# Protesting out of Love for One's Country: A discursive analysis of patriotic constructions in the 2024-2025 Serbian Student Protests

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## *A discursive analysis of patriotic constructions in the 2024-2025 Serbian Student Protests*

by

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*Figure*[1]

**ABSTRACT**

Studies on anti-governmental protests in hybrid and authoritarian regimes are often understood as driven by a general discontent towards the government. This thesis argues however, that by looking deeper at the protest discourse it reveals motivations embedded in attachment to the country. This study does not approach motivation articulated in the protest discourse as the personal drivers of individual participants, but as an underlying driver that operates on a patriotic logic. It examines how protest discourse articulates its actions as attachment, responsibility, and care toward the country, commonly tied to patriotism. Drawing on republican patriotism and taking the Serbian 2024-2025 protests as its case study, it analyses protests discourse depicted on banners across multiple events. Through the analysis it recognised particular discursive patterns that correlate with a patriotic logic. These patterns are collectively identified as three interrelated mechanism through which protesting is constructed as patriotic: striving for the common good, moral framing and generational responsibility. Together, these mechanisms frame protest participation not as mere anti-governmental opposition, but as motivation driven by care and concern for one's country.

[1]Protestors in Belgrade holding the banner "*You have blood on your hands"*
*Source*: Natasha Tripney, "The Sound of Silence: The Student Protests Sweeping Serbia," *Café Europe*, January 2, 2025, https://natashatripney.substack.com/p/the-sound-of-silence-the-student. Photograph by Reuters.

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# Introduction

Anti-governmental protests, particularly in hybrid and authoritarian regimes, are often sites of contestation between citizens and their governments (Robertson 2011). These protests typically emerge in response to systemic subversion by governing authorities, including corruption, institutional failure, and abuse of power. However, in contrast to democratic regimes, such protests are often ostracised, with governments portraying them as enemies of the country (Baturo & Tolstrup 2024). In response, protest movements mobilise the country itself within their discourse, using national and historical symbols not only for identity-building but also to contest the government's claim to represent the nation (e.g. Carnaghan 2016; Chevée 2022; Kazharski 2021). As a result, anti-governmental protests in these contexts frequently evolve into struggles over legitimacy, in which both protestors and governments claim to act on behalf of the country.

This contestation suggests that attachment to the country is significant and that these movements are not driven solely by context-specific grievances, but also by affective attachment and normative visions of what the country ought to be. While such elements are commonly associated with patriotism, the literature on anti-governmental protests rarely analyses such movements through this lens. Instead, it primarily explains mobilisation in terms of context-specific grievances. Although the country plays an important role in protest discourse as a means of legitimisation, existing research tends to treat references to the country as a tool for identity-building and for contesting government legitimacy, rather than as a source of motivation in itself. Even within the literature on patriotism, while possible links to protest and public dissent are acknowledged, there is a lack of systematic empirical analysis demonstrating how such dynamics operate in practice. As a result, we lack a clear understanding of how protesting itself may be articulated as an expression of patriotism.

To address this gap, this thesis asks: *How do anti-government protest movements discursively construct dissent as patriotic?* It explores this question through an analysis of the relatively underexplored 2024-2025 protests in Serbia. As a contemporary hybrid regime with a history of anti-governmental mobilisation driven by grievances characteristic of such systems, Serbia represents a theoretically relevant case within the literature (Miholjčić-Ivković 2025; Bieber 2018). The protests were triggered by the rooftop collapse of a newly renovated railway station in Novi Sad on November 1st, 2024, which resulted in sixteen deaths, The collapse was subsequently linked to governmental negligence and corruption, sparking widespread outrage, triggering a nationwide mobilisation led largely by Gen-Z students and evolving into one of the largest civic protest movements since the fall of Slobodan Milošević (Maksimović & Popović 2025). Unlike earlier waves of protest, the movement attracted broad societal support across social, regional, and ethnic lines, including participation from politically marginalised groups such as the Bosniak minority (Barać-Savić 2024; Miholjčić-Ivković 2025;

Selaković 2025). The unprecedented scale not only makes it a unique case in Serbia but also provides a rich empirical site for analysis.

Analytically, this study draws on republican theories of patriotism, which conceptualise loyalty to the country as an active civic commitment grounded in responsibility for the collective well-being. Building on this framework, patriotic discourse is identified through two core dimensions: ownership and civic responsibility. Ownership refers to expressions of attachment to the country and claims of acting on its behalf, while civic responsibility captures articulations of duty to care for and protect the country and its shared goods. Empirically, the analysis examines 177 protest banners collected across multiple protest events. Through qualitative discourse analysis, triangulated with media reporting and contextual sources, the study identifies three interrelated mechanisms through which dissent is constructed as patriotic: striving for the common good, moral framing, and generational responsibility. Together, these mechanisms demonstrate how protest participation is framed not merely as political opposition, but as an expression of attachment, responsibility, and care for the country.

Using Serbia as its case study and banners as its object of analysis, the question of thesis is: How does the anti-governmental protest movement during the 2024-2025 Serbian protests discursively construct protesting as patriotic? The thesis first reviews relevant literature and develops a theoretical framework grounded in republican patriotism. It then outlines the methodology and presents an empirical analysis of protest banners from the 2024-2025 Serbian protests, identifying key mechanisms through which dissent is constructed as patriotic. The final chapters discuss the implications of these findings and conclude.

# Anti-governmental protests: Discourse, its drivers and the role of attachment

Literature on anti-governmental protests in hybrid and authoritarian regimes recognises that the motivations of such movements often stem from similar political grievances, such as corruption (Aleya-Sghaier 2012; Kuzio 2010), electoral fraud (Vladisavljević 2016; Carnaghan 2016; Nikolayenko 2007), repression (Chevée 2022), or a combination thereof (Kazharski 2021). Generally, anti-governmental protests in these regimes rarely emerge from a single cause, but rather from an accumulation of overlapping grievances pointing to broader patterns of systemic failure and abuse (Nikolayenko 2007, 172). A central strategy that defines these movements is the use of discursive and symbolic practices not only to articulate their motives and grievances, but also to strengthen the legitimacy of the movement while undermining that of the state (Kazharski 2021; Carnaghan 2016; Chevée 2022; Nikolayenko 2007; Romanova 2023; Winegar 2021). Often faced with delegitimising narratives promoted by the governments they oppose, which frame them as traitors, threats, or outright enemies of the nation (Robertson 2011; Baturo & Tolstrup 2024), these movements have mobilised national symbols, historical references, and collective memory to counter such attacks.

