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Fragmented Solidarity? Reflections on Queer Participation in the 2024/2025 Student Protests in Serbia

Abstract: This article examines the experiences of queer students during the 2024/2025 student protests in Serbia, with a focus on how solidarity and identity were negotiated within the broader mobilization. Drawing on eight narrative interviews with LGBTIQ+ students, the study uses concepts from the social movement and identity control theories (ICT) to analyze the interplay between political participation, recognition, and identity verification. Findings suggest that queer students experienced solidarity in fragmented ways. While the student identity emerged as a strong unifying factor, the expression of LGBTIQ+ identities was more complex. A shared student role often fostered a strong sense of belonging, but solidarity was not uniformly experienced. Although based on their sexual or gender identity within the student movement many described a strong sense of belonging, queer identities were sometimes sidelined – particularly when they were not explicitly acknowledged in protest actions, slogans, or symbols such as banners and flags. Solidarity, in this context, should not be understood as a fixed or purely political ideal – it is shaped by lived experiences and structural conditions in the Serbian society. This research is significant for exploring the position of marginalized groups within the Serbian protest movement and for informing future queer engagement in collective action.

Keywords: queer students; student protests; Serbia; solidarity; identity verification; social movements.

Introduction

This article explores the experiences and positionalities of queer individuals within the student protests that took place in Serbia during 2024 and into 2025. Drawing on a small qualitative sample of eight participants who self-identify as part of the queer community, the study adopts a reflexive, narrative-based approach, highlighting themes of solidarity and belonging within broader social movements.¹

¹ This research is part of a broader project initiated by the Institute for Sociological Research at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, titled *The Wave of Student Protests in Serbia: Blockades 2024/2025*. The subsample presented here, which focuses on queer students participating in the protests, was designed and conducted by Marija Radoman (Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade) and Aleksa Milanović (Faculty of Media and Communications, Belgrade).

The collapse of the railway station canopy in the Serbian city of Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, resulted in the deaths of 16 people. This event sparked a wave of student and citizen protests against corruption and institutional failure. To this day, the political crisis remains unresolved, and the protests have grown into the largest the country has seen in recent history. Students have been at the forefront of this mobilization, marked by their distinctive organizing strategies, acting independently from the opposition political parties and their communal living on occupied faculties.

This research explores how queer students relate to the current student movement in Serbia. It draws on concepts from social movement and identity theories. Examining the dimension of solidarity within these protests adds to the traditional social movement theory by centering the meanings of queer individuals in the political action.² Additionally, researching the identity dimensions of queer students contributes to the identity control theory (ICT), which connects the study of social structure and individual agency.³ This study is guided by its main research question: *What are the possibilities for solidarity and visibility of queer students within the broader social movements that unfolded in Serbia during the 2024–2025 protests?* Ultimately, the article argues for a more nuanced understanding of the queer participation in the collective action, politics of identity and the politics of visibility in post-socialist societies.

Identity theory and queer perspectives in mainstream social movements

The version of identity theory has evolved into a systematic research program over the past decades.⁴ From the perspective of the identity theory, an important shift has occurred in how different bases of identity are understood, including the incorporation of emotions as an integral part of the identity processes and the identity research.⁵ Queer identities have gained visibility alongside more established bases such as ethnicity, race, and gender, and today they are among the most contested, resisted and highly politicized,⁶ particularly in the face of attacks from far-right and anti-gender movements.⁷

² Mary Bernstein, "Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement," *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1997): 531–65; Verta Taylor and Nella Van Dyke, "Get Up, Stand Up: Tactical Repertoires of Social Movements," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Blackwell, 2004), 262–93; Shaeleyad Miller, Verta Taylor, and Leila J. Rupp, "Social Movements and the Construction of Queer Identity," in *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe (Oxford University Press, 2016), 44.

