

»Democratic backsliding made manifest in the academic sphere«

Ivana Spasić in conversation with Thomas Schmidt-Lux¹

Thomas Schmidt-Lux: I'd love to discuss the current situation in Serbia with you, particularly at Serbian universities. Over the past few weeks, Aleksandar Vučić's government has been intensifying its measures, especially in Belgrade. But these things tend to fade quickly from public attention, even if the situation on the ground is not really improving. So, I wanted to check in today, and also talk about what it means to do academic work under repressive political conditions.

Ivana Spasić: There are many problems right now, and while the situation is serious, I am not someone who focuses on complaining. At the same time the situation is somewhat paradoxical. When I talk and work with colleagues abroad, things look »normal«, especially from the outside. But basically, we are having a serious crisis here in Serbia.

TSL: How would you describe what has been happening in Serbia these past few months?

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IS: Our situation has been deteriorating gradually. It is not like a sudden act of aggression; it is an ongoing process. An important factor has been the general support that the Serbian government has received from the EU and individual countries, including Germany. Over the years – and even now – it has been difficult to get them to unequivocally condemn what this government is doing, not only in its treatment of universities but in many other areas as well. And the common denominator has been the erosion of democracy.

One by one, the core principles of liberal democracy have been effectively hollowed out. They still exist formally – no openly dictatorial laws have been introduced, yet – but the way the laws are enforced is highly undemocratic. In practice, if you are a member of the ruling party or hold an official position within it, you can do almost anything. But if you are a protesting student, almost anything can become a problem. If you are a small shopkeeper publicly supporting the students, your shop might be set on fire or vandalized with graffiti. You might suddenly face a financial audit that uncovers – or invents – some kind of violation. These are the kinds of things that are happening and have been happening for quite a long time.

TSL: What does this mean specifically for academia since 2024?

IS: The situation for academics is rapidly deteriorating. It wasn't like this at the very beginning of the protests. About a year and a half ago, in November 2024, following the tragedy at the Novi Sad train station that killed 16 people and the government's highly inappropriate response, university students went on strike effectively shutting down most faculties of Serbian public universities, and some private ones as well. Initially, the government tried to de-escalate the situation by offering talks and incentives, such as cheap loans for young people. But these efforts failed.

Gradually, the government resorted to increasing pressure, and this continues. Now that the more visible forms of protest have subsided – unlike the first half of 2025, marked by mass street protests and blocked universities, we are now teaching, holding classes, and conducting exams as usual – the authorities seem to be relying on less visible forms of repression. Since ordinary people and the general public are not particularly concerned about the situation of academics, this pressure often goes unnoticed. At the same time, there are efforts to divide us, to turn us against one another, and to make our work more difficult. Some of these measures are sporadic and highly visible, like the recent incidents that I shall describe later on, while others are low-key but persistent.

TSL: From your perspective as a professor of sociology at the University of Belgrade, how does all of this look – especially for the field of sociology?

IS: The Serbian Faculties of Philosophy, which also house sociology departments, have traditionally been centres of protest – even during socialist times and in the 1990s. They are now being specifically targeted, particularly in Niš, the third-largest city in Serbia. There, certain actors – some not even from academia but with political backing – have suddenly proposed splitting the Faculty of Philosophy by moving the departments of Serbian language, history, and Russian into a new Faculty of Serbian Studies, claiming that Serbian identity is under threat and requires a separate institution.

This plan contradicts existing laws and regulations governing the academic sector. Even the students of these departments have protested, as they do not want to be moved. Various legal manipulations and political pressures are being used to give this unlawful move a veneer of legitimacy.

Protests at the University of Niš and the Faculty of Philosophy are ongoing. The decision is clearly political and has the support of only a minority of professors; the majority oppose it but are being pressured with an ultimatum: accept it or risk losing your job.

The situation at the State University at Novi Pazar, the youngest of Serbian public universities, located in a region with a Bosniak Muslim ethnic majority, is even more alarming but less well known. This university has been managed following political rather than academic reasons for years already, and to disastrous effect. In their case the mistreatment predates the protests of 2024/25, which reverberated strongly in Novi Pazar and generated remarkable solidarity among students of different ethnic backgrounds, which was a beautiful sign of restored interethnic trust after decades of tensions. But students and professors supporting the protests are now exposed to sustained harassment.

TSL: The situation in Belgrade has escalated quite sharply recently. How did things develop to this point?

IS: What we are seeing here is a gross manipulation of a personal tragedy. A couple of weeks ago, in late March, a young woman, our student, died by suicide – she jumped from a window in the Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy building. And that tragedy was then used as a pretext to raid the Faculty. Various authorities were sent in – the fire brigade, anti-corruption units, regular police. Students and professors were detained or summoned for questioning, including the entire faculty leadership.

