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“Faculties at the Crossroads”: Universities between the Sound of Silence and the Voice of Dissent

ABSTRACT

Pressures on Serbian state universities have intensified in recent years, particularly in the last twenty months, as they became sites of sustained academic and civil mobilisation following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy on 1 November 2024, which claimed sixteen lives and triggered nationwide protests. What followed was politically instigated interference in educational institutions, marginalisation of academic and cultural staff from

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decision-making processes, and severe undermining of university autonomy and integrity. In response, and in support of the students' months-long struggle for democracy, members of the academic community initiated a strategic collective action at a central Belgrade crossroads. As a form of civil disobedience, it brought together representatives of all state universities under the symbolic name "Faculties at the Crossroads".

Drawing on documents, testimonies, and participant observation, the study examines how the protest was organised under institutional pressure, how spoken word, visual art, and music shaped dissent – serving as channels of communication and mobilisation, and whether the participant-researcher position constituted a methodological limitation or an epistemic advantage. The findings show that the protest combined adaptive self-organisation with participatory planning, while its multimodal activities fostered solidarity beyond academia and strengthened ties between universities and society. The participant position proved essential for documenting processes inaccessible to external observers. The paper argues that "Faculties at the Crossroads" represents an unprecedented form of academic activism in Serbia and documents an ongoing struggle for university autonomy and academic freedom.

KEYWORDS: academic freedom, dissent, 16 minutes, students, university autonomy

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

Place: Railway station, Novi Sad

Date: Friday, 1 November 2024

Time: 11:52

Passengers are waiting beneath a recently refurbished canopy of the railway station. Among them are little children and teenagers, young and middle-aged adults, mothers and fathers, caring grandparents. Waiting for a train or a bus that will never come... as, without warning, tons of concrete collapse upon them, leaving fourteen dead, then fifteen..., then sixteen.

Shock and disbelief. Grief and despair. Solemn vigils in memory of the victims – sixteen minutes of silence for sixteen lost lives... day after day, month after month... across the country... for more than a year and a half... Questions without answers...

Crime without punishment...

Punishment without crime.

Students – punished for their pursuit of justice and their fight for democracy and the rule of law, institutions free from corruption and political interference, and calling for free and fair elections.

Academic staff – punished for joining students in these pursuits, defending academic freedom, university autonomy, the right to critical thought and scientific and intellectual integrity.

Citizens – punished for their solidarity with students, for demanding accountability and transparency, for defending fundamental civil liberties and for advocating life in a decent society.

Education represents one of the essential pillars of society, with higher education being a key driver of development and progress. Depriving the university of autonomy constitutes an attack not only on the freedom of students and academic staff, and their rights to learn, work, develop and think critically, but also on the moral and social values upon which society rests. In Serbia, a European country whose largest state universities rank among the world's leading academic institutions – University of Belgrade (top 1.9%), University of Novi Sad (5.4%), University of Kragujevac (7.3%) and University of Niš (8.9%) according to the Center for World University Rankings Global 2000 list (CWUR 2026) – such concerns are particularly pressing.

"Faculties at the Crossroads" is a campaign conceptualised as a strategic collective action, initiated by professors, researchers, artists and associates from dissenting state universities in Serbia. Clearly articulated strategic goals included the demands submitted to the Government of the Republic of Serbia, mobilisation of the academic community and drawing public attention to key issues in higher education.

The study examines the ways in which the dissenting academic community responded to the challenges faced by state universities in Serbia. It addresses three research questions: (1) how dissenting academics initiated, organised and documented the protest activities within the strategic action "Faculties at the Crossroads" under the conditions of institutional crisis and time pressure; (2) how the spoken programme, artistic production, and musical performance functioned as constitutive elements of the protest's strategy; and (3) how the participant-researcher position influenced the epistemological status of the documentation produced, and what methodological implications follow for the archiving of collective actions.