³ Peter J. Burke, "Identities and Social Structure: The 2003 Cooley-Mead Award Address," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2004): 5–15; Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "The Development of Identity Theory," *Advances in Group Processes* 31 (2014): 57–97.

⁴ Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe, eds., *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Miller, Taylor, and Rupp, "Social Movements and the Construction of Queer Identity," 444.

⁷ Mauro Cabral Grinspan, Ilana Eloit, David Paternotte, and Mieke Verloo, "Exploring TERFnesses: Editorial," *DiGeSt: Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 10, no. 2 (2023).

The theoretical framework for understanding one's identity encompasses not only structural conditions and social interactions during times of crisis and state repression, but also micro-level processes and the lived experience of the self,⁸ referring to the concepts of identity verification, solidarity, and the relationship between individual and group identities.

Some identity theorists raise important questions about how the self is constructed if we analyze certain established theories about identity, such as George Mead's interactionist perspective.⁹ Rather than focusing on what identity *should* be it may be more important for social science researchers to understand how identity is shaped within specific contexts, how society and culture shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and how these self-perceptions subsequently influence their behaviour. According to the Identity Control Theory (ICT), identity-related meanings, whether tied to roles, group memberships, or personal attributes, are formed and verified through interaction with others. These meanings are shaped by cultural processes, and at the same time are embedded within the broader social structure and reflect the cultural definitions that make identities intelligible. It is important to note that these meanings are not universally fixed; rather, "to a certain extent, however, meanings are very often local", as they depend on the specific social and cultural settings in which identities are enacted.¹⁰ In the case of LGBTIQ+ individuals in Serbia, such meanings are shaped within a particular legal and cultural context – one marked, for example, by insufficient legal protection for trans and gender-variant persons, and the absence of legislation recognizing same-sex partnerships.¹¹

The identity theory focuses on how individuals seek to verify their identities and align their self-perception with a shared identity standard.¹² This verification process plays a key role in how people understand and maintain their identities within social contexts and interactions. As a concept, identity verification is significant because it explains the dynamics between group belonging and the internal processes involved in understanding one's own identity and the emotions that accompany it. An important aspect of identity verification is the interactive process through which individuals behave in ways intended to align others' views of them with their own self-concept.¹³

⁸ Jan Stets and Peter J. Burke, "The Development of Identity Theory," *Advances in Group Processes* 31 (2014): 57–97; Stets and Serpe, eds., *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*.

⁹ Sheldon Stryker and Richard Stryker, "Does Mead's Framework Remain Sound?" in *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe (Oxford University Press, 2016), 31–57.

¹⁰ Burke, "Identities and Social Structure," 7.

¹¹ Marija Radoman, "Istopolne porodice u Srbiji u vreme epidemije KOVID-19," *Sociologija* 64, no. 3 (2022): 378–400.

¹² Shaeleyad Miller, Verta Taylor, and Leila J. Rupp, "Social Movements and the Construction of Queer Identity," in *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe (Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹³ Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

This interplay between the internal identity processes and the external recognition is particularly evident in the formation of collective identities within social movements. Participation in a social movement requires developing a collective identity that connects group members. This collective identity is important because it unites members around common interests, with some scholars highlighting solidarity's key role in its construction.¹⁴ Solidarity and collective identity within social movements are built through shared actions and meanings, as members define who belongs to the group by emphasizing both commonalities with insiders and distinctions from outsiders.¹⁵ This is evident in the case of the student movement, where collective markers such as protest slogans and chants highlight a clear opposition to the authoritarian system,¹⁶ reinforcing a shared sense of purpose and belonging. Moreover, the movement appears to be inclusive in the sense that, through protest banners and statements, it calls upon various social actors to engage in a broader struggle against the system.¹⁷

