Serbia: The Courage to Imagine Democracy Differently

Reflections from Novi Sad on resistance, solidarity and the future of the European peace project

I live and work in Novi Sad, a city that, on 1 November 2024, became the starting point of an extraordinary transformation in Serbian society.

Sixteen people lost their lives following the collapse of the canopy at our railway station.

I remember the overwhelming feeling of despair and meaninglessness that followed. Not only because sixteen people had died, but because of the terrifying realisation that any one of us could have been standing beneath that canopy. It could have been me, my family, my friends, or anyone passing through the station that day.

And perhaps even more devastating was the feeling that, to those in power, human lives had become little more than bargaining chips in a system built on corruption, political loyalty and the preservation of power.

There was anger, of course. But beneath it was something more profound: a sense of helplessness, of living in a society where even the most basic expectation — that public institutions should protect human life — could no longer be taken for granted.

And then something extraordinary happened.

Out of that despair, hope began to emerge. Not because a political leader appeared with a solution, but because people began to stand together. Students, teachers, farmers, artists, workers, pensioners, neighbours and complete strangers started showing solidarity with one another.

What began as grief and outrage became a collective rediscovery of our capacity to act.

For those of us who have spent years working in independent culture, civil society and international cooperation, this experience raises questions that go far beyond Serbia's borders.

What makes people overcome fear? How can communities divided by political beliefs, generations and identities begin to trust one another? And can democracy be reinvented from below, at a time when so much of Europe seems to be moving in the opposite direction?

A country with a complicated history

Serbia has a long history of resistance, but also a complicated relationship with its own past.

In the First World War, the Kingdom of Serbia fought on the side of the victorious Allies, suffering devastating human losses. In the Second World War, within occupied Yugoslavia, the multiethnic Yugoslav Partisan movement made a decisive contribution to the defeat of fascism and the liberation of the country.

Both victories came at an enormous human cost.

Yet our more recent history has been marked by nationalism, authoritarianism, war, isolation and the difficult, unfinished struggle to build democratic institutions.

Perhaps this is precisely why the events of the past two years matter so much.

They have challenged the idea that Serbian society is condemned to repeat its past, that authoritarian leadership is somehow inevitable, or that citizens are incapable of organising themselves without a strong figure telling them what to do.

This transformation has also challenged our understanding of patriotism. For decades, love of country was too often equated with nationalism, obedience to political leaders and hostility towards those perceived as different. The student movement has begun reclaiming patriotism as something more inclusive: a commitment to justice, solidarity and responsibility for the society we share. At the 2026 Festival of Reconciliation in Novi Sad, we explored precisely this question in a panel discussion entitled *New Patriotism*. One of the most powerful examples discussed was the students' encounter with Novi Pazar, where solidarity across ethnic and religious differences challenged deeply rooted prejudices. Perhaps this is another lesson Serbia can offer Europe: loving one's country does not have to mean fearing or excluding others.

The students have demonstrated the opposite.

Democracy without a leader

What made the Serbian movement remarkable was not only the number of people who took to the streets. It was the way they organised.

There was no single charismatic leader, no central figure, no political party directing the movement. Decisions were made through plenums — student assemblies based on discussion, participation and collective decision-making.

Nonviolence became a fundamental principle, even when protesters themselves faced intimidation and attacks.

Students walked and cycled across the country, connecting university cities with small towns and villages. People opened their homes, prepared food, offered transport and supported strangers. Networks of solidarity emerged in places where mistrust and political division had long seemed insurmountable.

In a country where political power had become increasingly personalised, the students offered an entirely different understanding of leadership.

They did not ask people to follow them. They invited people to participate.

They did not merely demand democracy. They practised it.

Of course, plenums are not a Serbian invention, and decentralised movements have existed throughout history. Nor is collective decision-making free from contradictions, inefficiencies or internal tensions.

But the scale, persistence and political consequences of this experiment have been extraordinary.

The movement has now achieved something that seemed almost unimaginable two years ago: an electoral victory that ended fourteen years of domination by the same ruling party.

The challenge ahead may be even greater. Can a movement built on horizontal decision-making preserve its democratic culture when confronted with the vertical structures of the state? Can it transform institutions without being transformed by the very political practices it opposed?

