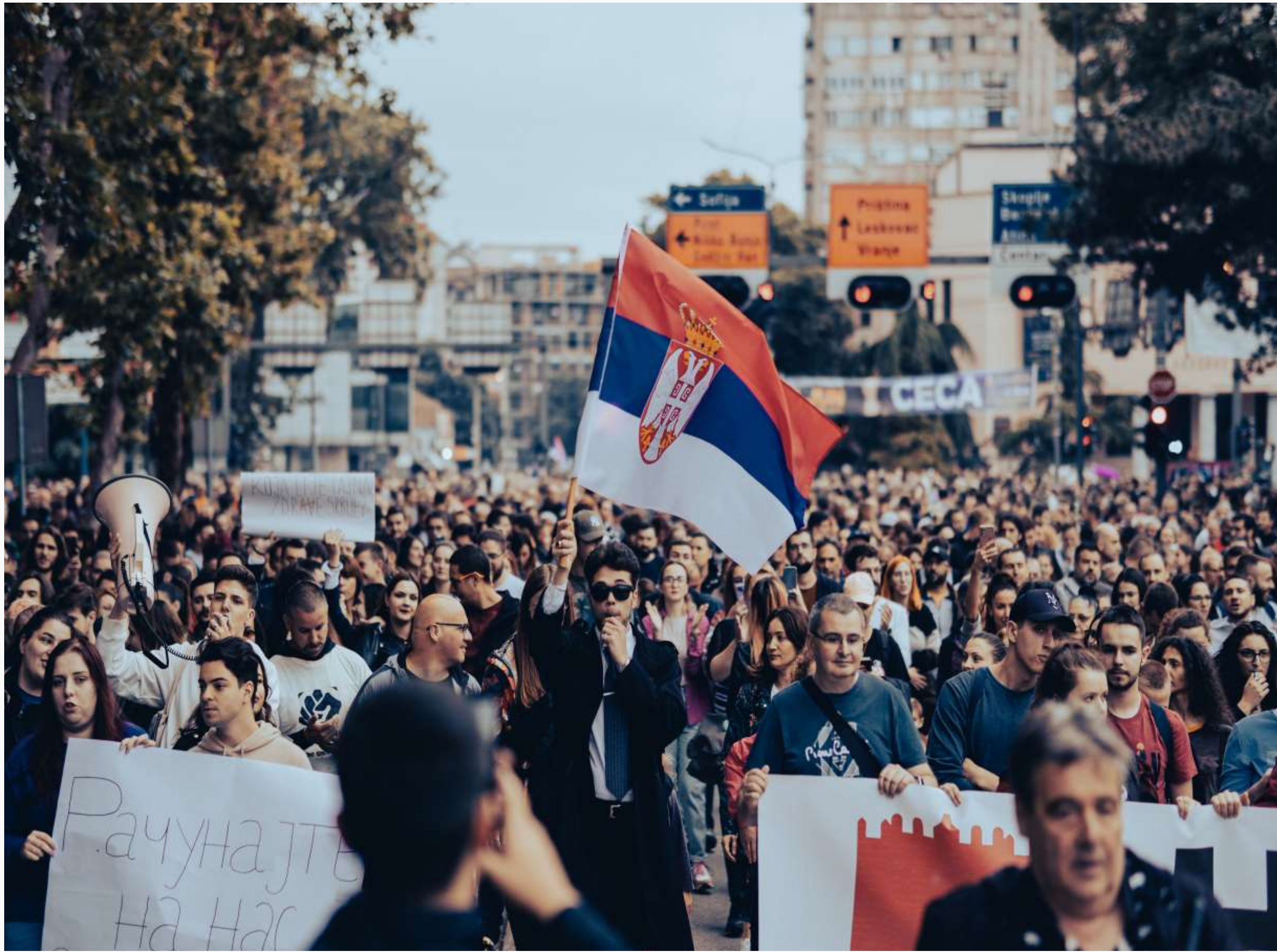




INTRODUCTION

- After months of protest against the authoritarian regime of Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian Student Movement's Instagram accounts gained hundreds of thousands of followers within days, which the movement described as a "bot attack" intended to trigger Instagram's enforcement systems and disable its accounts.
- This raises the question of why opponents would seek to disable the movement's social media, to answer that question, this research asks: "How can social media be used by pro-democracy movements to circumvent media capture in authoritarian regimes?"
- This is an important topic, as the rise of informational autocrats, who maintain power through control over the flow of information (Guriev and Treisman, 2019), has made autocracies more resilient to protest (Chenoweth, 2020)
- As most of the world's population now lives in autocracies and pro-democracy protest is becoming less successful, understanding new strategies for social movements is increasingly important (Nord et al., 2026)
- Existing research shows that social media can spread alternative information and facilitate participation (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012), while governments can use these platforms to strengthen information control (Gunitsky, 2015)
- However, less is known about how movements use social media under media capture and counter its effects on political participation, leaving an important gap in research on pro-democracy movement strategy which this research aims to cover

