Dragana Popović

We Were Constantly in Some Kind of Protest

https://doi.org/10.18485/knjiz.2025.15.15.11

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Since you were a student, you have witnessed and participated in numerous protests. My first question here is concerning student demonstrations of June 1968 in ex-Yugoslavia, that is – the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. What are your memories of those days?

Although I considered myself to be a passive observer, I have very vivid memories of that protest to this day. The center of the protest was at the Faculty of Philosophy, and, at the time, I was studying physics at the Faculty of Natural Sciences, just across the street. In fact, the protest at the University of Belgrade came with the wave of general student protests in the USA and Europe, particularly France, which started altogether as a resistance to the Vietnam War. In Belgrade, we had some demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, but it was just an echo of these events worldwide. However, the main and most important difference between the demonstrations of 1968 and the student protests later on, in the 1990s, was that it was distinctly left-oriented. In 1968, students were demanding social justice, more significant participation of workers in the government, better wages. They were strongly against the so-called *Red Bourgeoisie*, the new and arising social class of rich and privileged in the socialism. If there were any outcomes of that protest, the most important one was the establishment of minimum wages for workers. The protest itself lasted just five or six days. Then president Tito

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wisely announced that student demands were justified. And it was the end. It ended because the students, because we, believed in the government and in the authority of Tito. So, when Tito said: OK, all the demands will be fulfilled, the students gathered outside the faculties and danced a *partisan's kolo*. And many of the participants in the protest, many of my colleagues, joined the Communist Party later on. Also, many were disappointed afterwards. But it was the first protest and, I would say, one of a kind in any socialist country.

What was the atmosphere among the protesters?

The atmosphere seemed extremely serious. I would say there was no humor, no fun. All the lectures and speeches were political. For example, the famous actor, Stevo Žigon, performed a speech of one of the leaders of the French Revolution in the courtyard of the Faculty of Philosophy. Perhaps we were, I don't know, too serious, much more serious than the generations to come.

The next protest I'd like you tell us something about began as a civil one. It took place on March 9th, 1991, at the Republic Square in Belgrade. Do you have any memories of that day?

I have profound memories of that day. I was with my family and friends at the Republic Square, near the National Theater, and a writer and one of the leaders of the opposition, Vuk Drašković, was speaking from the Theater balcony. The other leaders of the opposition were with him, too, and the Republic Square was crowded with people of all ages. It was an anti-war protest, the protest against the politics of Milošević, the protest against the destruction of Yugoslavia.

The following day the students left student dormitories in New Belgrade and headed to the city center, asking for Drašković, and others who were imprisoned, to be released. It became a students' protest then?

It became a joint protest of students and citizens, or opposition. The well-known actor, Branislav Lečić, took on the role of students' spokesperson when they gathered around the Terazijska Česma, in the very center of the city. For me, personally, it was a very touching moment, because that was the period when many young people were leaving the country. At Terazijska Česma I

said goodbye to my best friend and colleague from both Grammar School and university. Men were fleeing the country, because they were scared of mobilization, they didn't want to go to war, to fight for something they did not believe in.

That was called our Velvet Revolution. A year later, exactly on March 10th, another student protest took place?

At that time, I was a more active participant in the protest, as I was an assistant professor at the University of Belgrade. That protest lasted for about a month, it was again an anti-war protest, and an anti-Milošević protest. Students locked themselves at the faculties, and we, the professors, held lectures. We wanted to be with them and to provide some content to that event. It was a bit surreal, I was talking about radiation, natural radiation, in the middle of the wars that were outside faculty halls. The protest had a large support, even from the Academy of Science and Arts (Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti – SANU). I think that about sixty members of the Academy signed that they support the students. But it just faded away. There were no outcomes. I think that the forces that were pro-war were too strong, so nothing came out of it. But it was just one of the many protests and demonstrations against the regime of Slobodan Milošević to come. Now, when I think about the '90s, it seems that we were constantly in some kind of protest, spending all the time on the streets.

The student protests in 1996 and 1997 were especially important.