We do not yet know the answers.

A lesson worth sharing

I believe other democratic movements across Europe can learn something from the Serbian experience.

Not because Serbia has discovered a universal formula for political change. Every society has its own circumstances, histories and struggles.

But because this movement has demonstrated that some of the assumptions dominating contemporary politics are not necessarily true.

People do not always need a charismatic leader to mobilise. Political action does not always require ideological uniformity. Solidarity can emerge across deep social divisions. And nonviolent collective action, sustained over time, can produce profound political consequences.

Perhaps most importantly, democracy does not have to begin with winning an election. It can begin with people learning to listen to one another, making decisions together and assuming responsibility for their communities.

These are lessons that may be particularly relevant at a moment when democratic institutions across Europe face growing distrust.

I think of Georgia, where citizens have been resisting authoritarian tendencies and defending their European aspirations. I think of the many people across the continent who continue to defend civic freedoms, independent institutions and the right to dissent.

I want to express my solidarity with them.

But solidarity should not mean simply offering encouragement from a distance. It should also mean exchanging knowledge, strategies and experiences. Serbian citizens have much to learn from other democratic movements, just as I believe those movements have something to learn from Serbia.

Democracy becomes stronger when its defenders recognise that their struggles are connected.

Europe as a peace project

There is another reason why these events matter deeply to me.

I have always understood European integration as something more important than a common market, a set of institutions or a geopolitical alliance.

For me, the European Union is, first and foremost, a peace project.

Born from the devastation of two World Wars, it represents the extraordinary idea that countries which once fought and destroyed one another could build a shared future through cooperation rather than conflict.

This idea has never been perfect. Europe has repeatedly failed to live up to its own principles, including during the wars that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia. Its institutions have often been slow, inconsistent and insufficiently responsive to the people they are supposed to serve.

Nevertheless, the European peace project remains one of the most important political achievements of the modern era.

And I worry about its future.

Across Europe, nationalism, authoritarian tendencies and the far right are gaining ground. Political discourse increasingly revolves around fear, exclusion, militarisation and the defence of narrow national interests.

Sometimes I find myself wondering whether the Europe that Serbia has been trying to join will still exist in the same form by the time we finally get there.

I hope it will.

More than that, I hope that Europe will not lose sight of the reason it was created in the first place.

Peace is not simply the absence of war. It is a continuous political and cultural effort to build trust, protect human dignity, resolve conflicts without violence and create institutions through which different communities can coexist.

For Serbia and the Western Balkans, this is not an abstract philosophical question. We know what happens when nationalism, fear and the politics of division prevail.

And perhaps that experience gives us a particular responsibility to defend the European peace project, rather than merely aspire to membership in it.

The role of culture

As someone working in independent culture and serving on the board of IETM, I cannot separate these developments from the work we do as artists, cultural producers and cultural organisations.

Cultural spaces are among the places where people learn to encounter difference, question authority, negotiate disagreement and imagine alternatives.

Theatre, in particular, has always been a space in which societies can examine themselves, confront uncomfortable truths and experiment with other ways of being together.

There is something profoundly theatrical, in the best sense of the word, about the Serbian student movement: public space was transformed into a place of collective action, familiar political roles were challenged, and citizens became active participants rather than passive spectators.

But what happened was not a performance of democracy. It was democracy being practised.

Our cultural networks should recognise the significance of such moments. We should defend the civic spaces that make them possible, support colleagues facing repression and strengthen the connections between cultural practice and democratic participation.

We should also remain critical of our own institutions and ask whether we practise the participatory values that we so often advocate.

A different future is possible

I do not know what Serbia will look like in five or ten years. Winning an election is not the same as building a democracy, and the challenges ahead remain enormous.

But something has already changed. Out of despair, people discovered solidarity. Out of solidarity, they found courage. And through collective action, they rediscovered hope.

I hope that Serbia will one day join a European Union that has not abandoned its democratic ideals or forgotten its origins as a peace project.

And when that day comes, I hope we will arrive not merely as a country seeking to learn from Europe, but as a society with something valuable to contribute.

Perhaps Europe needs that experience as much as Serbia needs Europe.