The study is grounded in theories of democracy and the right to dissent. It draws on John Stuart Mill's conception of freedom of opinion and expression as a precondition for intellectual and social progress, John Rawls' understanding of justice and civil disobedience as legitimate responses to perceived injustice, and Covey's view of dissent as citizens' engagement through acts of speech,

protest and non-violent resistance. It approaches academic protest as a legitimate form of democratic participation, allowing the activities of the campaign “Faculties at the Crossroads” to be interpreted not only as acts of dissent, but as expressions of civic responsibility and collective engagement against the instrumentalisation of institutions for political purposes.

The following chapters examine the theoretical foundations and diverse manifestations of political pressure and academic dissent through the case of the “Faculties at the Crossroads”.

DEMOCRACY AND THE RIGHT TO DISSENT

In today’s world, democracy remains a powerful yet contested political ideal, a proclaimed universal norm selectively applied in practice. Engaging with democracy requires confronting its conceptual foundations with the ways it is institutionalised, experienced and challenged in contemporary societies. Concerns about the true state of democracy and human rights appear to intensify under neo-capitalist models of state governance. While some countries allow open dialogue between opposing sides when tensions arise, others face growing scrutiny and the use of coercive force. As Lu notes, “The fundamental right to dissent stands as a cornerstone of democratic societies, enabling citizens to voice their opinions and participate in the governance of their nations” (Lu 2023).

According to John Stuart Mill, even erroneous dissenting opinion often contains elements of truth, and since prevailing opinion rarely represents the whole truth, “it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied” (Mill 2003, 118). For Rawls, justice is the first virtue of social institutions, and dissent is not only a citizen’s right but also a duty when facing injustice. Civil disobedience, as he defines it, is “a public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government” – an appeal that presupposes, rather than rejects, constitutional legitimacy (Rawls 2005, 371). Covey (2022, 90) conceptualises dissent as civic engagement expressed through acts of speech, protest, and civil disobedience, with non-violent forms constituting its most powerful expression:

“Protesters dissent by publicly voicing opposition to social or governmental authority. Marches, rallies, and sit-ins, such as those that characterized the civil rights protests in the 1960s or the Black Lives Matter movement today, are classic ways in which those seeking political change, or simply wishing to advocate a view, express their opposition” (Covey 2022, 89–90)¹.

1 Rally is a public meeting of a large group of people to support or oppose someone or something, while a sit-in is a strike or protest in which people sit or stay in a place and refuse to leave until they are given what they demand (The Britannica Dictionary 2025).

As a core feature of democratic life, dissent can enable social change. In authoritarian contexts, however, it is often subject to media manipulation and violent suppression. The following chapters examine both dimensions, as reflected in the actions of Serbian academics and students and in the conduct of state institutions and ministries.

These theoretical coordinates – Mill's epistemic argument for dissent, Rawls' grounding of civil disobedience in constitutional legitimacy, and Covey's typology of protest as civic engagement – serve as analytical criteria. The following sections examine how protest planning, public discourse, artistic production, and musical expression instantiate and extend these principles in practice.

A STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

When universities and citizens come under sustained pressure from authorities entrusted with safeguarding their autonomy and human rights, the result is profound institutional crisis. International cases demonstrate diverse forms of dissent and mechanisms of its suppression (cf. Lu 2023; Covey 2022; SPM IAS 2025).

In Serbian academia, institutional crisis is evident in interference with university governance, punitive decrees, unlawful intrusion of police and mercenary actors into university premises, fragmentation and dismantling of long-established universities, obstruction of academic promotion and re-election procedures, manipulation of student elections, replacement of duly elected board members, marginalisation and dismissal of competent decision-making staff and appointment of regime-aligned actors instead, withholding of funding for universities and cultural institutions while incentivising governing party's supporters, obstruction of research and artistic work, discrediting of scholars, arrests and restriction of dissenting students' and staff rights.

At the societal level, institutional crisis manifests in administrative dysfunction, capture of legislative and executive institutions, misuse of law, restriction of rights, seizure of public space, threats and violence against activists and journalists, media censorship, selective resource allocation, and suppression of healthcare and legal documentation. It also includes restriction of education, labour, culture, and healthcare rights for opponents, while incentivising loyalists through material rewards and pressure to secure votes or facilitate property seizure for government-led projects, as well as suppression of dissent through excessive force and questionable legal or extralegal measures, alongside sustained psychological strain on the public.