Collective identity theories explain how participation in the LGBTIQ+ movements can offer identity verification to queer individuals, helping to shape queer identity through involvement in collective actions. However, there is limited research on how queer identities are negotiated within broader, mainstream movements.¹⁸ This topic is important for several reasons: how to find a common ground for action, how solidarity is built and what it is based on, whether compromises are made and what is their nature, and how individuals perceive this relationship, especially if they feel their identity is not fully recognized within the mainstream movement. Based on the social movement literature, the collective identity is understood as an ongoing, ever-evolving process that functions dynamically within social movements – raising the question of who 'we' are.¹⁹ It should be noted that the insights from the existing literature cited in this article, which are largely based on Western contexts, cannot be fully applied to the post-socialist formation of queer movements and the dynamics between

¹⁴ William A. Gamson, "Commitment and Agency in Social Movements," *Sociological Forum* 6 (1991): 27–50. Miller, et al., "Social Movements and the Construction of Queer Identity."

¹⁶ Nemanja Zvijer, Aleksandra Marković, and Marija Radoman, "Svi u blokade! An Analysis of Slogans during the Student Occupations in Serbia 2024/2025 [Svi u blokade! Analiza parola tokom studentskih blokada u Srbiji 2024/2025]," *Sociologija*, 2025, manuscript submitted for publication.

¹⁷ The student protests received support from a wide range of social and professional groups across Serbia. Healthcare workers, university professors, schoolteachers, and high school students actively participated, often alongside parents of students. Cultural workers, journalists, and IT professionals also voiced their support. Legal professionals – including judges and lawyers – stood in solidarity, along with small business owners, farmers, and segments of the mining and public sectors. This broad backing reflected widespread dissatisfaction across society.

¹⁸ See more about how individuals negotiate the relationship between their self-understanding and participation in social movements: Sheldon Stryker, "Identity Competition: Key to Differential Social Movement Participation," in *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, ed. Sheldon Stryker, Timothy J. Owens, and Robert W. White (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 21–40.

¹⁹ Joshua Gamson, "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma," *Social Problems* 42, no. 3 (1995): 390–407.

broader mainstream civic and student movements and LGBTIQ+ participation in the Serbian context. This particular movement is historically significant, as it provides a unique opportunity to examine how queer individuals navigate and integrate their place within these collective spaces.

It should also be noted that movements based on queer identities often challenge and destabilize identity politics²⁰ and even the very movements grounded in them. This is difficult to fully assess outside the empirical reality, especially when external perceptions frame LGBTIQ+ individuals as seeking special rights based solely on identity.²¹ At the same time, from within the community, some LGBTIQ+ individuals argue for a critical approach to gender and sexuality – emphasizing that these should be questioned but not erased. Much of the critique of collective identity and minority identity comes from within the LGBTIQ+ community itself, often from an anti-essentialist position, despite the fact that such identities are typically constructed in a public discourse around fixed collective categories.²² These perspectives are not easily separated, and they both shape how identity is negotiated within social movements.

Solidarity, in this context, should not be understood as a fixed or purely political ideal – it is shaped by the material and structural conditions of the society in question. Economic, political, and social shifts influence how solidarity is practiced and perceived. In particular, the transformation of the European welfare state and neoliberal reforms, from collective responsibility toward individualization, have challenged solidarity as a principle of social cohesion and policy. On an individual level, precarious working conditions, widening class inequalities, and the erosion of the middle class have created fertile ground for the rise of authoritarian tendencies and populism.²³ According to international assessments, Serbia ranks near the bottom among countries labeled as “flawed democracies”, moving closer to the category of hybrid regimes.²⁴ Especially after March 15 and in light of the police repression since July 2025, many observers now describe the situation in Serbia as an increasingly authoritarian government.²⁵

Such global political changes also open space for the targeting and instrumentalization of marginalized groups. In unstable social conditions, LGBTIQ+ movements are sometimes accused of weakening broader social struggles by focusing on individual identities and fragmenting collective goals. These accusations often

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Marija Radoman and Irena Petrović, “Unveiling Homophobia: A Study of Attitudes in Serbian Society,” *Sociologija* 66, no. 3 (2024): 407–28.

²² Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?”

²³ John Fossum, “In What Sense Does Right-Wing Populism Pose a Democratic Challenge for the European Union?” *Social & Legal Studies* 32, no. 6 (2023): 930–52.

²⁴ EUI, accessed May 12, 2025, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/>.

²⁵ The Lancet Regional Health – Europe, “Serbia Is in Crisis,” *Lancet Reg Health Eur* 55 (August 2025); <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/16/violent-clashes-escalate-anti-government-protests-serbia-belgrade>.

produce anti-gender rhetoric, where gender politics are framed as the concern of privileged groups and detached from material or structural demands. However, data on homophobia²⁶ in Serbia indicate that the position of LGBTIQ+ individuals remains precarious, highlighting that the integration of politics for marginalized groups will likely need to find a more explicit place within broader social movements. Additionally, the dynamics between broader social movements and LGBTIQ+ individuals in Serbia unfold within a context marked by institutionalized homo- and transphobia, as well as wider social non-acceptance, which shapes the possibilities and limits of integration. This raises the question of how willing the broader movement is to include queer participants and whether the student movement itself is inherently more progressive than society at large, based on data on public attitudes.

Research approach and methods

This study combines semi-structured interviews with contextual analysis. This approach is particularly important, as marginalized subject positions are often denied visibility within dominant theoretical frameworks and heteronormative currents in the social sciences. Emphasizing a queer perspective that shapes not only the interpretation, but the very research process represents a form of engaged scholarship – *a politics of change*.²⁷ It seeks to foreground voices that are always shaped by relations of power and often remain invisible, even within scientific frameworks that claim objectivity.²⁸

The research is based on qualitative interviews with 8 participants who identify as queer students (although they do not necessarily use the *queer* label for themselves, but instead various identity categories). The sample was purposively selected and expanded using a snowball sampling, facilitated primarily through contacts from a Belgrade-based organization working with the TIRV (trans, intersex, and non-binary) community. Interviews were conducted during April and May 2025. All data have been anonymized in accordance with ethical research standards: participants were later assigned different names and identifying details have been altered. Most participants identify as trans and use a variety of gender pronouns (he/him, she/they, all pronouns, she/her, etc.). While the sample size in this study is relatively small, it was sufficient to capture key patterns and experiences within the student movement. Additional interviews could potentially reveal perspectives from other segments of the community, such as students from rural areas which might nuance the findings further. Nevertheless, the current sample provides meaningful insights into the main dynamics of solidarity, activism, and the challenges faced by marginalized groups within the movement.

²⁶ Radoman and Petrović, “Unveiling Homophobia.”

²⁷ Jones and Adams, “Autoethnography is a Queer Method.”

²⁸ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage, 2005).

The interview guide was organized into thematic blocks aligned with the study's focus. Particular attention was given to emotional and embodied experiences during student protests and blockades, participants' reflections on identity and belonging, and their views on organizational practices within the student movement – especially in relation to the LGBTIQ+ identities. These dimensions were selected to better understand how personal experiences and broader political dynamics intersect in shaping participants' relationships to collective action and self-identification.

The interviews were conducted by two researchers – one identifying as a trans masculine person, the other as a queer woman. Their identities were disclosed to participants in different ways. For some, the identities were already known due to the communication channels used to arrange the interviews. For others, the researchers explicitly stated that they identify as members of the LGBTIQ+ community. This decision to be transparent was a deliberate methodological choice, not something left implicit or spontaneously revealed. This approach aimed to create a space of greater trust and openness, based on the expectation that such conditions would allow for deeper and more nuanced insights.

This research is driven by both academic and personal concerns, as I identify as both feminist and queer. My perspective as a researcher was further shaped by my active engagement in the protests and reflections on my positionality as a queer academic within the university context, where I was partly an outsider due to my faculty role, yet often shared common ground with students, particularly queer participants. This position enabled me to closely follow the dynamics and experiences of the queer community within these protests.