For instance, during the 2020 protests in Belarus, opposition groups reappropriated state-controlled symbols and World War II rhetoric, reflecting them back to highlight the regime's fascist tendencies. They also revived the historical white-red-white flag to distinguish themselves from Lukashenko's regime and to anchor their movement in a longer national tradition of resistance (Kazharski 2021, 76–77). Similarly, in Syria, opposition forces used the former Independence flag to distinguish themselves from Assad's regime while connecting their mobilisation to a foundational moment in the country's history (Chevée 2022, 160–161). Movements can also draw historical parallels between their struggle and the past, as seen in Ukraine during the Orange Revolution, where protestors used imagery associated with earlier resistance movements (Carnaghan 2016, 1596–1599). Across cases such as Syria, Georgia, and Ukraine, protest movements have also employed inclusive narratives that bring together diverse social groups, contrasting themselves with the government's divisive and exclusionary rhetoric (Carnaghan 2016, 1589–1591; Chevée 2022).

These case studies demonstrate that in anti-governmental protests against hybrid or authoritarian regimes, the country plays a significant symbolic role within protest discourse. It functions as a discursive and symbolic site through which legitimacy is contested, particularly with regard to who truly represents the nation. This symbolic contestation further suggests that attachment to the country itself may serve as a motivating factor behind protest participation. Existing scholarship on nationalism and patriotism recognises such attachment as a potential driver of political action (e.g. Fish 2024; Tamir 2019; Sekerák & Min 2025; Poole 2007; Gustavsson & Miller 2020), and several studies on anti-

governmental protest acknowledge this connection through the lens of nationalism (Carnaghan 2016; Kuzio 2010).

While protesting out of care or concern for one's country shares affinities with nationalism, it is conceptually more closely aligned with patriotism. Whereas nationalism places a strong emphasis on identity, membership, and boundaries of belonging, patriotism foregrounds the normative relationship between citizens and their country, emphasising feelings of responsibility, duty, and care. Approaching protest through this lens allows dissent to be understood not merely as opposition to a regime, but as action undertaken on behalf of the country itself. Scholarship on patriotism similarly suggests that public dissent, including protest, can constitute an expression of patriotism when governments are perceived to act contrary to what citizens believe their country ought to be (Schatz 2020, 618–620; Keller 2005, 574; Primoratz 2007, 22; Viroli 1995, 187).

Despite these conceptual connections, the literature on anti-governmental protests rarely frames protest motivations through the lens of patriotism. Instead, mobilisation is predominantly interpreted in terms of context-specific grievances such as corruption, repression, or electoral fraud, often connected to broader dissatisfaction with the regime. Furthermore, as illustrated in the case studies discussed above, references to the country within protest discourse are largely treated as symbolic tools for contesting legitimacy and constructing collective identity, rather than as expressions of normative motivation grounded in duty, responsibility, or care for the country. Although some studies on anti-governmental protest refer to patriotism, the concept is typically mentioned without further elaboration or clarification regarding its operationalisation or its precise role as a motivating force (Stepanović 2025; Chupyra 2015; Hall 2011). It should be noted that Hall's work does show a link with the argument made on protests within patriotism literature. For instance, it shows how the civil right movement in the United States was framed as a patriotic act that strived for America to live up to its fundamental values, most notably the principle of equality (see Chapter 1). Yet, with its thematic focus on the history of social movements within the U.S. it offers little information on the operationalisation of the concept, nor does it extensively analyse attachment as driving factor behind the protests. Also, its American-centred focus does not offer a contextual understanding how this functions non-democratic regimes. In addition, while the literature on patriotism offers a conceptual link that protests indeed can be seen as an act of patriotism, itself does not offer empirical studies how this would operate.

Taken together, the literature reveals two related gaps that would benefit from being brought together. Scholarship on anti-governmental protests demonstrates that the country plays an important symbolic role in protest discourse and implicitly suggests that attachment to the country may serve as a motivating factor. Related work on nationalism and patriotism further confirms that such attachment can indeed drive political mobilisation. Patriotism in particular offers a conceptual framework that

links to motivation by emphasising duty, care, and responsibility toward the country. However, neither body of literature provides an empirical analysis of how this relationship operates in practice.

This leaves an unanswered question of how in anti-governmental protest movements articulate its actions out of attachment of one's country understood as patriotism. In other words, how does protests discourse constructs its actions as patriotic? As protest movements often articulate their motives and ideas through discursive and symbolic practices, such as banners, this study will look specifically at protest discourse to answer this question. This study does not seek to determine individual motivations directly, but to examine how the discourse constructs its actions through a patriotic logic. To analyse this, this study uses the Serbian 2024-2025 protests as a case-study. The main research question therefore becomes. Being a hybrid regime, Serbia is a representative case study within literature on anti-governmental protests, having itself been the subject of various studies on the topic (e.g. Vladislavljevic 2016 & Nikolayenko 2007). Furthermore, by analysing how citizens articulate loyalty to country not through ethnicity or regime support, but through the rejection of systemic abuse performed by the government, this analysis also offers a new angle on analysing identity in Serbia, which literature is often focused ethno-nationalism (e.g. Judah 2009; Anzulović 1999; Čolović 2002). Lastly, it also offers an empirical analysis on a relatively recent event that has so far been understudied. In the following section I will further elaborate on how patriotism functions and condense it into an operable analytical framework.

# Understanding Patriotism

In its most rudimentary sense, patriotism is commonly understood as love for and loyalty to one's country (Kleinig 2007; Smith 2021, chap. 1; Soutphommasane 2012, 20–25). Like concepts such as nationalism or democracy, however, patriotism has developed into an equivocal concept with multiple interpretations (e.g. Müller 2008; Staub 1997; Laborde 2002) and is therefore prone to conceptual ambiguity (Primoratz 2007; Bitschnau & Mußotter 2024). For this reason, many scholars draw on its republican tradition (e.g. Soutphommasane 2012; Smith 2021; Viroli 1997), which offers a conception of patriotism grounded in civic responsibility toward one's political community. This thesis follows a similar approach, drawing on republican patriotism as its theoretical understanding of the concept.