When institutions intended to safeguard public order become instruments of coercion and co-optation, systemic crises emerges, calling for action. And when constitutional order and legal protections are breached and basic human

rights undermined, academia is compelled to respond through strategic action, understood as “a careful plan or method for achieving a particular goal, usually over a long period of time” (The Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2025).

Against this socio-political background and the ongoing institutional capture of universities, the 17-day life at the *Crossroads* stood as our embodied act of dissent.

METHODOLOGY

This paper has a limited scope. It does not aim to provide a full sociological or political analysis of the “Faculties at the Crossroads” protest, or to assess its long-term institutional effects. In line with the research questions, its primary purpose is to document the protest by reconstructing how it was planned and carried out from materials that the authors, as direct participants, were able to observe, collect, and preserve. This limitation is partly practical, resulting from insufficient time for a broader analysis, but it is also methodological. Within an ongoing protest cycle, documentation is itself scholarly work rather than merely a basis for later analysis.

The authors approach this material both as participants and as researchers. Rather than attempting to resolve that tension, the paper makes it explicit. It therefore combines descriptive and analytical methods. Participation made it possible to observe and contribute to planning and decision-making processes inaccessible to an outside observer in real time. At the same time, this position has clear limitations, particularly regarding perspectives that were not recorded, potential informal disagreements, or actors who chose not to speak.

The analysis draws on three principal types of primary material: transcripts of speeches delivered at the Crossroads, internal planning documents produced by the working groups for strategy, logistics, security, and media communication, and testimonies of direct participants. Secondary sources – including media reports, social media records, publicly available footage and photographs – are used where they help corroborate or contextualise the primary material. The archive is necessarily partial, and the paper makes no claim otherwise. Its conclusions should therefore be read in light of the materials available at the time of writing and the inevitable gaps resulting from what could not be documented.

DOCUMENTING “FACULTIES AT THE CROSSROADS”

Emerging from public outrage over the unresolved railway station disaster and subsequent recurrent violence against students, academics and citizens attending vigils, the protests in Serbia initially took the form of faculty

blockades in Belgrade, before progressively spreading across universities, cities and towns nationwide. A self-organised academic collective – formed primarily, though not exclusively, by dissenting professors and researchers, artists and associates from the University of Belgrade and the University of Arts in Belgrade – brought together more than 2,000 members, united under the *Dissenting² University* initiative.

Months later, dozens of members of the initiative organised a strategic action in defence of academic autonomy, with colleagues from the informal *Free state Universities* of Kragujevac, Novi Pazar, Niš, Novi Sad and Priština – temporarily based in Kosovska Mitrovica, contributing as co-organisers, speakers and invited guests. From 9 June 2025, the intersection of Nemanjina Street and Kneza Miloša Street – two arterial roads in Belgrade – became the site of a peaceful yet persistent blockade. The space in front of the central building of the Government of the Republic of Serbia became a place of resistance, laying claim to academic integrity, freedom of thought and human dignity. What was first envisaged as a potential 2-to-3-day protest evolved into a 17-day sit-in.

Our epistemological stance assumes that protest is socially constructed and observable through participants' accounts, official documents and media coverage, allowing us to interpret the strategies and forms of dissent in an analytically rigorous manner. The *Crossroads* calls for careful documentation so that it is not interpreted as another episode in the series of demonstrations that have taken place in Serbia since late 2024, and so that the truth of a deliberate, sustained and carefully designed practice of resistance is not lost.

Accordingly, this paper positions itself within the tradition of *engaged scholarship* – a mode of academic inquiry that does not pretend to be the *god trick of seeing everything from nowhere* (cf. Haraway 1988, 581) by observing the events it studies from the outside, but instead acknowledges participation as both a methodological condition and an ethical stance rooted in *testimonial justice* (see Fricker 2007, 93–94). This approach has clear precedents in feminist standpoint theory and the sociology of knowledge produced under conditions of political urgency (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991).

The text that follows should therefore be read in three registers simultaneously: as an archive – preserving what happened, as an analysis – examining how and why it happened, and as an argument – contending that what happened matters. The tension between these registers is not a flaw to be resolved but a feature of the form itself.