This positionality informs a reflexive methodological stance that foregrounds affective and embodied knowledge, emphasizing the significance of *intersubjectivity*²⁹ within queer and feminist research frameworks (*queer methodologies*³⁰). From a research perspective, it was challenging to set aside my own perceptions and previous experiences in various leftist and activist initiatives, which often made me skeptical of the idea of a uniform experience of solidarity. From my subjective perspective, it always seemed that significant compromises were made by individuals within mainstream movements in order to support a particular political goal or idea. However, this may not fully reflect the experiences of newer generations – some LGBTIQ+ students perceived the student movement as inclusive enough to allow space for diverse sexual and gender identities, at least in certain contexts.

²⁹ Plummer, "Critical Humanism and Queer Theory."

³⁰ Jones and Adams, "Autoethnography is a Queer Method."

On solidarity and belonging: queering the student movement

Background to the movement

On November 1st, when a concrete canopy at the railway station collapsed, killing sixteen people and seriously injuring one, it was not easy to anticipate that this would spark some of the largest protests in Serbia's recent history. In the days that followed the event, people organized symbolic actions, standing in silence for 15 minutes to express their collective grief. But things quickly changed. Students were the first to react more openly, and soon the protests began to spread. What started as a response to a tragedy became a much broader social and political movement, revealing the corrupt deals behind the collapse of the structure. Soon, the protests expanded beyond the university spaces and spread to all segments of society. The protests quickly exposed much deeper problems: the widespread corruption, breakdown of institutions, and the erosion of democratic values. So far this year (2025), protests have taken place at least once in more than 516 cities and municipalities across Serbia.³¹ The escalation of violence since mid-2025, along with continuous attacks on the university and the undermining of its autonomy through the introduction of police into campuses and faculties, indicates that the social and political crisis shows no signs of abating. These developments, and the repeated resort to force, suggest that the government has effectively lost both legitimacy and public trust. Students demanded the release of all documents related to the construction, as well as the resignation of those politically responsible. They also called for answers regarding the violent attacks on students by unidentified individuals, who were later revealed to have ties to the regime. In addition, they demanded the calling of the early parliamentary elections. To this day, no one in power has taken responsibility for the collapse.

In the early weeks of the protests, there was a strong sense of energy and hope, especially among young people. From the very beginning of the protests, and throughout their development, these events gave rise to broader expressions of solidarity among different social actors. While it remains open to debate how long a system can rely on pressure and various forms of violence without undermining solidarity, it is clear that, from the early stages of the student movement, solidarity has stood out as one of the most defining features of these protests.³²

Fragmented solidarity?

In this context, our research team found it particularly important to explore the notion of solidarity from a different angle – that of queer students. This focus was especially relevant given that solidarity might be experienced differently across

³¹ "Mesta u kojima su održane akcije posle rušenja nadstrešnice," *Arhiv javnih skupova*, February 2, 2025, <https://javniskupovi.org/index.php/2025/02/01/gradovi-u-kojima-je-odrzana-akcija-zastani-srbijo/>.

³² Iva Gajić, "Probudila se solidarnost kod ljudi": Odjek studentskih protesta i van granica Srbije," *Radio slobodna Evropa*, February 3, 2025, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/odjek-studentskih-protesta-srbija/33301854.html>.

generational lines. In our case, the researchers were, on average, around twenty years older than the interview participants. Different generational backgrounds raised important questions for us even before fieldwork began, and the ways in which solidarity would be articulated and understood proved to be a puzzle throughout the research process.