## Republican Patriotism

Republican patriotism understands loyalty to one's country not as a passive attachment, but as an active civic commitment. It presupposes that citizens, as members of a political community, hold duties and responsibilities toward maintaining and protecting the well-being of that community, namely the country itself. Importantly, these duties and responsibilities are not imposed upon citizens, but flow from the loyalty they feel toward their country. This loyalty, according to Kleinig (2007), derives from attachment to and identification with the country, which evokes a sense of "ours" that renders it deserving of care (40–44). Through this sense of ownership, citizens come to feel responsible for the flourishing and well-being of what they regard as theirs (Smith 2021, 15).

Critics of patriotism often argue that such loyalty is prone to generating bias through particularism (Keller 2005). Republican thinkers, however, contend that such critiques conflate loyalty with obedience (Kleinig 2007; Smith 2021; Poole 2007). Loyalty understood as obedience corresponds to what Staub (1997) terms "blind patriotism," a form frequently articulated by non-democratic regimes. As Baturo and Tolstrup (2024) note, such regimes employ patriotism to present themselves as the sole defenders of the country's interests, effectively fusing loyalty to the country with loyalty to the regime. Acting against the regime is thus framed as acting against the country itself, often casting opposition as traitorous (583–593). In this context, patriotism is reduced to unquestioning obedience, reinforcing the notion that only the regime can legitimately represent the country's true interests (Kleinig 2007, 44–45).

Republican patriotism explicitly rejects such uncritical allegiance. Instead, it emphasises vigilance against corruption, tyranny, and arbitrary power that threaten the collective well-being of the country (Poole 2007; Primoratz 2007). This well-being is commonly articulated through the concept of the common good, understood as a set of shared goods that generate collective benefits for the community as a whole and serve all of its members (Etzioni 2009, 115; Etzioni 2019, 73–76; Soutphommasane

2012, 26; Viroli 1997, 27). Crucially, these goods are not defined by individual interests but derive their value from their shared and inclusive character. It is this collective value that motivates citizens to feel responsible for the common good, prompting investment in its protection, maintenance, and continued existence. In other words, caring for the common good is understood as part of citizens' civic responsibility.

In modern states, the protection of the common good is typically safeguarded through political institutions and the rules, principles, and norms embedded within them, most notably the rule of law and constitutional frameworks (Poole 2007, 129–130; Etzioni 2019, 74–76). These institutions, however, do not operate independently. Their effectiveness depends on citizens' collective responsibility to uphold the values and principles they embody, often through everyday practices and shared civic norms. This responsibility requires vigilance toward abuses of power and action when institutions fail to serve their intended purpose. Loyalty, in this sense, is not a passive commitment to one's country, but includes a critical responsibility to assess whether those in power act in accordance with the country's well-being.

A concept that closely adopts this idea is *constitutional patriotism*. However, this understanding has been critiqued for being too thin of a basis for loyalty and that it cannot be fostered solely by abstract ideas, rules, and principles (Poole 2007 140–145; Laborde 2002 & Baumeister 2007). It establishes loyalty not to the country, but to the universalistic principles that are enshrined in its constitution (Ingram 1996, 2–3; Müller 2008 79–82). Critics argue that loyalty cannot be fostered solely by abstract ideas, rules, and principles. Moreover, this would suggest that if the primary loyalty of the citizen is based on universal values, a citizen could, in principle, simply change one country for another if that one country is better at upholding these values. This would surpass what is so important to patriotism: the relationship to one's country (Poole 2007 137–138 & Soutphommasane 2012, 20). Therefore, despite its nominal similarities, I will not use this specific concept.

According to Poole (2007), it is not abstract institutions or principles alone that generate loyalty, but the relationship these institutions have to the country itself (138). Citizens defend institutions not merely because they embody universal norms, but because they are understood as integral to the country's well-being and collective flourishing. Their role in safeguarding the common good renders adherence to these institutions valuable and makes preventing their subversion a civic necessity. Defending institutional rules and ensuring that institutions function in accordance with their normative commitments are therefore understood as acts of care for the country itself.

Anti-governmental protests against non-democratic regimes, as established above, are generally centred on grievances related to systemic subversion by ruling authorities. Within a republican patriotic framework, such grievances can generate not only a cause but also a civic responsibility to act. Anti-governmental protest thus constitutes an expression of republican patriotism when it is directed against practices that jeopardise the common good and the well-being of the country. By exposing systemic

abuse and demanding adherence to institutional and constitutional principles, protestors frame dissent not as mere opposition to government, but as an active duty of care toward the country. This makes republican patriotism particularly well suited as a theoretical framework for this analysis.

*Limits of republican patriotism*

This sense of civic responsibility toward institutions has led many scholars to draw on patriotism as a means of fostering loyalty to democratic institutions (e.g. Soutphommasane 2012; Viroli 1997; Smith 2021; Sekerák & Min 2025). Bitschnau and Mußotter (2024) criticise this approach for its pro-democratic bias and its tendency to exclude non-democratic commitments from being recognised as patriotic. This study acknowledges this, but it does not seek to resolve this conceptual debate, something other works already address (e.g. Staub 1997). Rather than defining what patriotism ought to be, it examines anti-governmental protest in non-democratic regimes as a patriotic act. For this purpose, republican patriotism offers a useful analytical lens, as it conceptualises resistance to systemic abuse as an expression of care and loyalty toward the country.

## Recognising Patriotism in Practice

As established earlier, anti-governmental protests against non-democratic regimes are often driven by grievances related to systemic subversion by the ruling government, such as abuse of power, the undermining of institutional principles, or corruption. Within a republican patriotic framework, such grievances can constitute a cause for civic action when they are perceived as threatening the common good and the well-being of the country. Such action is conceptualised as an expression of the civic responsibility citizens feel towards their country. This is the key argument through which this study understands protesting as an act of patriotic duty.