2 Bearing in mind the theoretical framework, formal political register, and the academic tone of this paper, the initiative is here referred to as the Dissenting University. Owing to the broader protest climate and the collective's mobilising ethos, some members refer to it as the Rebellious University, including in academic publications. Both labels denote the same non-violent collective actor, unrelated to past historical designations.

Testimonies of the *Crossroads* – the traces left by *the Dissenting* and *Free Universities* – in the context of global hyperproduction of visual statements, are predominantly photographic and video records. These circulate through the media and social networks, while also becoming part of numerous personal archives that sustain individual memory and, ultimately, collective remembrance. “At an elementary epistemological level [...] any trace left by the past becomes a document for historians as soon as they know how to interrogate its remains, how to question them” (Ricoeur 1988, 117). However,

“it may well be the case that historians still do not take the evidence of images seriously enough, so that a recent discussion speaks of ‘the invisibility of the visual’. As one art historian puts it, ‘historians [...] prefer to deal with texts and political or economic facts, not the deeper levels of experience that images probe’” (Burke 2001, 9–10).

Yet Ricoeur’s deeper insight – that historians do not simply find documents but construct them through the act of questioning – obliges us to be transparent about our own construction. What we include reflects the perspectives of those who organised and participated in the protest, while what remains undocumented – the voices of those who were present but did not speak, moments that resisted capture, and differences in perspective – forms the horizon of a future, more complete archive.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to initiate documentation that counters ‘the invisibility of the visual’ and remains a source for further studies, by reconstructing the strategic planning of the protest “Faculties at the Crossroads”. Its particular value lies in the authors’ direct participation in the protest, providing testimony grounded in lived experience.

At the same time, this perspective inevitably entails a degree of subjectivity and a lack of both emotional and temporal distance necessary for a fully balanced assessment – not only of the protest itself but also of the broader student movement and developments within the academic community that began in late 2024 and are still unfolding. A future version of this study, written after greater historical distance has been gained, will necessarily incorporate what this one cannot: interviews with participants who remained silent, institutional responses, testimonies of victims of academic and broader retaliation, and the long-term consequences for academic life in Serbia. The present text should therefore be understood as the first layer of a stratified archive for future analysis, and a point of departure in informed argumentation, rather than its conclusion.

We deem that methodological transparency calls for equal transparency about the ethical position from which this testimony is offered. Thus, fully aware that documenting is itself a form of responsibility, serving not only memory but also future understanding, we maintain that the position expressed through active participation in the protest is, in fact, the only position members of the academic community can legitimately hold.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

In situations of institutional crisis, a comprehensive strategic approach includes a well-coordinated collective action designed to influence public perception, decision-making structures, and power relations. It integrates analysis, goal setting and resource allocation. Structured orchestration of a protest entails the deliberate selection of symbolic acts, spatial positioning, and sustained presence in order to articulate dissent and exert pressure for institutional change. It also requires adapting to public reaction, media dynamics and institutional conduct, aiming to transform an immediate crisis into a visible and relevant public cause (see Mintzberg and Waters 1985; Tilly and Tarrow 2015).

Strategic planning of this protest required goodwill, dedication, careful deliberation and extensive voluntary work. The first steps on the macro-level involved defining the protest's goals: mobilisation of the academic community; drawing broader public attention to key issues in higher education; and awakening civic awareness through an informative and educational campaign. The voluntarily formed working groups for strategy, logistics, security, and media communication then devoted themselves to methodical planning, taking into consideration their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as potential opportunities and threats.

Each of the four working groups planned its activities and needs and took steps to meet them. Beyond its coordinating role, the strategy team was particularly engaged in day-to-day planning of the educational, cultural and artistic programme for citizens, students and colleagues alike. It included: public speeches (30); panel discussions and open conversations (12); psychological workshops (2); creative art and craft workshops (12); symbolic artistic performances (3) and daily displays; concerts and dances (48); open-air screenings (3); quizzes (3); daily sports activities; educational fairs (3); daily charity fund-raising and donations; promotions (7); children's animation (4); a monologue performance (1); student-led interviews (2); festive welcome ceremonies (3); first-aid training (1); a chess tournament (4 days and on); and daily press conferences or on-site interviews. The large daily turnout confirmed that these efforts were effective.

