of the outrage, makes the protesters look corrupt or malicious (Zakharov, 2026) or makes the scale of the opposition uncertain.

Social media, however, can counter these effects by constructing alternative narratives, producing emotional content, demonstrating a movement's scale, building its identity, mobilising young people and challenging the credibility of propaganda outlets. Regime-critical traditional media are less able to perform these same functions because they face limits in reaching broad audiences, constraints on narrative construction and a lack of public trust.

Krstić (2026) finds that independent journalists in captured-media environments closely follow norms of neutrality, objectivity and balance. Although they report political events, these norms can limit their ability to construct narratives offering causal interpretation, moral evaluation or solutions (Entman, 1993). Low trust creates another constraint. In 2025, only 17% of people trusted N1, despite it becoming Serbia's most trusted outlet (IRI, 2025). Those who distrust an outlet may avoid its reporting or dismiss its claims, further limiting its influence over public opinion. Limited reach, professional neutrality and low trust therefore restrict independent outlets' ability to challenge dominant regime narratives.

What Can Social Movements Do?

Social media allow movements to bypass constraints imposed by captured media and take control over their public communication. Movement-controlled accounts allow movements to construct alternative narratives, strengthen perceptions of injustice, demonstrate scale and commitment, counter political apathy, mobilise young citizens and challenge the credibility of propaganda outlets. In Serbia, recent changes are consistent with these mechanisms. In 2023, 39% of respondents identified inflation and the economy as Serbia's main problem and 30% selected Kosovo, while only 14% selected the Vučić regime and 10% corruption (CRTA, 2023c). By 2025, the proportions selecting the regime and corruption had risen to 18% and 29% (CRTA, 2025). These shifts coincided with the Student Movement, which framed corruption as the cause of both the Novi Sad canopy collapse and wider institutional failures (studenti_u_blokadi).

Media capture makes mobilisation harder by distorting information, shifting blame and weakening perceptions of injustice and collective effectiveness. Regimes can portray protesters as marginal, unsuccessful or politically motivated, making participation appear unnecessary or futile. In Serbia, pro-government media did this by using misleading attendance figures, blaming students for economic decline, claiming their demands had been fulfilled and portraying their actions as politically motivated (Associated Press, 2025; Reuters, 2025a; RTS, 2024). However, by connecting events to values and emotions, communicating collective effectiveness and constructing a division between "us" and "them" frames can move citizens from passive concern towards participation (Snow & Benford, 1988; Ganz, 2011; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Social media are suited to this task because they combine text, video, images and sound, which can generate strong emotional responses (Rosenfeld & Wallace, 2024).

The Student Movement used these advantages to connect the canopy collapse with systemic corruption and present mobilisation as justified and effective. One post declared, "Serbia or the Mafia, you choose. Together we will win!" (studenti_u_blokadi, 2026). Footage of the collapse and police violence was circulated to evoke anger and injustice, while the movement used its accounts to reject Vučić's claim that every student demand had been fulfilled (studenti_u_blokadi, 2026). Attendance estimates and drone footage challenged attempts to minimise protest size, while videos of students marching across Serbia and cycling to Brussels demonstrated commitment.

Social media can also counter political apathy, the belief that political participation will achieve little or nothing (Rosenberg, 1954). Media capture can reinforce apathy by leaving citizens less informed and by encouraging political cynicism in which political alternatives appear equally self-interested or untrustworthy (Leeson, 2008; Agger, Goldstein & Pearl, 1961). Such attitudes are substantial in Serbia. Political parties were the least trusted institutions in one survey, receiving confidence from only 13% of respondents (Džunić, Golubović & Marinković, 2020), while Serbian politicians later received an average trust score of 2.00 out of ten (Mandić & Vinokić, 2025). The Vučić regime reinforces this cynicism by presenting political and media actors as incompetent, self-interested or controlled by foreign forces (Krstić, 2026; Dragojlov, 2026).

The Student Movement's social-media presence offered an alternative. Since its emergence, Serbia has witnessed some of its largest demonstrations, while the movement gained the trust of almost 60% of the public (Jelovac, 2026; CRTA, 2025). Its accounts displayed what Tilly (2004) describes as worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment. Videos of students marching and

sleeping outdoors presented sacrifice as evidence of commitment; support for arrested students demonstrated unity; protest footage communicated scale; and demands for systemic reform presented collective rather than personal interests (studenti_u_blokadi, 2026). Videos of students speaking with citizens and organising humanitarian donations further humanised the movement. This allowed students to construct their own identity rather than accept one imposed by pro-regime outlets, which portrayed them as elitist, foreign-controlled or detached from ordinary citizens (Kurir, 2025; Pink, 2025).

