



PRESS KIT

"Track to Brussels" — *Relay Ultramarathon for Justice and Awareness*

OVERVIEW

What: Relay Ultramarathon – *"Track to Brussels"*

When: April 25 – May 13, 2025

Where: 8 countries, 17 cities, 1950 km

Who: 21 students from Serbian universities (16 male and 5 female runners)

Why: To raise awareness across Europe about the situation in Serbia and honour the memory of 16 victims of a fallen roof canopy of the Novi Sad train station

Key Stop: Strasbourg – European Parliament session on May 7-9, 2025

Final Destination: Brussels, Belgium

MISSION STATEMENT

“Track to Brussels” is a powerful **student-led initiative**: a relay ultramarathon covering **1950 kilometres** over **18 days**, across **8 European countries**. **21 students** are running in honour of 16 victims of the collapse of the train station roof canopy in Novi Sad, carrying with them the hopes and voices of our peers — and a message to the European public and its institutions.

Following a previous symbolic bicycle ride to Strasbourg, this new effort is both a **tribute and a call to action**. The students aim to amplify awareness of ongoing issues in Serbia and advocate for **support, transparency, and justice on an international scale**.

ROUTE & SCHEDULE

- **April 25:** Departure from Novi Sad, Serbia
 - **April 26:** Osijek, Croatia
 - **April 27 – May 7:** Through Slovenia, Austria, Germany
 - **May 7–9:** *Strasbourg, France* – Visit to European Parliament
 - **May 10–12:** Luxembourg → Belgium
 - **May 12–15:** Arrival in Brussels – Meetings with European institutions
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KEY MILESTONES

- **1950 kilometres** over **18 days**
 - **17 cities**, including Osijek, Maribor, Graz, Munich, Strasbourg, and Brussels
 - **8 countries:** Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Germany, France, Luxembourg, Belgium
 - Visit to the **European Parliament in Strasbourg**
 - **Final advocacy** and **outreach** in **Brussels**
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THE MESSAGE

The **Serbian students’ ultramarathon** is not just a tribute — it is a **cry for justice, accountability, and European solidarity**. The students are determined to ensure the lives lost are not forgotten, and that **institutional support for democratic values and human**

rights is mobilized. Through every step, the students carry letters, stories, and messages that they **will personally deliver to European representatives**.

How Did It All Start?

The story begins with a tragic event: the **collapse of the newly renovated Novi Sad railway station roof canopy** on **1 November 2024**, which **claimed the lives of 16 people** and left several others injured. This disaster was widely seen not as an isolated accident but as the devastating consequence of **chronic corruption, mismanagement, and politically connected nepotism**. Investigations revealed substandard construction, rushed deadlines, and opaque deals with foreign firms, awarded without due process or oversight.

But the anger and grief sparked by this tragedy have deeper roots. Over the years, Serbia has witnessed the erosion of its democratic institutions: **growing authoritarianism, media censorship, politicised courts, restricted academic freedom, and violent suppression of dissent**. The collapse of the canopy became a symbol of the larger collapse of trust in government and governance.

Students across Serbia responded with a wave of protests that began as silent vigils but rapidly evolved into widespread acts of resistance—marches, university blockades and city-wide demonstrations, first in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, and then in nearly every city in Serbia. **The students' demands represent a vision for a renewed democracy: justice for the victims, accountability for corruption, and a commitment to democratic values—including free elections, an independent judiciary, and press freedom.**

Instead of addressing these concerns, the government dismissed the protesters as **'foreign agents,' 'hooligans,' and 'Nazis,'** while escalating media attacks and state intimidation. It repeatedly tried to manipulate public opinion by falsely claiming that the students' demands had been met. But the students persisted—and the movement grew. Dismayed by the state's response, students at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade initiated a blockade of their campus. Within days, solidarity spread across the country—**more than 80 faculties joined the blockades** of Serbia's largest universities, including the University of Belgrade, University of Novi Sad, University of Niš, and University of Kragujevac, amongst others. Regular academic life was put on pause, replaced by protest assemblies, teach-ins, and open calls for systemic change.

Despite growing public sympathy, the government escalated its violent response. Students faced **physical intimidation, smear campaigns in pro-government media, and constant**

arrests. But instead of backing down, the protests doubled down. What started on university campuses soon spilled into the streets.

The Collapse of the Government

The government under **Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned on 28 January**, following a **violent attack on students in Novi Sad by masked individuals wielding baseball bats**. The assailants were linked to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), and **one of the attackers was photographed alongside Vučević's son, Mihailo Vučević, suggesting close ties between the perpetrators and the Prime Minister's family**. This incident intensified public outrage amid ongoing anti-corruption protests sparked by the fatal collapse of a train station roof in Novi Sad in November 2024, which had already eroded trust in the government. Vučević acknowledged the attackers' connections to the SNS and accepted "objective responsibility" for the assault, **leading to his resignation along with that of Novi Sad's mayor, Milan Đurić**. The convergence of these events underscored systemic issues within the ruling party and contributed to the government's collapse. Mounting pressure from both domestic opposition groups and segments of the international community exposed deep fractures within the ruling coalition. Accusations of **authoritarian practices, rampant political cronyism, and the erosion of democratic institutions** shattered public trust, ultimately forcing the government's resignation.