The protest "Faculties at the Crossroads" thus functioned through well-coordinated and almost synergistic – though often spontaneous – efforts of the four working groups. Although there were moments of haste and stress, these were an inevitable part of day-to-day planning of a gathering of this scale. Drawing on their previous six months of experience, students also provided invaluable support in the strategic planning of the protest and gladly participated in its many activities.

The dissent of the academic staff was also voiced through media statements and numerous public appeals to relevant national and international bodies,

including the submission of the initiative's demands to the Government of the Republic of Serbia:

1. disbanding of the recently established Working Group for the New Higher Education Law and initiating a new, public, and inclusive debate on the law – (partially fulfilled);
2. repeal of the Amendments to the Decree on University Standards, as they are considered unlawful and harmful to autonomy – (still not fulfilled over a year later);
3. approval of the state-funded Higher Education Quotas by the end of June 2025, which the Ministry of Education had been withholding – (fulfilled).

THE LANGUAGE OF DISSENT

Speeches constituted a significant – and at the very beginning of the protest, a crucial – form of communication with the public. Their importance lay not only in articulating the reasons for the protest and formulating demands addressed to the authorities but also in establishing a relationship with all those sympathetic to and supportive of this campaign. This is evidenced by the fact that on the first day, 9 June 2025, six motivated speeches were delivered. The podium was taken by faculty members from five of *the Dissenting* and *Free Universities*: the University of Priština with a temporary seat in Kosovska Mitrovica, the University of Kragujevac, the University of Niš, the University of Belgrade, and the University of Novi Sad.

In the later part of the protest, faculty members from the State University of Novi Pazar and the University of Arts in Belgrade, also addressed the gathering. On the second day, there were four speakers, after which the number of daily speeches was reduced to a maximum of three, with some days featuring a single speech alongside other activities. The exception occurred on 26 June 2025, the final day, when five speeches were held.

In addition to academic staff, speakers included students, high school professors, professional associations and solidarity networks, underscoring the breadth of support and the inclusive character of this mode of public address.

All speeches shared a pronounced measuredness: an academic register, rhetorical clarity and appropriateness. In this respect, Hans-Georg Gadamer writes:

“The ancients practiced the festive custom of eulogy, in which recognizably laudable things received public praise: Gods and heroes, love or fatherland, [...], justice, wisdom – even old age [...]. The lovely custom of eulogy, belonging to a world cognizant of its ideals and sure about them, nurtured a whole genre of eloquence that was considered an undisputed good. It was devoted to praise of such things” (Gadamer 1998, 16).

The eulogistic dimension of these addresses was not directed toward individuals or toward something concluded, but toward justice, integrity, honour, struggle, and courage – values invoked as living principles rather than commemorated as remnants of the past.

Gadamer's eulogy presupposes a community that already shares the values being praised; the speech *confirms* and *binds* rather than persuades. At the *Crossroads*, this was clearly observable: speeches did not primarily address the authorities or undecided observers, but the participants themselves. Each address became an act of mutual recognition in which speakers and listeners confirmed that the invoked values of dignity, academic freedom and civic courage were, shared, real and worth defending. The third speech below illustrates this most clearly: "Today, we do not merely celebrate history – we continue it". This is the grammar of eulogy: not description but enactment.

Here are the striking parts of three speeches held on 9, 14 and 16 June:

[1] Professors who truly understand the calling of teaching are no false elite. They stand shoulder to shoulder with their students – present and future alike. They do not hide behind the lectern. They do not tremble under the weight of criminal regime pressures. They are not cowards. If they were, the classroom would have no place for them.

We long to return to that classroom – but not while our means of living are taken from us, not while we are targeted with a language so twisted that only their poisoned minds could invent it, not until the shameful regulation that reduces science to mere scribbling is repealed, not while threats of privatisation serve as revenge for students daring to show that the emperor has no clothes.