However, an important element in recognising protest as an expression of civic responsibility towards the country is that calls for systemic adherence and opposition to subversion are not articulated due to simple adherence to abstract rules. Rather, they are valued because of the implications they hold for the country, the common good, the collective future, and overall well-being (Schatz 2020, 618; Keller 2005, 573; Poole). As Kleinig (2007) noted, it is this sense of *ours* that is fundamental to evoking loyalty (40–44). Citizens come to feel responsible for these institutions not simply because of their abstract normative content, but because they are understood as holding value for the country. Therefore, when such motivations are articulated in protest discourse, they need to be expressed in relation to the country. Thus, a feeling of ownership is also key to evoking action and care. How this relationship is identified discursively is elaborated further in the methodology chapter.

This establishes two key dimensions through which this study recognises republican patriotism in protest discourse. First, civic responsibility is expressed as a sense of general care towards one's country, ensuring its well-being and common good. This care is in part understood through calls to defend institutions, the rule of law, and constitutional principles, as well as demands for adherence to their normative commitments. Second, ownership is expressed through acting upon feelings of attachment one has towards their country, justifying action because of these attachments. Together, these dimensions form an operationalisable analytical lens through which this study examines how patriotism is constructed as a normative justification for anti-governmental protest. By analysing how claims of civic responsibility and ownership are articulated in protest discourse during the 2024-2025 Serbian protests, it aims to examine how protesting is constructed as patriotic.

# Methodology: Analysing Patriotism in Protest Discourse

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the 2024-2025 Serbian protests through the lens of republican patriotism. As the study focuses on understanding how protesting is constructed as patriotic through discourse, an in-depth analytical approach is required. A small-N design enables such depth, as it allows for close engagement with the data and detailed examination of discursive patterns that would be difficult to capture in broader comparative studies.

Serbia as a case study offers a representative case within the literature on anti-governmental protests in hybrid regimes. As a hybrid regime, Serbia shares key characteristics with other cases analysed in the literature, particularly the tendency to frame dissent as an attack on the country and to equate opposition to the government with disloyalty to the country itself (Stojanović 2025a, 2025b; Miholjčić-Ivković 2025; Bieber 2018). Protests against the regime are similarly characterised by systemic grievances

| | |
|---|---|
| *Protests in Novi Pazar* | The protests in Novi Pazar were selected for their relevance in *inclusive national framing*. A majority Bosniak town, it has been the sight of several protests as Bosniak citizens have taken an active role in the protests. Historically politically marginalised, their participation reflects how the protests appeal and include a wider side of Serbian society. |
| *January 12th gathering in Belgrade* | The January 12th gathering in Belgrade was chosen for its strong symbolic engagement with *civic responsibility*, as they protested in front of the constitutional court demanding for its normative functioning. |
| *January 24th general strike* | On this day a general strike was announced around the country in support of the student protestors. It reflects a nationwide solidarity the movement, illustrating how claims of ownership and civic responsibility extended beyond student protestors to broader segments of society. |
| *February 15th gathering in Kragujevac* | This chosen for its relevance to symbolic framing as the protests was held on Serbia's Statehood Day, marking the date that commemorate both its first constitution in 1835 and the First Serbian Uprising in 1804, establishing links with the current movement to important national historical and political events. |
| *March 1st gathering in Niš* | This gathering marks the declaration of the "Students Edict" which outlined normative vision of what according to the student protestors of what Serbia ought to be and the duties required to achieve it. |

*Table 1*

commonly observed in anti-governmental mobilisations in non-democratic regimes. Furthermore, the unprecedented scale and level of mobilisation in the Serbian 2024-2025 protests indicate a distinct moment of citizen-government contention compared to previous protests in Serbia (Barać-Savić 2024; Szpala 2024). This makes the current protests particularly revealing within the framework of anti-governmental mobilisation, providing a rich context for analysing protest discourse. As the focus of this study is how patriotism is constructed through protest discourse, discourse analysis is used as the primary analytical method. To operationalise patriotism as a concept of analysis, two core dimensions are established: civic responsibility and ownership. The further operationalisation of the concept and the coding of the data can be found in Table 2. After passing a minimal reliability test, the coding table and its dimensions were adjusted accordingly. Due to limited time, the sampling of data relied on publicly

accessible material rather than field research or interviews. As the protests span from November 2024 to the present, there are many different rallies, which this study cannot cover in their entirety. Moreover, some rallies and meetings are less well documented. Through purposive sampling, this study selected protest events based on their empirical and symbolic richness, as well as their relevance to the analytical dimensions of ownership and civic responsibility (see Table 1). While the events were selected in part for their connection with the analytical framework, selection bias was mitigated by prioritising protests that were widely reported, symbolically prominent, and recognised as key moments within the broader protest movement, thereby capturing sentiments central to the protests as a whole. The timeframe chosen (January, February, March) corresponds to the mobilising phase of the protests, during which the normative narrative was establishing itself (Maksimović & Popović 2025). This phase is analytically significant because it provides insight into the emergence of key discursive developments that came to define the protests.

## Data Selection - Banners

This study focuses on protest banners as the primary unit of analysis. Banners are particularly well suited to the aims of this research, as they represent condensed, intentional, and publicly oriented forms of communication through which protestors articulate grievances, normative claims, and justifications for their actions. Their public visibility, especially through media coverage, allows for systematic collection across multiple protest events. This makes them particularly suitable for identifying recurring discursive patterns and general sentiments within the movement, and therefore useful as an empirical basis for identifying the dimensions of ownership and civic responsibility outlined in the analytical framework.

Within this study, banners are defined broadly as any hand-held or publicly displayed placards containing textual or symbolic content. To collect the data, visual media, including videos and photographs, were used. The data were selected from sources that met the following criteria: 1) publicly available; 2) directly or indirectly referencing the protests; 3) referencing at least one of the analytical dimensions, as shown in Table 2; and 4) visually discernible. The analysis focuses on banners that convey a discernible message relevant to the analytical framework. Banners that lacked a clear normative or discursive claim, or whose meaning could not reasonably be interpreted in relation to ownership or civic responsibility, were excluded.