But the impact on the students has been even worse. Some of the student protest leaders happened to be present when the woman took her life, and they are now at risk of being charged with murder. No formal charges have been filed yet, but they have been interrogated several times. The semi-official narrative suggests that protesting students started a fire in the building, and that the young woman jumped to escape it – which is a monstrous claim.

One of these students is the president of the student parliament and a prominent member of the protest movement at the Faculty of Philosophy. He had spoken with her just minutes before the incident, making it an enormous shock for him to have witnessed it. Instead of offering support, the authorities are treating him as a suspect. This targeting of students is perhaps the most alarming aspect of the situation.

TSL: And what happened at the faculty after that?

IS: First the building of the Faculty of Philosophy was raided, searched from top to bottom, and a host of documents seized, most of them completely unrelated to the tragic incident (like the minutes of the student assemblies during the protests). The Faculty leadership was interrogated for hours. Two days later, the adjacent seat of the University of Belgrade's Rectorate was raided as well. The official justification was that because the buildings are connected, and some departments of the Faculty of Philosophy also use lecture rooms in the other building, the authorities claimed they needed to search the rectorate as well – looking for fireworks, weapons, drugs – all supposedly as part of the investigation into the student's death.

In practice, the building was completely sealed off. Staff were not allowed to leave, and students inside were prevented from going anywhere for several hours. They were even told not to use their phones – so they had no way of contacting anyone outside. It was a clear abuse of power. And at the same time, the authorities were going through records related to student protest organisations – material that had absolutely nothing to do with the student's death.

The rector himself was not formally detained, but he was effectively held in the building until around ten o'clock in the evening while the search was ongoing. He was asked to sign a statement about what had allegedly been found, and he refused – because he considered it inaccurate. The atmosphere was extremely tense.

Outside, students and professors had gathered in large numbers. And there were heavily armed police in riot gear standing in front of the building

– one of the oldest in Belgrade, a national landmark, the seat of the rector. That image alone – armed police facing a crowd of students and academics – was deeply disturbing. In many ways it captured the government's relationship with the university in a single frame.

The standoff lasted throughout the day and into the night. At points there was genuine uncertainty about how things might develop – whether the crowd might try to push into the building, or whether the police might get orders to move in. That kind of thing has happened before over the past year – peaceful gatherings met with force, followed by dubious charges.

The rector has been called in for questioning several times now since the beginning of the protests on various grounds, but he has not been arrested. Given how publicly visible he is, and the respect he commands among protesters, the authorities probably consider that too risky – at least for now.

TSL: Is this same restrictive pressure from the state evident in other areas of academic life as well?

IS: About a year ago, when many of the oldest faculties were under blockade and many professors supported the students, a new decree was introduced by the Ministry of Education. It was unlawful, since it violated explicit provisions of the relevant Law on Higher Education by changing the balance between teaching and research duties. Previously, the workload had been 50:50, that is, 20 hours of teaching and 20 hours of research per week. But it was altered to heavily favour teaching – 35 hours of teaching and just five hours of research.

This change had a direct impact on salaries, which are calculated based on that balance. Since most professors were not teaching during the blockades, the new system effectively reduced their pay drastically – down to a fraction of what they had earned before. This situation lasted for about four months. The Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade was among the last to resume classes, and during that period, we received practically no wages. Although we were later able to recover part of the lost income by making up teaching during the summer, the decree remains in place, and salaries are still lower than before.

Officially, we are now expected to teach around 35 hours per week and devote only minimal time to research, which contradicts existing law, and severely jeopardizes scientific research in Serbia. This is just one example of how regulatory instruments – normally used to manage higher education – are being used in a repressive way.

TSL: These are real, tangible cuts that affect your daily work. How do you cope with all of this?

IS: We are not actually teaching more – the change is purely formal. It is about demonstrating power, showing that the authorities can impose whatever rules they like. In practice, we go on teaching the same courses as before. What concerns us, though, is that institutions which are supposed to be independent – like the accreditation body – are increasingly being instrumentalised.

All higher education institutions go through periodic accreditation as part of a broader European framework. But the Serbian accreditation body has long faced serious criticism. It performed so poorly that the relevant European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the ENQA, demoted its status from member to affiliate, following numerous complaints. There were clear indications that it treated certain politically connected private universities far more leniently than long-established public institutions with decades of tradition.

Our Faculty is due for accreditation next year, and if the current government is still in power, there is deep uncertainty about what that might look like. The rules could be changed overnight. New requirements could be imposed arbitrarily, and the whole thing could still be presented as perfectly legal. That is possible because key positions in these supposedly independent bodies are increasingly being filled with people who are politically loyal.