What emerged from the interviews with one group of participants was a sense of general and pragmatic solidarity, one shaped by the urgency of collective goals. For Luka (first-year student, University of Belgrade), identity-based divisions were seen as a potential threat to the unity of the movement: “We can’t afford to split into leftists, right-wingers, liberals, anarchists – we all need to stay together, otherwise the whole movement will collapse.” This emphasis on cohesion sometimes placed pressure on queer students to downplay individual or group-specific concerns in favor of a broader, more unified front. Even symbolic choices, such as which flags were visible at protests, were interpreted through the lens of preserving unity: “I’m okay with the Serbian flag – we’re Serbian students, we study here. But when those far-right flags appear... it leads to fragmentation, and that will ruin everything.”

While student protests were primarily directed against government corruption and broader social injustices, they also provided a space where queer participants could navigate questions of visibility and safety. The presence of far-right symbols or actors heightened the precarity for queer individuals, making their participation contingent not only on shared political goals but also on careful negotiation of personal and collective risks. In this sense, solidarity within the movement was shaped both by pragmatic concerns for cohesion and by the ways in which queer identities could be acknowledged or constrained within a wider, often heteronormative, activist space.

Lori’s (final-year student, University of Belgrade) perspective on community and solidarity reflects a nuanced understanding shaped by her own position as a queer student. She stresses that, despite differences in identity, a person remains the same and should not be rejected because of who they are. Lori does not plan to undergo any medical transition but believes that if more openly out individuals took initiative and publicly affirmed their presence, it would have a stronger impact in social movement, especially student: “If we all stood up and said ‘I am here’, then that would make a difference.”

Regarding the relationship between the student movement and the LGBTIQ+ individuals, she believes everyone is united by a common goal regardless of political stance but recognizes that experiences vary across faculties regarding queer persons – for example, between the Faculty of Philology and her own natural sciences faculty. Lori is somewhat pessimistic about whether the movement will maintain its focus on differences after the blockades end, since everyone is currently united around the same cause. She highlights the importance of ongoing communication within the movement to foster understanding, saying: “I am the same person as I was during the blockades, and you communicated with me normally and respected me without knowing, so why should that change now that you do know?”

Mika (fourth-year student, University of Arts, Belgrade) emphasizes a strong sense of community and belonging within the protests, highlighting the importance of collective action. She says, “There is that feeling of togetherness, that you are part of something bigger, not just an individual. You see it at the plenums because at the plenum you are not just an individual, we are together in this struggle. So, that idea of community is key for me, and I would also connect it with the queer community.” She reflects on how, during Pride when the info center was active, small groups of people came together, and similarly, at the protests she found many trans people, communicating and meeting queer individuals. “That feeling that we have built something – that is the most important part of the protests. Those small things, how people come together.” Mika also shares a personal experience: “I am out as trans, and one of my friends came up to me and said, ‘You seem cool, do you want to hang out?’ Even though I have met many people, I always end up hanging out with queer people (laughs).”

While Mika acknowledges some challenges, such as instances where someone’s gender identity is not respected – like when a colleague’s gender was discussed behind her back – she notes that “generally, everyone tries to be respectful, even though there is a lot of right-wing opposition. The bigger problem is that people are not vocal enough to oppose it.” Openly trans and having changed her name, Mika is committed to being visible and vocal: “I don’t want to hide. I am here, I am loud, and I want to help other trans people come out.” She stresses the importance of the faculty being a safe space for trans people – something she did not have when she first started studying.

Danilo (third-year student, University of Belgrade) reflected on his experiences within the student movement: “There’s a lot of homophobia, misogyny and sexism – some truly awful things – but I did hear that some people reacted against it, which is a good sign [...] Speaking specifically about my faculty, the plenums³³ and the whole visual identity of the blockade felt very patriarchal, very macho and masculine. I kept saying that from the beginning. I had a few people I could talk to about this – saying that we need to feminize all of this somehow and I mean in a substantial way. Especially now, with this distancing from representative democracy, there’s a real opportunity to create non-patriarchal politics. But that’s not what’s happening.”