Mobilising young people is important because they support recruitment, movement growth and the diffusion of participation beyond the youth itself. Their greater “biographical availability” means fewer obligations leave them more able to participate (Earl, Maher & Elliott, 2017). Student environments facilitate horizontal diffusion among peers and vertical diffusion from students to parents (Van Dyke, 1998; Bloemraad & Trost, 2008), while younger participants are more likely to develop new protest tactics (McAdam, 1983; Soule, 1997). Young people therefore contribute through participation and organisational development.

Because young people commonly obtain political information through social media, these platforms may reach them more effectively than traditional outlets. Social media can demonstrate that activism is meaningful, increasing the likelihood of participation (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). This matters in Serbia, where 56.7% of young respondents identified the belief that politicians are all the same as a reason for not voting (KOMS, 2025). However, in 2025, more than 80% of young respondents reported attending at least one protest (KOMS, 2025). This does not demonstrate that social media caused participation, but it illustrates the value of reaching citizens who are available for activism, embedded in dense peer networks and likely to diffuse participation through interpersonal and family ties.

Finally, social media can weaken propaganda by challenging the credibility of the outlets disseminating it. Source credibility affects whether audiences accept political messages and frames (Rosenfeld & Wallace, 2024; Druckman, 2001). In Serbia, trust in RTS fell from 31% in 2022 to 17% in 2025, while trust in N1 rose from 9% to 17% and Nova S from 5% to 9% (IRI, 2022, 2025). These shifts matter because media skepticism can weaken agenda-setting influence, while distrust of mainstream sources can encourage citizens to seek alternative information (Tsfati, 2003; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

Independent media can contribute to this process, but low public trust and professional commitments to neutrality, objectivity and balance constrain how directly they can challenge competitors’ credibility (Krstić, 2026). Movement-controlled accounts face fewer constraints. They can compare pro-regime claims with videos, photographs, documents or eyewitness accounts, while reposting and discussion carry this evidence beyond followers. The Student Movement used its accounts to criticise RTS, Informer and other pro-regime outlets, highlight biased reporting and structural advantages benefiting the SNS, and call for protests against RTS and Informer (studenti_u_blokadi). Because the movement commanded high public trust, its criticism could carry greater weight than similar claims from a distrusted media organisation. These accounts therefore weaken authoritarian information dominance through two reinforcing mechanisms, providing an alternative information source and challenging the credibility on which captured outlets depend for persuasive and agenda-setting influence.

Conclusion

As social media become more widespread, they play an increasingly important role in pro-democracy movement strategy. This paper has argued that movement-controlled social media accounts help movements circumvent constraints facing government-critical traditional outlets in captured-media environments. They provide independent infrastructure through which movements can reach broader audiences, frame events, present their identity, demonstrate strength, counter the political consequences of media capture and challenge the credibility of pro-regime outlets.

However, social media alone cannot fully explain the Student Movement's scale. The Novi Sad tragedy, dissatisfaction with the government and mistakes by regime figures created grievances and political opportunities that social media could not have produced. Instead, social media helped the movement communicate these causes, maintain its public visibility and translate them into broader participation. Their effective use was therefore insufficient to create a mass movement, but important for sustaining and expanding one.

Further research should examine how information control produces political and media cynicism in Serbia and how these attitudes encourage inactivity, distrust and withdrawal from public life. It should also investigate how content reaches those who do not use social media for news through networks within families, neighborhoods and communities. Testing these mechanisms against the 2025 protests in Indonesia and Nepal could distinguish those that apply across captured-media systems. Comparing those cases with Serbia would help distinguish mechanisms that travel across captured-media systems from those that depend on Serbia's particular political, demographic and media environment.

Nevertheless, the Serbian case shows that movement-controlled social media can preserve communication where traditional channels are captured, construct alternative narratives, mobilize politically inactive groups, particularly young people, and challenge pro-regime sources. These functions address restricted access to alternative information, weakened perceptions of injustice, doubts about collective effectiveness, political apathy and continued exposure to propaganda. Social media cannot replace traditional media or guarantee success. However, as governments increasingly rely on information control rather than repression alone, independent communication networks may become more important to movements' capacity to mobilize, expand and survive.

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