TSL: These measures often seem to come out of nowhere, and they can be quite subtle as well, right?

IS: They are targeting students at our Faculty of Philosophy specifically. And on top of that, there is this constant low-key pressure that just keeps going. It takes the form of all kinds of audits – from the Ministry of Education, which suddenly needs to check something, or from the Ministry of Finance, whose staff have been sitting in our accounting department for weeks, or the Ministry of Labor coming in to check our work contracts, or the Department of Public Safety of the Ministry of the Interior, which has mandated that the doors to our lecture halls open in the wrong direction, and a host of other similar shortcomings ... so they threaten to close down our entire building claiming that it allegedly does not meet technical standards. They go through everything looking for mistakes, and the thing is, it is virtually impossible not to make mistakes, because the regulations themselves are unclear.

Take the new accounting system they introduced in the beginning of this year. All the universities in Serbia had agreed with the Ministry that the

rollout would be postponed. And then, right at the end of December, the Ministry announced that on January 1st they were implementing a completely new electronic system – one that fundamentally changes how resources are allocated and gives the government significantly more control. No warning, no transition period.

So it is all these little details that get weaponized. Many of these low-key forms of repression are, more or less, technically legal. It is not about breaking the law – it is about abusing powers that any government would have anyway. The regulations exist, in principle, for everyone's benefit. But right now, they are being twisted into means of pressure.

TSL: I find it quite striking that so much of the pressure on universities is applied through bureaucratic and technocratic channels.

IS: Absolutely, and this is not just affecting those of us who teach. There are also people who work exclusively in research institutes, and they are caught up in this, too.

All of us were represented in a digital registry system, called e-Science, where our research outputs were recorded. It was long overdue, honestly. It was developed by the Belgrade University Computing Centre for the Ministry of Research, and it was up and running for the past couple of years. They kept refining it, and it actually worked quite well. It was a central registry of researchers and their results, which is a basic prerequisite for any serious national research policy. And beyond that, it was essential for our compatibility with European research structures – which means we can apply for European funding, we can compete for projects. But for that, we need to be visible, which this system ensured. And then, out of nowhere, the Ministry of Research simply did not renew its contract with the Computing Centre. The person at the ministry who handled the whole thing left. And just like that, e-Science is gone. Completely dead. Nobody knows if it will ever be revived. Thus, in terms of digital research infrastructure, we have been thrown back fifteen or twenty years overnight.

Research funding generally has been shaky, to say the least, particularly for the social sciences and humanities. And in the past year, it has suffered additional blows, with the functioning of the national research agency, the Science Fund, effectively grinding down to a halt: there have been no new calls for projects to be funded, and the evaluation results from the latest round, closed in January 2025, are not yet available – after 16 months.

And you are still doing your research, you are still pushing through – and sometimes you just think: am I crazy for persisting in a context this dysfunctional? And that is what makes it so serious – it is a direct attack on the foundations of research itself. But I think what it ultimately comes down to is a very clear message: »We do not need you.« More specifically: »We do not need legitimate higher education and research.« Because there are academics who are on friendly terms with this government – they are a minority, but you can always find a handful of politically loyal PhDs if you look hard enough. And thus, the strategy may be: set up a government-run research centre, make sure it has no financial problems, and at the same time slowly suffocate the legitimate institutions. You do not have to shut them down directly. You just deprive them of their resources, bury them in audits, pull the plug on the systems they depend on – and eventually they cannot function anymore. That is the logic of it.

TSL: What is the situation like at other universities across the country?

IS: At the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, one colleague was essentially dismissed – her contract was not renewed, officially due to some formal procedural shortcoming. But it was obvious to everyone that it was retaliation for her very visible support of the students. And something similar is now happening to a colleague from a different department there as well.

Novi Sad is a good example of how the situation varies quite significantly between universities and even between departments. A lot of it comes down to who happens to be running them. In Novi Sad, the rector is openly government-friendly. In Belgrade, it is very much the opposite. And that difference matters enormously.

Because it is also a way of undermining the unity of the academic community as a whole. If the government has its own people installed in key positions at certain institutions, it does not need to apply the same pressure everywhere. It can lead to factions, cause inconsistency, make it harder to organise a coherent front. You do not need to control everything – you just need enough leverage in enough places.

TSL: We've been discussing the various methods used by the state. How were these methods applied in the case of the searches at the University of Belgrade?

IS: What they are doing to the rector is just completely brazen. There is this whole episode with police officers that looks like something out of a bad TV crime drama – and I mean bad.