THE CASE OF THE SERBIAN STUDENT MOVEMENT

- Since the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) took power in 2012, Aleksandar Vučić has consolidated control over media through privatization, regulatory capture and financial and political pressure
- Several social movements like *Serbia Against Violence* and *One in Five Million* managed to attract attention and support, but ultimately failed to become politically consequential
- However, the Student Movement emerged after the Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse killed 16 people and initially demanded accountability. Protests grew into a nationwide student movement, later adopting broader demands around democracy and the rule of law
- Students increasingly relied on movement-controlled social media to communicate directly with citizens and challenge these narratives.
- By organizing some of Serbia's largest protests and forcing an early election, the Student Movement became consequential, making it a useful case for studying social media under media capture

THE RESILIENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO MEDIA CAPTURE

- Media capture prevents the media from effectively holding governments accountable
- Media capture is usually achieved through ownership, financial pressure, regulatory capture and intimidation (Stiglitz, 2017; Stigler, 1971)
- In Serbia, the Vučić regime has used state advertising, legislation and influence over the regulating body and the national broadcaster to strengthen its control over the media
- This allowed Vučić's regime to restrict the reach of alternative information, ignore protests concentrated in major cities, control official narratives and discredit the opposition, which prevented movements from becoming politically consequential
- By demonstrating broader reach and influence, the Student Movement, however, shows how social media can bypass these pressures and reach wider audiences

This comparison is shown in the table below

CAPTURE MECHANISM	TRADITIONAL MEDIA	SOCIAL MEDIA
OWNERSHIP & DISTRIBUTION	Outlets or distributors can be acquired privatized or removed from operator's offers	Accounts cannot be privatized; social media bypasses TV and print intermediaries
FINANCIAL PRESSURE	State advertising, project funding and high production costs create dependencies to regimes	Platforms are free to use; volunteer content can be produced with everyday devices
REGULATORY CAPTURE	Licensing, regulatory governance and broadcast frequencies shape access to audiences	No broadcast license is required to publish nationally through social media like Instagram and X
INTIMIDATION	Named journalists face threats, lawsuits, violence and high replacement costs	Anonymous teams and collective administration make targeting and replacement more difficult

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA COUNTERS PROPAGANDA'S INFLUENCE

- Social movements succeed when they can successfully make people:

Feel injustice towards the movement's cause

Identify with the movement

Believe that the movement can make a difference

- 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

Consequences of media capture on the political sphere:



- Propaganda can make people less likely to participate in protests by weakening perceptions of injustice, redirecting outrage, discrediting protesters and making the true scale of opposition unclear (Rosenfeld & Wallace, 2024; Zakharov, 2026)
- Social media, however, can counter these effects by constructing alternative narratives, producing emotional content, demonstrating a movement's scale, building its identity, mobilizing young people and challenging the credibility of propaganda outlets. These mechanisms are illustrated below:

1 Alternative Narrative Creation

- Reframes events around **injustice and systemic problems**
- Counters **regime narratives and misleading claims**

2 Identity Creation

- Builds **identification and emotional connection** with the movement
- Strengthens **legitimacy and willingness to participate**

3 Youth Mobilization

- Mobilizes young people by showing that **activism can achieve results**
- The youth then spreads participation through **peer and family networks**

4 Lowering the trust in pro-regime media

- Exposes **bias and misleading reporting**
- Weakens propaganda by **challenging source credibility**

- 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)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

- As social media become more widespread, they play an increasingly important role in pro-democracy movement strategy
- 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
- Further research should examine how information control produces political and media cynicism in Serbia, how that impacts political participation and the spread of social media content through networks like friends and family
- These mechanisms should also be tested against similar cases like protest movements in Nepal and Indonesia in order to distinguish between mechanisms that travel across captured-media systems from those that depend on Serbia's particular context
- The Serbian case shows that movement-controlled social media can preserve communication, shape alternative narratives, mobilize citizens and challenge pro-regime media, helping movements overcome media capture