Danilo’s frustrations highlight the presence of voices within the student movement that seriously question the acceptance of queer students. His experience reveals layers of the movement where heteronormative and patriarchal structures, as well as non-progressive tendencies, persist. These voices underscore the tension between participating in collective action and protecting one’s personal identity, while also pointing to the challenges of creating an inclusive and progressive space within the movement.

These responses highlight the complex balancing act queer students navigate – between asserting their identities and maintaining solidarity within a movement that is presented as “apolitical,” yet shaped by deeply political tensions and symbolic

³³ In the context of the Serbian student movement, the term plenum refers to an open assembly where decisions are made collectively and horizontally.

struggles. When looking at the broader context of the protests, LGBTIQ+ themes were largely absent from the public discourse surrounding the movement. Pride symbols and rainbow flags were not present, except during the March 8 demonstration, which was led by activist groups. Protest banners, one of the most visible markers of the movement, did not include messages or slogans referencing sexual orientation or gender identities outside the cisnormative frame.³⁴ Although many participants described a strong sense of belonging within the student movement, queer identities were at times sidelined – particularly when they were not explicitly acknowledged in protest actions, messages, or symbols.

Powerful space for identity verification

The concept of identity verification helps explain the dynamics between internal self-perception and the need for recognition within a broader collective. In the context of these student protests, participants' narratives reflect how personal identity is not only affirmed but reshaped through interaction and shared experience.

As Luka reflected, the most emotionally intense moments came during protest speeches: "There are people who truly believe in us students, who want change, who speak on behalf of all of us... I started crying because you could feel that sense of unity." These moments of collective recognition served as powerful forms of identity verification – affirming a place within the movement regardless of gender identity or societal norms. In the context of a broad and cohesive mobilization, it is expected to observe the consolidation of a dominant student identity, as it offers the most widely accessible and least contested basis for unity across diverse individual positions.

Additionally, this emotional connection was particularly meaningful for those who might otherwise feel excluded. Luka noted: "Even though I'm a trans person – someone who, in the Serbian mindset, isn't supposed to belong here – I still feel like I belong to these people, to my peers, to my faculty, as a student." Such statements show how strong the shared identity of "student" became, capable of overriding narratives of exclusion and creating a verified sense of belonging.

Belonging was also tied to interpersonal closeness, including familial metaphors: "Tomorrow, someone from my family could be under that awning – I don't want that to happen." Luka described transformation in how he related to their surroundings: "I thought I'd stay withdrawn, not talk to anyone. But during my first night shift at the blockade, I met seven new people. Now I'm part of the working group for the blockade, meeting new people every day, forming new friendships, building new relationships. That group is something I can consider – if not quite family – then people I can count on." Participation in the movement thus became a context in which personal confidence and social identity could be affirmed: "My self-confidence has grown. I want to socialize more. I even feel uncomfortable being at home – I have to go to my faculty. It's become my second home; I only come home to sleep and shower."

³⁴ Marković, Zvijer, and Radoman, "Photographic Archive of Student Protest Banners."

These accounts highlight how the student protests provided not only political motivation but also, for some participants, a powerful space for general identity verification – where individuals' sense of self was affirmed through shared struggle, peer recognition, and emotional connection. The interview leaves somewhat unclear as to what extent the trans identity itself gained increased significance in this context.

Similar experiences were described by another student. Sasha (second-year student, Academy of Arts in Novi Sad) explained how his sense of belonging and self-acceptance grew significantly during the protest, particularly through continuous interaction with other students. Initially, he saw his peers as “some foreign body” and didn't feel the faculty was a safe space. However, the experience of being “forced to communicate with people” helped him feel part of a collective: “I finally started to see my peers as peers.” He recalls moments when his anxiety was challenged by necessity: “I had to get over my anxiety because it was so important to say what I had to say.”

Through bodily experience and shared routines, such as sleeping in occupied spaces, Sasha was pushed to confront and renegotiate his personal boundaries. “At first, I couldn't imagine sleeping in the same room with people. Now, it's so normal I can't believe it was ever a problem.” These embodied interactions were not only about proximity, but about building a new kind of physical and emotional safety with others. This process deepened his trust: “I've realized how much I can rely on people for different things.”