I have heard about the experience of a technician employed at the Rectorate, who testified about what happened as he was directly involved. He accompanied the police officers as they went through everything by the book – they inspected the premises together, and then both signed off on an official report. Everything accounted for, nothing found. But then the officer left, came back, and said: »Look what I found.«

The technician was baffled. He asked where exactly it had been found. The officer said it was in the basement, behind some old piece of furniture. And the technician said: »That is impossible. I moved that table there yesterday, and there was nothing behind it. You must have planted it.« To which the officer just said »No, no, we don't do that sort of thing.«

What the officer claimed to have found were firecrackers. And that was significant, because the whole allegation is that students involved in the protests had stored illegal materials that caused a fire – the fire that supposedly led to a woman jumping out of a window. So the police buy some firecrackers, take them to the basement of the oldest university building, and claim they found them there. That is the tactic. That is what we are dealing with.

TSL: That is pretty frightening. And it strikes me that on the one hand it is extremely serious, but on the other it is somewhat naïve – they tackle the whole thing with a kind of breathtaking nonchalance.

IS: There is another detail that really says it all. The student who jumped out of the window was studying art history. So the police summoned the head of the Art History department for questioning – and she cooperated, she spoke to them. But after about half an hour of the conversation she suddenly realised: these people have absolutely no idea how a university works.

It turned out that in Serbian, the word for »department« is similar to the word for a class in secondary school. And they had taken it literally. They thought she was something like a headmaster or form tutor – that she personally knew every single one of her students and had been following them since their first year. They asked her to describe her role, what she actually does as a professor. They had no concept of what academic work consists of.

It was just so amateurish. They had not even bothered to send interrogators with a basic understanding of how higher education functions. And that is what we are up against.

TSL: Where do you see things developing from here?

IS: I genuinely do not know what their plan is. And that in itself is a serious problem – not knowing how far they are willing to go. Will they start arresting people on various pretexts? We do not know. Maybe they will pull back. Maybe they won't. Every morning you wake up and ask yourself: what is going to happen today? Most days, nothing dramatic actually happens. It is just the pressure, that is always there, constantly. But then somewhere, something explodes. And that makes it very hard to develop any coherent strategy of resistance – because you are never quite sure what you are preparing for.

Additionally exhausting is the sheer number of fronts. There are so many points of attack, so many simultaneous forms of pressure that a lot of us are simply tired. Deeply tired. At some point you reach a moment where you think: I cannot do this anymore, I need to be present for my family, I need to focus on my teaching. I need to just function. And I suppose that is precisely the point. That is part of the tactic too.

TSL: How do you and your colleagues manage to deal with it all?

IS: One of the ongoing challenges is simply keeping things running. Because there is a great deal we cannot just abandon – teaching, administration, all the institutional machinery. We cannot operate in permanent open opposition to the state, because we are a public university. We depend on the government for funding and for countless other institutional matters. We have to talk to them. We have to deal with them. There is no way around that.

The challenge, then, is to strike a balance between carrying on with everyday life as normal, as if everything were as it always has been, and keeping up the resistance – a judgement each of us has to make all the time.

But not just the academics, even the administrative staff – who are not necessarily interested in protesting, who may not particularly care about politics – are being put in an impossible position, too. Every time a new directive comes in from the Ministry, they have to weigh up, in real time, how to respond. Do they comply immediately? Do they push back? Do they stall? Every single demand becomes a small decision with potential consequences.

Our Faculty is definitely not the only one – the legal secretary of the Medical School of Belgrade University was suspended and then dismissed for refusing to condone dubious legal arrangements within the institution that resulted from political pressure.

That is the exhausting reality of it. The pressure does not just land on the people at the front – it filters through the entire institution.

TSL: I find some of what you are describing particularly interesting because it is conceivable in other contexts as well. In particular, the fact that formal regulations and procedures, which are often unpopular and burdensome under normal circumstances, can then turn into dangerous instruments. Accreditation processes, for example, are often stressful and generate a huge amount of work, so everybody tends to complain about them. But in your case, as far as I understand, they can actually become dangerous instruments.

IS: Yes, and there is another thing they managed to do. Faculties can also be accredited separately as research institutions – it is a distinct process, carried out by what is supposedly another independent body. Well, the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš has recently been refused that accreditation. Officially, members of the faculty are no longer recognised as capable of carrying out research. Not good enough, apparently.

Remember: it is the same faculty from which they have just forcibly separated three departments. Those three departments will almost certainly receive their own accreditation – quickly, smoothly, no obstacles. While the original Faculty of Philosophy, with hundreds of academic staff, thousands of publications, decades of research output – that institution is deemed not up to standard.