[2] In many university classrooms across Serbia, my pupils are today teaching assistants, lecturers, and some are already associate or full professors. This often means that my students leave my embrace only to be embraced by their new professors – my former students. And for this, among so many reasons, I am at peace. Even in these unsettled times. I know the steady hands that will guide them, and I know the dignified graduates I release from my own. Most of all, I know that my hands – and the hands of my student – are not the only ones. Across Serbia, countless such connections flourish.

[3] We are not merely witnesses to attacks on academic freedom in Serbia. We are not merely the objects of those attacks. We are its shields.

We will not give up. In this resides our honour – and our responsibility.

Today, we do not merely celebrate history – we continue it. And each of us here is a living part of it.

We do not live off tradition – we live by the choice to be worthy of it every single day. And we will stand. As long as we can look our students and our

citizens in the eye – we will stand. That is why – we remain upright. That is why – we do not give up. Until victory!

The speeches created the first links between members of the academic community – the organisers and participants of the protest – and all others present. They were also an important element of mutual bonding among the participants themselves. The addresses delivered by speakers whose ties to universities stretched back to their own student days were received with deepest gratitude, seen as expressions of remarkable courage and solidarity:

[...] Together with professors, students, colleagues, parents, and citizens – and with everyone who understands that the struggle for the university is not only an academic matter but a struggle for the society in which our children will grow and be educated.

These words powerfully embodied the essential truth of why we must stand together.

By the numbers, the *Crossroads* featured thirty speeches delivered by twenty-eight individuals, including twenty-two faculty members and researchers from all seven state universities across six cities. These figures reflect the breadth and collective commitment of Serbia's academic community. Twenty-one speeches have been transcribed, preserving voices that connected and inspired everyone present.

The cultural programme also included panel discussions on topics such as: coping with stress during blockades, the future of education, science and education at the crossroads, protest through the lens of photography, the past, present and future of Serbian state universities, media at the crossroads, youth in the times of crisis, and the (un)ethical use of artificial intelligence. These discussions enabled critical reflection and situated the protest within broader social and technological contexts, enriching the intellectual dimension of the multi-day initiative.

Yet, probably the most powerful statement of all was the 16 minutes of silence in honour of the 16 people who had lost their lives – the message unspoken for 17 days.

THE ART OF DISSENT

Considering art as “an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world through signs, forms, actions, and objects” (Bourriaud 2002, 107), it was inherently present in the Serbian protest movement. From the almost formalised work of art professors and students – which certainly deserve a more extensive and in-depth analysis they will undoubtedly receive – to the countless individuals who wittily, precisely, and poetically *produced*

relationships with the world through signs, forms, actions, and objects, the protests were marked by creativity.

The pinnacle, preceding the "Faculties at the Crossroads" strategic action, took place at the Art Pavilion "Cvijeta Zuzorić" at Kalemegdan: the exhibition "Interspace", showcasing the creative-protest work of students from art faculties in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Niš. Represented were the Faculty of Fine Arts, Faculty of Applied Arts, Faculty of Music, and Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade; the Faculty of Philology and Arts in Kragujevac; the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad; and the Faculty of Arts in Niš. The exhibition presented the *signs, forms, actions, and objects* through which students, in the context of the protest, *produced relationships with the world* they aspired to transform, offering a creative vision of the society they sought to change.

One of the most remarkable works of art from the *interspace* – "Trojan Horse", which recalls Article 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia: "No state body, political organisation, group or individual may usurp sovereignty from citizens, nor establish power against the freely expressed will of citizens" – was at the *Crossroads*. The "Trojan Horse" performed a specific semiotic function: by literalising a classical metaphor of concealed subversion, it repositioned the protesters not as outsiders attacking power, but as citizens reclaiming what is constitutionally already theirs. The work did not argue; it demonstrated. Its presence at the Crossroads transformed the intersection into a space where legal text and artistic form occupied the same ground, each reinforcing the other's claim to legitimacy.

"Faculties at the Crossroads" was announced and articulated on social media through works produced by faculty members and students of the University of Arts in Belgrade, positioning visual practice as part of the protest's public presence. At the *Crossroads*, striking examples of graphic design were on display: a protest reinterpretation of the University of Arts logo, visual identities developed for the Free University of Novi Sad and the Free University of Kragujevac, and a screen-printed protest image bearing the message "You Will Not Dig", created by students of the Faculty of Applied Arts and distributed among participants.