Massive protests and marches

Between February and March 2025, Serbia witnessed a massive wave of student-led protests. On 1 February, around 20,000 protesters gathered in Novi Sad, with students from Belgrade marching 80 km over two days to join in a symbolic "Three Months – Three Bridges" action. Two weeks later, on 15 February, students marked Statehood Day by marching to Kragujevac, some walking 120 km from Belgrade, 130 km from Niš, and 60 km from Čačak, converging with around 10,000 participants for a 15-hour blockade in memory of the 15 victims. On 7 March, over 40,000 people rallied in Belgrade for a general strike, joined by teachers, farmers, and health workers. This was followed by coordinated marches from across the country: students and citizens walked 80 km from Novi Sad, 180 km from Subotica, 170 km from Kraljevo, and 200 km from Niš, arriving in Belgrade on 15 March.

15 March 2025 – The Largest Protest in Serbian History

Between 275,000 and 325,000 people gathered in Belgrade under the banner "*15th for 15*", commemorating the 15 victims of the Novi Sad tragedy (while the 16th victim, a 19-year-old student, died on the 21 March after fighting for his life for over four months). The event featured speeches, silent vigils, and cultural performances, highlighting the movement's depth and organisation.

During the 12th minute of the silent vigil, demonstrators reported being hit by a powerful, high-pitched sound that caused mass disorientation and panic. Though authorities initially denied the use of **sonic weapons**, images and live TV footage later revealed police vehicles equipped with **LRAD (Long-Range Acoustic Device) technology**.

The “New” Government

Serbia’s new government under **Prime Minister Đuro Macut**, appointed on **April 16, 2025**, signaled a **deepening of President Aleksandar Vučić’s authoritarian rule**. Despite Macut’s lack of political experience, the cabinet is stacked with **controversial, entrenched figures, including individuals linked to corruption, war crimes revisionism, and nationalist extremism**. Moreover, despite clear signs of democratic backsliding, **the European Commission welcomed the government’s formation**, prompting growing demands for clarification of its stance on Serbia’s political trajectory. Since the beginning of the protests, the Serbian government has intensified its **crackdown on academia and civil society** in its response. Recent actions include the **expulsion of foreign nationals**, such as **Davide Martello**, a German pianist of Italian origin known for performing at protests, and **Arien Stojanović Ivković, a Croatian citizen residing in Belgrade**. Instead of addressing the students’ legitimate demands, the government has escalated repression: **expelling journalists, beating and arresting protestors, withholding salaries from professors who support the students, and removing Dr. Vladimir Dugalić, a leading surgeon and head of the HPB surgery department** at the First Surgical Clinic of Serbia’s University Clinical Center, **from his position** after he publicly supported the protests and criticized the health minister. The escalation of **police brutality against students and citizens** culminated on **28 April in Novi Sad**, where protesters, including both students and citizens, demanded the **resignation of Patrik Drid, Dean of the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education**. During the intervention, **the police used pepper spray**, and unofficial reports indicated that **at least four individuals were injured — two female students and two mothers of students** who had come to show their support. These actions are **clear violations of fundamental human rights** and the core democratic values upon which the European Union is built. The students’ movement strongly aligns with these values, further amplifying the **urgent need for the EU to respond and act**. Consequently, the student protest movement chose to extend their engagement to the broader public and bring their concerns directly to the European Union. This decision was influenced by the perception that **EU media outlets provided insufficiently detailed coverage of the events**, and that the **European Commission’s leading officials**, adhering to their customary diplomatic language, **largely refrained from offering explicit support**.

Cycling to Strasbourg

In April, after previous protests in Serbia failed to elicit an institutional response, around 80 Serbian university students embarked on a remarkable **1,400-kilometre cycling journey from Novi Sad to Strasbourg**. Their mission was to raise awareness across Europe about the escalating corruption and the decline of democracy in their homeland.

Throughout their cycling odyssey, Serbian students were warmly welcomed by citizens, diaspora communities, and local officials. Their journey began with a warm reception from **Aleksandar Čučković, Dean of the Faculty of Economics in Subotica**. In Budapest, **Mayor Gergely Karácsony** personally welcomed the cyclists, while Vienna celebrated their arrival with a vibrant public reception, backed by major Austrian media. Among the officials welcoming the students, **Thomas Gegenhuber, Chairman of the Committee for Economy and Innovation of the City of Linz**, greeted them in Linz, while **Deputy Mayor Kay-Michael Dankl** received them in Salzburg.

In Munich, **city council member Andreas Vosseler** praised their courage, and in Ulm, **Deputy Mayor Martin Bendel** and **Sebastian Rihm, Director of the Donau Büro**, honored them with a red carpet ceremony, highlighting the deep ties between Serbia and Ulm.

Finally, upon arrival in Strasbourg, France, they were welcomed with magnificent warmth by the **Deputy Mayor of Strasbourg, Véronique Bertholle**, who expressed admiration for their courage and wished them success in their pursuit of the **Nobel Peace Prize**, for which they had been nominated earlier in February. The students' arrival also sparked overwhelming support from the Serbian diaspora and European students alike. In Strasbourg, the cyclists were warmly welcomed by **Members of the European Parliament, Irena Joveva** of Slovenia, **Fabienne Keller** of France and **Gordan Bosanac** of Croatia, who opened the doors of the European Parliament to their cause. **The Council of Europe** embraced the students with genuine attention, as **Deputy Secretary General Bjørn Berge** led a powerful and heartfelt meeting, listening deeply to their hopes, fears, and determination for a better future.

The Road to Brussels

Now, the group of **21 university students** have launched **the boldest initiative yet—a gruelling ultramarathon from Novi Sad to Brussels**. Retracing parts of our original cycling route, these determined students are running **1950 kilometres** backed by a network of volunteers, medical teams, and diaspora communities throughout Europe. Their destination is the heart of EU decision-making: **the European Parliament and the European Commission**. Their message is clear—a **sincere call for European solidarity, institutional accountability, and global recognition of Serbia's deepening authoritarian shift**.

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