From his perspective, the atmosphere of mutual care also affected how queer students were treated: “I know three trans people who are involved, and their pronouns are respected – people treat them normally.” Even practical aspects reflected this shift: “I like that the bathrooms are now unisex – we live together, there's no need for separation.”

Lori describes how her sense of self shifts through interactions with others who affirm her identity, which directly influences her feeling of belonging from a non-cis-gender position. “I feel more like myself in that sense – when I found a network of people during the blockades. It's enough for me to have even one person there during the day who accepts me, and I feel relaxed, and I don't care what anyone else thinks.” She also recounts a moment of unexpected recognition: “One colleague told me that, based on how I wrote in the anonymous Telegram group, she assumed I was a guy” (laughs). Lori interprets this as a form of affirmation – an instance where the masculine aspect of her non-binary gender identity was acknowledged, even in a seemingly trivial interaction.

Recognition and affirmation of identity within the student movement is particularly important given the broader social and political context in Serbia. The position from which queer individuals participate in broader social movements in Serbia is often already marked by institutionalized homophobia and transphobia. Many participants are not fully out, which shapes how they navigate their engagement and the degree to which they can express their identity. Unlike organized queer groups in some Western contexts, where participation may be visible and politically marked, queer

individuals in Serbia often join from a precarious position, balancing personal safety, social and family pressures, and activist commitments. This pre-existing vulnerability significantly influences both their visibility and the ways in which their participation is recognized within wider movements.

Conclusion

The 2024/2025 student protests in Serbia were marked by a strong emphasis on solidarity as a core value. However, this research reveals that solidarity within the movement was not experienced uniformly, particularly by queer students. While the student identity often served as a unifying factor, expressions of gender and sexual diversity were sometimes sidelined. Protest banners and slogans, for instance, rarely included queer symbols or references, despite the visible participation of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Additionally, some of the students we interviewed were not openly out about their queer identities within the movement.

Findings suggest that solidarity was fragmented and shaped by multiple factors, including the institutional context, prior (activist) experience, and being out among peers. It seems that queer students experienced solidarity in different ways – the sense of togetherness was strong when built around the student identity or role, but more complex and often problematic when approached from the position of being an LGBTIQ+ person. This suggests that solidarity did not carry a uniform meaning but was instead fragmented – experiences varied depending on personal identities and previous experiences. The impression of research is that some students managed to reconcile these two experiences by balancing between them, usually prioritizing the student identity as more dominant and widely accepted. This balancing was easier to maintain for students who had positive experiences during the blockade. The general impression is that even when students face discrimination, they cope better if they have support and are open about their identities.

Future research could explore generational differences in the understanding and practice of solidarity within student and broader social movements. Expanding the study to include participants from other cities, as well as a wider spectrum of the LGBTIQ+ community, could provide a more comprehensive picture of inclusivity and marginalization. Newer investigations, particularly around the announcement of the Pride Parade in Belgrade in September 2025, might reveal emerging dynamics, tensions, or solidarities that were not captured in the current study. Comparative studies with other post-socialist societies would also be valuable in contextualizing these patterns and understanding how different cultural factors shape activist practices. Additionally, longitudinal approaches could shed light on how solidarity and activism evolve over time within these movements.

This research highlights that queer students are highly present and engaged within student struggles, standing behind the collective goals and actions of the movement. For a future Serbian protest movement to foster safe and inclusive spaces

where LGBTIQ+ individuals can participate without compromising their identities or experiences, it is essential to build broad-based coalitions that recognize and actively include gender and sexual minorities – without reproducing antagonism or marginalization. As Lori, a final-year student at the University of Belgrade, states: “*We need to awaken awareness that we are everywhere and that we simply exist. Everyone should have a chance to fulfill their potential.*”

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