The initial and main cause were the elections: the opposition won local elections in Serbia, but Milošević didn't want to acknowledge it. The opposition started the protest, and then the students joined. At the time, I was a professor at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, and I was protesting every day at noon with the students, and in the afternoon with the citizens. It is interesting to mention that students of veterinary medicine had a mascot, a little donkey, attending the protest with us. One of the students would be with the donkey in front of our group, and we would gather with students from Faculties of Medicine, Pharmacy and Dental Medicine at the nearby park, and then all of us would go to the Republic Square.
I don't remember the exact number, but there were perhaps twenty out of about a hundred members of the faculty, and about one third of members

of University of Belgrade who signed the document stating they wanted the results of the elections to be acknowledged. But actually, there were only five to ten of us, professors and assistants, who were active participants in the protest. And the professors were mostly women. Five women professors were with the students every day. Once, we had a clash with the Radical Party leader, Vojislav Šešelj: he pointed a gun at the students, and one of the professors, a woman, was shouting at him, trying to get to him, beating a policeman with an umbrella. This was almost a funny moment in a rather grave situation.

Were there any really funny situations?

During many of these days, there were some funny and carnivalesque events. The badges, for instance, were really funny. We even staged some events – in one instance we decided to stop the traffic in Belgrade. The drivers stopped their cars pretending they were broken. I was close to the Palace Albania, and Terazije, when every single car stopped. And we, the pedestrians, gathered around them and asked the drivers: "What is wrong with your car? Can we help?" And the drivers would respond: "I don't know. I had it repaired yesterday. I don't know what is wrong now." So, it was like street theater.
I also remember that we, the protesters, called all the ministries, asking to speak with the ministers. The clerks, who were mostly women, would just ask us not to call again, because they could not work. So, there were many elements of humor. But they had serious implications as we were blocking the traffic, the ministries, etc.

What was the most dramatic moment during 1996-97 protests?

For me, it was when the students blocked Kolarčeva Street, a small street between the Republic Square and Palace Albania. It was a cold and foggy winter. I would wake up at two or three o'clock in the morning – at night, actually – to make some sandwiches and prepare some tea, and take it to Kolarčeva street – to the students who were there night and day. Another one of my colleagues, a close friend of mine, professor Gordana Đurić, would come with a bucket, a broom and a big brush, to clean the street. As there were many foreign media and TV stations in the city, she did not want the street to look dirty.

Tell us how you passed the police cordon to get to the students.

I was with my dog, a big rottweiler. The police cordons were at Terazije and the other end of Kolarčeva, at the Republic Square. Students were gathered inside a small open space, where you were not supposed to get in. But I, and some other people, we went there, through a house passage the policemen did not know about, because they were not from Belgrade. It was Milošević's policy to bring police from smaller towns, but they were not familiar with the city they were brought to. And then, in one moment, I was standing in the middle of this space, with my dog. The students and people shouted, „Bravo, bravo, bravo!" A policeman, probably the one in charge, turned, and saw me, then came to me and asked: "Where did you come from?" Funny, but at that moment, I was not afraid for me, I was afraid for my dog. I must say that I'm not a brave person and I don't like to be in a crowd, but at that time I just felt I had to go. Anyway, he let me go, perhaps because of the dog. And, as far as the blockade of Kolarčeva street is concerned, Serbian Patriarch Pavle came and led the students through the cordon.

Did you feel obliged to participate in the protest because of your students or your children?

Yes, my son was young. I was afraid that he would be mobilized, and yes, I felt I had an obligation towards my students. I do believe teachers should stand by their students.

Were any lectures held during these months?

At most of the faculties there were no lectures, no lab practice, nothing. At some faculties, however, some professors were giving lectures or enabling lab practice. There were students who wanted to take the exams or attend the lectures. People have different reasons for it, and different financial and family situations. I remember that even during the bombing I was holding exams because some students wanted it. But, the friction between the students and professors who would go to protests and those who would not, was not so strong as it is nowadays in the ongoing protests. I don't think we were more tolerant. I rather believe mutual relations within the academic world were different.