These practices extended into participation. Collective production of protest badges, banner-making workshops, and a protest Monopoly installation transformed the site into a space of participation, where design, play, and political agency converged. By applying the structures of the current political and educational system onto the grammar of a board game – a game explicitly about property, power, and the rules that govern those who win – the students made visible what critical theory usually requires paragraphs to explain. Artistic practice thus functioned as a constitutive element of the protest itself, shaping its visual language, modes of engagement, and collective imagination. These were but a few among numerous visual forms speaking words of dissenting wisdom.

But there was one more – the solemn figures standing in silence for 16 minutes every day and every night.

THE MUSIC OF DISSENT

During the blockade of the intersection, a richly varied, full-evening musical programme unfolded each day, from the first to the last. Its aim was to convey to the wider public the significance of education and the central role of the University of Arts. Students and academic staff from the Faculty of Music responded enthusiastically to the invitation, joining in large numbers. Among them, 64 faculty representatives participated, spanning all levels of study – from undergraduate to doctoral.

The programme's cultural dimension was complemented by music performed by soloists on the piano, flute, and violin, as well as young opera singers. Ensembles ranged from two piano duos and a piano trio to a mixed choir and various jazz ensembles. A musicological research project, *"Music and Rebellion"*, was also presented, in which students of the Faculty of Music explored and analysed the connections between music and protest across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, drawing from diverse musical genres.

Different genres of music speak different languages but lift spirits in similar ways. Thus both emerging DJs and well-known figures from the local DJ and club scene responded to the call, performing sixteen sets in total. While their initial engagement required multiple strategic steps, by mid-protest many participated on their own initiative, as their programme was met with a warm reception.

Beyond classical music, the intersection hosted concerts featuring well-known Serbian bands. Their rhythms aligned with the sense of solidarity and energy of participants and visitors alike. Singing, dancing, and moving to tunes ranging from the national kolo to rock sustained the vibrant atmosphere of the protest.

Students and professors from the Faculties of Arts in Novi Sad and Niš also joined the initiative, contributing a jazz ensemble and a piano duo. The performances attracted considerable public attention, and participation grew steadily throughout the campaign. Open to performers of all levels, the programme included remarkable contributions from very young artists: piano students from a lower music school in Novi Sad and a young violinist who gave a recital as a high-school graduate.

On the final evening, the anthem of the Dissenting University was presented to the public for the first time. Composed by a student specifically for the multi-day blockade, it was performed by a mixed choir of the Faculty of Music, accompanied on piano, echoing dissent.

26th June – and once more – the sounds of solemn silence playing the saddest tune of all.

CONCLUSION

It appears that the time in which we live and protest – with the *Crossroads* as a temporary but important point of intensification – may signal the entry into a new era of education in Serbia. The modes of exchanging ideas and thought, and the level of interconnectedness that has likely never existed before, suggest that the kind of society we aspire to is possible to build.

What distinguishes the “Faculties at the Crossroads” from previous episodes of academic activism in Serbia is not only its duration or scale, but its mode of organisation. The participation of members from all seven state universities, the day-to-day planning and coordination of activities, the integration of artistic production and musical harmony into the protest’s daily rhythm, the bonding among students and teachers, and the deliberate inclusion of other professionals and educators from preschool to university level – all of this reflects a form of horizontal interconnectedness that earlier academic protests, organised within single institutions or around single demands, did not achieve. It is precisely this structural novelty that lends credibility to the claim below.

The citizens of Serbia recognised and embraced the call for change. Their sustained presence at the *Crossroads* – in numbers, in hours, in material support – confirmed that the struggle for the university was understood as a struggle for society itself.

This convergence between academic and civic demands echoes a diagnosis Michel Serres offered more than a decade ago. Serres called for

“a change that will eventually have repercussions on the entire space of our global society and its obsolete institutions. Indeed, it will not only affect teaching but also work, business, health, law and politics – in short, all our institutions” (Serres 2015, 13).

In Serbia, that change is not a prospect but a demand already in motion – still unfolding, and all the more urgent as the current institutional crisis is not over.