Duplicate banners were avoided by cross-referencing images across multiple media sources and excluding banners that appeared repeatedly across different reports or protest events. This was achieved by saving each identified banner only once in the dataset. Repetitions of banners across different events were saved separately but were interpreted in the context of understanding the general sentiment of the

protests. Translations and interpretations were conducted with the support of a native Serbian speaker. Full references to the banners used can be found in Appendix A.

While the aforementioned events form the core of the analysis, data collection followed a snowball sampling strategy. However, this was only applied in cases where additional material discovered outside of the selected events was of clear relevance to the analytical framework, either by introducing new insights or by significantly strengthening already collected data. If newly identified material merely repeated existing patterns without expanding them, it was excluded. Data collection continued until newly gathered material no longer revealed additional patterns related to ownership and civic responsibility.

## Source Selection

The sources consist of publicly available news and media coverage of the protests. Sources were selected based on their regional specificity and proximity to the events in order to capture grounded representations of the protests and to avoid reliance on external or detached international framings. International media that were used consisted of regionally specialised branches of these outlets (*e.g. BBC, DW*). This approach allows the analysis to remain sensitive to the cultural, historical, and regional nuances relevant to interpreting protest banners and symbols. These sources were also selected for their on-site media coverage, including broadcasts and photographs, offering rich visual data (*e.g. balkans.aljazeera.net, N1, Nova.rs*).

The use of contextual analysis from thinktanks, NGOs, and investigative journalism (e.g. *European Western Balkans, Balkan Insight, OBCT, Vreme, Centre for Eastern Studies*) allows for triangulation of information, offering greater balance and contextual understanding of the collected data. These sources were used primarily to contextualise protest events, institutional developments, and political dynamics rather than as primary data for analysis, unless visual material was included.

To ensure authenticity and traceability, all sources were required to be identifiable, meaning that the context and origin of publication had to be traceable. This applied particularly to visual imagery such as photographs. If the context or original publisher of an image could not be reliably identified, the source was excluded. Where possible, data related to specific events were cross-checked with media reports or contextual analyses to ensure reliability. All collected data were archived in a table including the date of publication, date of access, source name, type of content, and event. All material analysed in this study is publicly accessible. No private communications were included. Visuals containing identifiable individuals were treated with care to avoid harm, and references to individuals were anonymised where appropriate.

| Dimension | Subdimension | Operational Understanding | Anchor | Negative evidence |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Ownership** | *Symbolic framing* | Use of national symbols, historical references, or rituals to claim the protest are acting on behalf of the Serbian nation or its collective identity | Utilisation of historic or national references that to articulate protest ideas and demands | Use of national symbols that does not clearly articulate a claim about representing, protecting, or acting for the country. |
| **Ownership** | *Inclusive national framing* | Articulations that suggest the protestors broadly represent Serbia and its citizens as a whole. | Banners of "Mi smo Srbija" (*we are Serbia*), explicit refrences of "all of us", "everyone", the textual inclusion of multiple social groups | Representing the protests through exclusivist and ethno-nationalistic terms, such as claims as "Kosovo is Serbia" |
| **Ownership** | *Care as commitment to the country* | Statements that express a desire for and commitment to a better country out of attachment to it. | "For a better future in Serbia" | Abstract expressions of care that cannot be contextualised or refer or to the country |
| **Civic responsibility** | *Demanding Institutional Adherence* | This focuses on normative behaviour. It refers to discursive claims that call on governing authorities to comply with constitutional principles, legal norms, and institutional rules and how the government ought to behave. | "No one is above the law", "Everything according to the law" | Simple bashing of the regime without reference to normative demands of institutional obligation |
| **Civic responsibility** | *Legitimising Institutions* | This refers to normative function. Statements that explicitly link institutions and constitutional order to the country's stability, survival, or collective well-being. How the system ought to function and the value they hold for the country and its citizens. | "The constitution protects us" "Institutions work for us" | References to institutions that do not attribute value or significance to them in relation to the country's well-being. |
| **Civic responsibility** | *Opposition framing* | Statements that delegitimise the government's rule for systemic subversion, while legitimising protestors as responsible citizens acting in defence of the country. | "We defend the country", "Your hands are bloody" | Anti-government criticism that lacks a normative claim about civic duty or does not frame protest as an act of protecting the country |

*Table 2*

# Protesting for the Country: Discourse Analysis of the Serbian 2024-2025 protest banners

This section analyses how protest discourse during the 2024-2025 Serbian protests construct dissent as patriotic. Focusing on banners as discursive artefacts, the analysis identifies recurring patterns through which protest is articulated in relation to care, responsibility, and attachment to the country. Rather than treating protest as oppositional politics, these framings position mobilisation as an act undertaken on behalf of the country itself. The findings are organised around three interrelated discursive mechanisms: striving for the common good, moral framing, and generational responsibility. Each section examines how these mechanisms operate within protest discourse and how, together, they contribute to constructing protest as a patriotic act.

## Striving for the common good

Striving for the common good constructs dissent as a civic responsibility by framing the protests as acting in defence of the common good. Within the analytical framework, civic responsibility refers to discursive claims that present political action as a duty to protect shared institutions, collective well-being, and the conditions necessary for the country's functioning. The banners examined here articulate protest not as a pursuit of particular interests, but as an obligation to safeguard what is collectively owned and valued, thereby linking systemic grievances not merely out of anti-governmentalism, but out of an act of care and responsibility for the country which this study identifies as patriotism.

### Framing the common good

While the immediate trigger of the protests appears to be the moral outrage surrounding the rooftop collapse, protest discourse frames this event as more than an isolated incident or an instance of corruption. Rather, the collapse is presented as a catalyst that exposed broader patterns of systemic dysfunction. Banners such as "The system has failed; it's time for a retake" and "Error Your system is corrupt. It can't be trusted and may not work properly. - Restart"[2] frame the incident as symptomatic of a system that no longer functions according to its intended purpose. Furthermore, the words *retake* and *restart* suggest that system is not only dysfunctional, but that it also needs to be restored.[3] Within the patriotic framework, this reflects a civic responsibility to safeguard institutional functioning, remain vigilant against abuse, and call attention when its compromised.