At that time, you were already active in Belgrade's Center for Women's Studies?

Yes, the Center was, like many other civil organizations and NGOs, a kind of a sanctuary for me. It was a place where you could meet like-minded people. You could talk with them. You could even talk about things that were not directly connected to the war. That is when I started my research about women in natural sciences. The Center had a great number of students, and offered a variety of courses, I think it was its golden age. It sounds kind of contradictory if you think about the fact that around us, at that time, there were wars, poverty, personal tragedies and losses, but inside the Center, we had something that was blooming in a way.

We have proof of that, and it is thanks to you, because you were the one who suggested we do yearly reports. And we were like, ha, who has the time to do that after all the things we have done in a year? But it turned out to be a very smart decision. And the monography of the first ten years of the Center for Women's Studies was your idea, too.

Well, we all participated, but yes, I thought it was important to have a written record of what had happened.

I just realized that the first lectures at the Center, or what later became known as the Center for Women's Studies, took part on March 8th, 1992, which was just two days before one of the student protests we mentioned.

It was before my time in the Center, but yes, I think we all needed it. We all needed a place where we could discuss what is happening to us. Like, for instance, the lectures by historians Dubravka Stojanović and Olja Milosavljević, which were not strictly about women, but rather about history from another angle, helped people understand what was going on. And there were lectures on various subjects, like for example Chinese culture, not only about women empowerment. It was important for the students, and for all of us really.

What was the outcome of the protests of 1996-97?

Well, having the results of the elections acknowledged. It should be pointed out that, eventually, the protests got support from Europe. Felipe Gonsalez

– from Spain, he was, I think, a Prime Minister – he came and had a long talk with Milošević. He told the opposition, okay, the results of the elections are okay, but don't ask for Milošević to resign. And the opposition accepted, although we were all a bit disappointed. So, the following year Milošević became the president of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, a country made up of Serbia and Montenegro. And that was the beginning of the end of his regime, although years were still to pass.

Milošević was inaugurated as the president of the so-called Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia in July 1997. On that occasion, there was a protest in Pioneers' Park, situated exactly opposite the building of the National Parliament.

That protest was symbolic – people were throwing old shoes at the new president. The shoes represented people who had left the country. We wanted to show him, to show Milošević, how many people left the country. The police didn't allow us near the Parliament building, so we were on the edge of the park opposite the Parliament, and he was standing at the entrance with his family, waving to the people. I had a large bag of shoes, which I collected from my mother and aunts. At one moment, Jelena Šantić, a well-known ballet dancer and peace activist, was standing next to me. She was empty-handed and had no more shoes to throw, and she asked me if she could use some of mine. "Help yourself", I said.

The photo of Jelena Šantić throwing a shoe, taken by Goranka Matić, became iconic. It was used for a logo of the foundation named after her which supports young people's struggle against repression.

I do not know if in that particular photo she was throwing one of the shoes I gave her, but the important thing is that the act itself represented resistance. There was no expected outcome of this protest, we were just doing it for all the people who left the country. And too many did so. The void left behind them was large and impossible to fulfill.

My final question concerns the present situation. It is now August 2025, and student protests have already been on for nine months at this moment. Citizens have also joined it. These are the longest lasting protests ever held here, and we still cannot anticipate when they will come to an end, which

should come with the fulfillment of student demands. Instead, the reaction is harsh and, among other things, a group of so-called "students who want to study", supported by the government, populated the above-mentioned Pioneers' Park. How do you feel when you have to walk around this place?

I feel emptiness. Now I'm the passive observer again, it is as if I have closed the circle. I feel emptiness and I think, how did it come to this? How did it come to this after all these years and after something that I think we have achieved? And yes, we must say we have achieved something. So, why are we back at the same point we started from? Well, perhaps it is not the beginning again, because the context is quite different, both globally and locally, but we are still in the streets once again… I feel bitterness, too. This is the most precise description of how I feel. And angry. I feel so angry.