What emerges from this account is a text moving gradually from epistemology to ethics and then to action – a trajectory in which methodological reflection becomes inseparable from normative commitment.

The three questions posed at the outset can now be answered provisionally. The protest’s strategic logic emerged from the continuous, autonomous adjustment of four parallel working groups operating under time pressure and without institutional backing – a deliberate improvisation that the documents and testimonies collected here attempt to reconstruct. The spoken word, visual art, and musical performance each functioned as distinct communicative channels, reaching audiences and forging solidarities that the other channels could not mobilise. And the participant-researcher position, far from being a methodological liability, was the very epistemic condition of access.

What makes the manuscript distinctive is not only that it describes a collective strategic action, but that it speaks from within it. It is therefore a document that, in a moment of historical turning point, combines testimony, analysis and intervention. This positionality carries its own obligations – chief among them being the transparency this paper has enacted.

The archive opened here is only a first layer. The questions it leaves unanswered will define the next.

With each passing day, repression directed at our universities intensifies, further eroding their autonomy and public mission. “Faculties at the Crossroads” has recently marked its anniversary – twenty months after the tragedy, and twenty months of intensifying pressure on Academia. Do the proposed higher education reforms, publicly announced – although without prior consultation with university officials or the academic community – represent yet another stage in the systematic undermining of university autonomy through political pressure, procedural bypassing and institutional interference? This remains to be seen and documented in near future. At present, academic freedom in Serbia, particularly at state universities, is seriously imperilled, calling for a stronger response from the professional community and society at large. Following the students’ courageous long-distance marches, cycling tours, and the broader academic and public mobilisation, sustained interest in state universities suggests that prospective students and their parents continue to place their trust where it belongs.

For all the reasons provided above, the strategic action “Faculties at the Crossroads” cannot be considered concluded as long as the repression of Serbia’s universities continues.

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„FAKULTETI NA RASKRSNICI”: UNIVERZITETI IZMEĐU ZVUKA TIŠINE I GLASA POBUNE

APSTRAKT

Pritisci na državne univerzitete u Srbiji intenzivirali su se proteklih godina, posebno u poslednjih dvadeset meseci, kada su postali centri trajne akademske i građanske mobilizacije nakon urušavanja nadstrešnice železničke stanice u Novom Sadu 1. novembra 2024. godine, u kojem je stradalo šesnaest ljudi, što je podstaklo proteste širom zemlje. Usledile su političke intervencije u obrazovnim institucijama, marginalizovanje zaposlenih u obrazovanju i kulturi iz procesa odlučivanja i ozbiljno podrivanje autonomije i integriteta univerziteta. Kao odgovor i u znak podrške studentskoj višemesečnoj borbi za demokratiju, deo akademske zajednice pokrenuo je stratešku akciju na centralnoj beogradskoj raskrsnici. Kao čin građanske neposlušnosti, akcija je okupila predstavnike svih državnih univerziteta pod simboličnim nazivom „Fakulteti na raskrsnici”.

Oslanjajući se na dokumente, svedočenja i posmatranje sa učestvovanjem, rad ispituje kako je ovaj protest organizovan pod institucionalnim pritiskom, kako su govor, vizuelna umetnost i muzika kao osnovni kanali komunikacije i mobilizacije oblikovali otpor Pobunjenih i slobodnih univerziteta i da li je pozicija učesnika-istraživača predstavljala metodološko ograničenje ili epistemološku prednost. Rezultati pokazuju da su samoorganizovane radne grupe združenim planiranjem kombinovanih aktivnosti podstakle solidarnost i izvan akademske zajednice i ojačale veze između univerziteta i društva. Pozicija direktnog učesnika pokazala se ključnom za dokumentovanje procesa nedostupnih spoljnim posmatračima. Rad konstatuje da protest „Fakulteti na raskrsnici” predstavlja presedan akademskog aktivizma u Srbiji i dokumentuje aktuelnu borbu za univerzitetsku autonomiju i akademske slobode.

KLJUČNE REČI: akademske slobode, pobunjeni, 16 minuta, studenti, univerzitetska autonomija