Its restoration is not simply tied demanding its normative function; discourse establishes that its function is there to protect citizens and serve as a public good. This is achieved for instance, through contrasting

[2] B11, B101
[3] Also see B4, B5

frames such as “There would not have been blood, if it went according to the law”[4], indicating that if the system *were* to function accordingly, lives would not have been lost. In this framing, the collapse becomes evidence that institutional safeguards meant to protect citizens have been compromised. Yet, in the current state, the guarantee of public safety is arbitrary, as suggested by slogans such as “How much does safety cost in Serbia?” and “Safety is not a luxury”[5]. By framing safety as generally compromised, protest discourse presents the issue not as a particular grievance, but as one that affects Serbia as a whole.

This illustrates that the protests strive for goods that are understood as universal and collectively guaranteed, anchoring their demands to the common good. Through this framing, systemic failure is understood not merely as a political problem, but as a collective one that jeopardises the well-being of the country and its citizens. By anchoring their demands in the common good, understood as shared societal goods that generate collective benefits, protest is framed as more than opposition and instead as an explicit act oriented toward the interests and well-being of the country. By emphasising that such systemic failure endangers shared societal goods in Serbia, protestors justify mobilisation as a necessary response to protect what is collectively held and valued. This theme is reoccurring within the protest and not only tied to safety, as will be shown in the next section.

What striving for the common good does discursively is that it contextualises its demands as something that is within the collective interests of the whole of society. It anchors it in the common good as something that is not a luxury, but one that ought to be systemically guaranteed due its collective and shared properties. In other words, its actions are not solely driven by governmental malpractice, but by ensuring the protection of shared societal goods. It is through this emphasis on shared benefit and collective care that protesting is constructed as a patriotic act, as it operates *for* the country.

## Moral framing

Striving for the common good constructs protesting as patriotic by grounding its motives within the common good, i.e. it is acting upon ensuring and protecting collective well-being and shared benefits of society. Discursively, this is indicated through articulations that frame these goods as belonging and benefiting to all, and through speaking and acting not on behalf of specific groups but for all citizens. This stance reflects a civic responsibility that recognises the collective value of these goods and the need to care for and protect them from harm. Public dissent emerges as a collective expression of this responsibility. The protest discourse appeals to the system’s safeguards and articulate their normative function but also establishes that their negligence or disregard endangers the collective well-being of all

[4] B115
[5] B38, B34

citizens. The protests do not frame this as mere rule-breaking or a legal violation, but as an immoral act. This is where the mechanism of moral framing in the protest' discourse emerges.

### *Criminal culpability*

Central to this framing is the portrayal of the rooftop collapse as a criminal act rather than an unfortunate accident. Protest discourse consistently rejects the government's narrative of describing it as misfortune through articulations of "A crime, not a tragedy" and "Murder, not a tragedy"[6]. They articulate how this had been the result of systemic disregard and harm could have been prevented had institutional rules and safeguards been respected, as shown by B115. They are criminalised, because their systemic subversion has led to the death of citizens, thereby putting culpability for these deaths in hands of the government. This logic is visually reinforced by the recurring symbol of the bloody hand and the slogan "You have blood on your hands"[7] which directly attribute moral and criminal responsibility to the government.

### *Erosion of knowledge & education*

Beyond the collapse itself, protest discourse extends this moralisation to broader patterns of systemic malpractice by the government, particularly through references to corruption in education and knowledge production. Education and competence play an important role within protest discourse as symbolism. Largely because it is student-led, but also because the cause of the disaster has been understood as the result of corruption-induced incompetence (Maksimović & Popović 2025). It also operates on the mechanism of *striving for the common good*, because discursively they recognise it as valuable to society, both explicitly through statements such as "Knowledge is the pillar of society"[8], but more implicitly by connecting it to the disaster. It serves as a contextual example to say that the ignorance and incompetence that results from the disregard of these goods is harmful.[9] In other words, the discourse contextualises the value of education and competence by contrasting it with the consequences of their disregard. They express how corruption and nepotism as practices allow the unqualified to wield power.[10] This is further reinforced by references to forged diplomas and purchased qualifications, which various government officials have been accused of in the past (Jelovac, 2021). Statements such as "Bought diplomas destroy the future" and "You buy your diplomas and sell our lives"[11] shift the critique from incompetence to moral decay, framing these practices as actively harmful to society and its future.

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[6] B35, B137
[7] B36
[8] B145, also see B43, B49, B13, Student Edict in Appendix B
[9] B78, B128
[10] B92
[11] B122, B142

*Existential Threat*

Much like other anti-governmental protests, these frames serve to delegitimise the government. However, when contextualised and read alongside other banners, a broader narrative emerges in which governmental behaviour and practices are not portrayed as mere instances of rule-breaking, but as an existential threat to the country itself. Slogans such as "**If SNS survives, Serbia won't**," "**The land you are killing is not yours**," and "**With a government like this, we do not need enemies**" depict governing authorities as actors who actively endanger the country's survival. Framings of the government as an enemy were even more strongly emphasised during the February 15th protests, where explicit parallels were drawn between the Serbian uprising against Ottoman rule in 1804 and the contemporary protests.[12] This existential framing constructs urgency and necessity, captured in calls such as "**Rise up, country of Serbia, now or never**".[13] In this logic, protesting is no longer framed as opposition politics or anti-governmental activism, but as a defensive response to a threat against the country. This moves discursive practice away from simply delegitimising the government, to framing them as inherently illegitimate and in fact an enemy to the country. It also frames a clear sense of ownership, because the object of their care, i.e. the country, is being threatened and therefore necessitates action.

*Contrasting*

Moral framing also operates through contrast. While the government is depicted as immoral and dangerous, protestors present themselves as morally legitimate actors who act in the interest of the country. Slogans such as "Students standing in defence of the homeland" and "The homeland is defended with beauty, honour, and knowledge"[14] frame mobilisation as an expression of care rather than self-interest. It furthermore establishes that the protests are considered a defensive act to protect the country. Claims such as "Students are not paid" and "I block for free"[15] explicitly reject governmental accusations of bribery or foreign influence (Blackburn 2025), reinforcing the portrayal of protestors as principled and responsible citizens. This is also reflected in banners such as "If you lack a spine, we will put in ours" and "A student's voice is stronger than concrete"[16] that express moral strength and resolve in opposition to the government, thereby framing protesters as righteous actors. Through this contrast, protest discourse establishes a moral hierarchy in which protestors are positioned as rightful defenders of the country's well-being.