That is how it works. It is never one big, obvious blow. It is all these small, technically often legal moves that accumulate – each one deniable on its own, but together they make the whole thing unworkable. That is how they make our lives difficult.

One thing is particularly sad about all of this: After Milošević, Serbia introduced a whole range of institutions and oversight bodies that were meant to anchor democracy – an ombudsman, a public information commissioner, and so on. Authorities designed to hold the government accountable. And now these bodies are being brazenly turned into instruments of that same government.

Take the ombudsman. Over the past year, as police were beating people for no reason – attacking unarmed, peaceful protesters – he said absolutely nothing. Complete silence. And now, following the suicide at the Faculty of Philosophy, he has suddenly decided to launch an investigation – into the Faculty. To determine whether the Faculty took adequate steps to identify students at risk and offer them psychological support. As if the Faculty of Philosophy, of all institutions in Serbia, is the one that should have known which of its students were suicidal and intervened accordingly.

The darker side of the whole affair is not just that you have a minister, a president and the police against you, but that the entire machinery of what were once democratic institutions has been hollowed out – emptied of any democratic substance – and repurposed as one more weapon. To suppress protest, to silence legitimate grievance, to obstruct any appeal to justice.

From a sociological and political point of view, it is a fascinating and deeply troubling phenomenon. Democratic forms kept intact, but the content gutted entirely and inverted.

TSL: I find it very impressive that you still manage to find the energy, the time, or simply the distance to step back and analyse all of this in a broader way. But let me ask another question: what can European sociology actually do?

IS: Some of us have been in contact with the European Sociological Association, especially through a member of the Executive Committee Milica Antić Gaber, who, being from Slovenia, has naturally been following developments in the region more closely than most. She was very concerned about what was going on here and, on her initiative and insistence, the ESA issued a statement last fall on the situation in Serbian academia.

We have also been in touch with the president of the International Sociological Association, Geoffrey Pleyers, who has offered support and has helped bring our plight to a wider public audience.

Let me also explain the situation with sociological associations here in Serbia, because it is relevant for the context. We actually have two. One is the official, representative national association, the Serbian Sociological Society, with which many of us came to be rather unsatisfied, for various reasons. In 2020 we thus established a second one, the Scientific Sociological Society of Serbia, of which I am the president. This is an academic association, gathering only people who do sociology as an academic discipline, that is, university teachers and researchers. When I say *we*, I generally mean our association, as well as a broader circle of concerned sociologists and other social scientists, many of them involved in the informal network of academics in protest called the »Rebellious University«.

We have been trying to spread the word about what is happening, though we are still feeling our way forward somewhat cautiously – it is not always clear which approach is the most effective. Currently, we are preparing a piece to be published in the International Sociological Association's magazine *Global Dialogue*.

TSL: It might be a bit of a strange question, but have you come to any sort of preliminary conclusion yet?

IS: You can look at all of this through a sociological lens – as a social process, as democratic backsliding made visibly manifest in the academic sphere because the protests began at the universities, and students remain the regime's main challengers, far more so than the opposition parties, which have been weakened, corrupted, and worn down by years of political manipulation. The students, by contrast, are officially non-partisan and non-political – and that matters enormously. The general public trusts them in a way it no longer trusts political actors. There is a powerful romantic dimension to it as well: the image of young people, innocent and untainted, sacrificing themselves for the common good. And rather than fading, that image has sustained and even deepened public support for the students as a force of opposition.

Therefore, universities are being targeted so aggressively – perhaps more so than in other countries undergoing similar processes of democratic erosion. The regime understands that the real challenge is coming from universities.

In some ways our situation is comparable to Hungary, because the Orbán government has also pursued a long-term strategy of capturing universities and research institutions. But within the European context, the Serbian case is actually quite interesting in its own right, sociologically speaking because what you have here is a government that still maintains its ties to the European Union. It still presents one face to its EU interlocutors – positioning itself as a country firmly on the path to European accession, a legitimate democratic government doing everything by the book. It has not severed those ties, and it will not, because it needs the money and it needs the political cover. But for domestic audiences, it cultivates a very different tone – often openly critical of Europe, with the government-controlled media systematically promoting a blatantly anti-European agenda. It is a carefully maintained duplicity. And what is striking is that the EU has been absorbing this for quite some time now. I suspect the European Commission knows perfectly well what is going on. But it is not yet willing to translate that knowledge into any meaningful change of position. And so it continues.

TSL: Dear Ivana, thank you so much for your time and for this insightful conversation. We wish you all the strength and wisdom you need in the time ahead. Take care, and let's stay in touch.