Moral framing establishes that the deliberate violation of the common good, precisely because of its shared value, constitutes a collective threat to both citizens and the country, thereby making such actions

[12] B105
[13] B64
[14] B127, B69
[15] B176, B177, also see B124, B33
[16] B85, B149, also see B49

morally reprehensible. By constructing systemic subversion as both immoral and existentially dangerous, protest discourse justifies dissent as a legitimate response, as it is aimed at defending the country from further harm. In doing so, it draws a clear moral boundary between those portrayed as harming the country through deliberate violations of the common good and those claiming responsibility for its protection. Protestors are thus constructed as morally legitimate defenders of the country, while those responsible for violating the common good are framed as morally illegitimate. Rather than just delegitimising the government and portraying its behaviour as mere rule-breaking, this mechanism advances anti-government protests from simple opposition, towards an act of patriotism that defends the country.

## Generational responsibility

Moral framing establishes the urgency of action in response to present harm, framing protesting as an act of defence of the country. However, the reoccurring theme of 'future'[17] within the discourse situates the cause to protests also within a temporal perspective. Generational responsibility emerges as a mechanism through which dissent is constructed as patriotic by linking present action as way of ensuring the future well-being of the country. In this framing, the threat posed by systemic failure is not limited to current citizens but extends to future generations who will bear the long-term consequences if action is not taken. This logic is captured in the banners such as "If we stay silent today, who will suffer tomorrow?"[18], which clearly articulates sense of responsibility to the future. This expands responsibility beyond the present moment, transforming dissent into an act of care aimed at preserving the country over time.

### Role of the Youth

The prominent role of students in the protests further reinforces this mechanism. Students occupy a dual position in which they are both victims of current systemic dysfunction and, as bearers of the future, also its inheritors. Their mobilisation reflects an awareness that current institutional decay will disproportionately affect their lives and those of subsequent generations. This future-oriented responsibility is articulated in banners such as "The future should be taken care of by those who are coming, because it will belong to them"[19] framing students as legitimate actors precisely because they will live with the consequences of today's political choices. While students fighting for their future arguable reflects partisan-interests, the banners reveal a deeper motivation, one that is defined by attachment to their country. Statements such as "I don't want to look for a better country; I want my country to become better" and "I'm changing the country because I don't want to change the country"[20]

[17] B44, B48, B104, B142, B159, B15, B18, B22
[18] B28
[19] B159, also see Student Edict in Appendix B
[20] B154, B110, also see B125, B130

frame protest participation as a choice to remain and improve rather than exit. It reflects a sense of civic responsibility rooted in attachment, tying it to patriotism.

The students show as themselves agents of change and continuity "Future students for a future system" and "You designed the downfall, we are drawing a new future."[21] These statements do not merely express youthful optimism but situate dissent within a longer temporal perspective, emphasising the responsibility to ensure that the country remains viable for those who will inherit it. In a context where emigration is a persistent concern for young people (Radonjić & Bobić 2021), the decision to protest is presented as an expression of attachment to the country and commitment to its future. Through this logic, the ability to live, work, and prosper within one's own country is constructed as a shared good that must be protected. It suggests that having a future life, being able to prosper and grow within one's own country is a common good. In this sense, generational responsibility reflects a form of patriotic care rooted in the decision to stay, to improve, and to assume responsibility for the country's future rather than abandoning it.

By discursively situating protest within a future-oriented temporal framework, generational responsibility expands the motivation for dissent into a broader form of care for the country. Protest is thus not only framed as a response to present harm, but also as a commitment to safeguarding the country's longevity. It reveals a patriotic logic that suggest that the country is something needs to be cared for, because it is handed down, reflecting a sense of collective ownership, and it needs to be cared for now, because other generations will inherent it, reflecting civic responsibility.

[21] B44, B22

## Mechanisms Defined

In conclusion, these mechanism operate through following way. **Striving for the common good** grounds protest motivation in care for shared societal goods that sustain the collective well-being. It identifies what constitutes the common good (such as education and public safety) by contextualising its shared benefits and establishes that its enjoyment depends on collective responsibility for its protection and maintenance. Thereby it also legitimises the function of institutions and its embedded rules and principles that are designed to safeguard the common good. **Moral framing** builds on this logic by constructing that the deliberately jeopardising the common good, knowingly compromising the collective well-being, is morally reprehensible. Such acts are framed as a collective threat, thus necessitating collective action. Through this logic of threat, protest is justified and legitimised as a defensive response, positioning protesters as rightful defenders of the country while constructing the government as morally illegitimate actors, framing them as enemies. Generational responsibility further extends this justification across time by framing action as morally wrong toward future generations who will inherit the consequences of present systemic failure. **Generational responsibility** further expands protests justification across time, framing it is morally wrong to leave a damaged country and thereby endangering the well-being to those who had no say in its inheritance.

Taken together, what these mechanisms reveal is that when looked through the lens of patriotism, the protesting is being motivated and justified by striving for the well-being of society, today and for those in the future. Protesting is an act of defence to ensure that this is will not be jeopardised. It therefore constructs a clear patriotic logic of acting in defence of the patria.

# Discussion

The findings demonstrate how anti-governmental protest discourse can construct dissent as a patriotic act. The three identified mechanisms, striving for the common good, moral framing, and generational responsibility, operate together to that construct how protesting can operate through a patriotic logic of care, duty, and civic responsibility toward the country, in which its protesting becomes an act of defence against harm to country. Through its analysis, this study contributes to the literature on patriotism by offering an empirical case that illustrates how the concept can operate within the context public dissent, particularly that of anti-governmental protest. More specifically, it extends existing research on protests in hybrid regimes by moving beyond interpretations that frame mobilisation solely as opposition to government or as a response to specific grievances. It illustrates that motivations to protests lie deeper than these grievances, such as corruption in Serbia, or moral outrage.

It demonstrates how protest discourse can articulate dissent as motivated by attachment to the country itself. When situated alongside other cases of anti-governmental protest, it shows how certain discursive and symbolic articulations hold a deeper meaning that can reveal a patriotic logic. For instance, delegitimising narratives directed at the government do more than just undermine their authority. In the case of Belarus (Kazharski 2021), for example, their co-option of WW-II rhetoric can operate through the mechanism of moral framing. It delegitimises the government as a historic existential enemy, thus legitimising the protestors as the country's defenders. In this sense, rather than merely being a tool for delegitimization, such discursive tactics can reflect a deeper commitment to the country.

## *Patriotism as implicit and explicit*

While the identified mechanisms demonstrate how protest discourse can construct dissent as patriotic, this study also recognises that these were extracted largely based on its implicit presence rather than explicit. Meaning, it does not assume that protesters would necessarily describe their participation as patriotic if asked directly. Nevertheless, it is not the aim of this study to understand individual motivations. Rather, its aim is to recognise discursive patterns that align with a patriotic logic of care, ownership and civic responsibility, thereby understanding how protesting constructs itself as patriotic. Its implicit presence is analytically significant, as it suggests that patriotism may function as a background normative orientation within protest discourse, even when it is not explicitly named or uniformly recognised by participants. This makes this approach prone on relying too heavily on interpretive methods. It is therefore important to have solid framework, which this study addressed by grounded its analysis strongly into the framework of republican patriotism.

While operating implicitly, the framework establishes that certain elements of the protest discourse must be explicitly articulated in order to distinguish these protests from other forms of anti-government mobilisation. As the literature recognises, not every protest can be understood as a patriotic one (Keller

2005; Schatz 2020). For them to be framed as patriotic, a clear relationship to the country must be articulated, accompanied by a sense of ownership or responsibility towards it. In the Serbian case, the identified mechanisms operate by recognise clear discursive links to the well-being, functioning, and future of the country itself. Where protest claims are grounded solely in universalistic values or abstract human rights principles, without implications they have for their country, their patriotic character becomes less evident.

### *What did not function as a mechanism*

While the participation of the Bosniak minority and the inclusion of various social groups were initially considered potential indicators of patriotic mobilisation, the analysis found that these elements did not function as central discursive mechanisms within the protest discourse. Although such participation may indicate solidarity and shared civic concern, the banners analysed did not mobilise such solidarity as a basis for constructing protests as patriotic. The participation of these groups is best studied separately and might be more fitting within the framework of civic nationalism, as other studies have done (e.g. Carnaghan 2016; Chevée 2022).

### *Youth, generational orientation and future research*

While this study briefly touched upon the fact that the protest movement in Serbia are led by young people, predominantly students and Gen-Z, this factor should be more explicitly noted. The discourse and mechanisms reveal a strong civically conscious generation. They appear to show stronger ties to republican patriotism than with the ethno-nationalist tendencies through which Serbia is often analysed. Rather than mobilising ethnic identity, protest discourse emphasises that attachment to the country means care for the common good and responsibility to its future. Their participation explains why generational responsibility emerges strongly within the protests, thereby rendering it more context specific than the other two mechanisms. Still, this does not reduce its analytical use, as young people are recognised to be prominent drives behind protests (e.g. Nikolayenko 2007). The mechanism does well in contextualising their participation and possible motives. The prominence of youth participation thus represents a promising subject for further empirical research, particularly with regard to how attachment to the country can play role a role what motivates these youth movements.

### *Limitations*

This study is limited to the analysis of protest banners as discursive artefacts and does not claim to capture the full range of meanings represented within the protest movement. As such, the findings reflect dominant discursive patterns rather than individual motivations. Moreover, the case-study focus limits the generalisability of the findings. To assess analytical strength and generalisability of the mechanisms, future research would benefit from applying them to comparable case studies. Such work could also

complement through different forms of discursive analysis, such as interviews, thereby further exploring how patriotic framings operate across different protest.

# Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how protest discourse constructs protesting as patriotic, drawing on a republican understanding of patriotism centred on care, ownership, and civic responsibility. To do so, it analysed banners displayed across different protest events during the 2024-2025 Serbian protests. With it, it aimed to address a gap within both literature on patriotism as well as anti-governmental protests in hybrid regimes. The former, links the possibility between protesting and patriotism, yet it does not provide substantial empirical examples. Meanwhile the latter does not substantially analyse attachment to country as motivation to protests. Rather, it largely treats references to the country as a symbolic resource for contesting legitimacy. More broadly, the motivations in anti-governmental protests are primarily interpreted through context-specific grievances that often were the cause to the protests.

The analysis identified three interconnected discursive mechanisms that reflect the aforementioned patriotic logic: striving for the common good, moral framing and generational responsibility. Together, these mechanisms demonstrate that protesting is constructed as patriotic by articulating dissent as an expression of responsibility for the collective well-being of the country. By framing governmental malpractice as a threat to shared societal goods, protest discourse justifies mobilisation as a necessary act of defence, thereby constructing a clear patriotic logic of acting in defence of the patria. The mechanisms operate in corelation with patriotic literature in that discourse has to make explicit connections the country in order to be identified as patriotic. Yet, at the same time, the study also recognises that through its analysis, patriotism appears to operate implicitly. Meaning that protesters may not necessarily identify their actions as patriotic. Rather, patriotism functions as a background normative orientation that shapes how dissent is justified within discourse.

By approaching protest through the lens of patriotism, this study contributes on our understanding how anti-governmental protests operate and justify themselves as well how patriotism can relate to it. Furthermore, it highlights the role of attachment to the country in motivating protest as well as pursuing institutional and democratic adherence. While not the primary focus of this thesis, the Serbian case study suggests the emergence of a civically conscious generation in the country whose political engagement aligns more strongly with republican patriotism than with the ethno-nationalist tendencies through which Serbia is often analysed. As this study aimed for a deeper discursive analysis to better identify patterns that corelate to patriotism, its scope to further studies has remained limited. While Serbia offers a representative case amongst other studies on anti-governmental protest of hybrid regimes, the generalisability of the mechanisms discussed in this paper would benefit from testing across comparable cases. This thesis therefore calls for further research into the role of patriotism within anti-governmental protest movements.

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