
THREE FREEDOMS PLATFORM

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION
FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION



Three freedoms under the magnifying glass

Review of violations of freedom of association, assembly and expression in Serbia
16-31 August 2019

Association. Assembly. Expression.

These three freedoms must be guaranteed to all. These three freedoms form the basis of civil society. No country can call itself democratic without guaranteeing these rights.

These freedoms are guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Serbia. Practice, however, shows the opposite. We are witnessing more and more frequent attacks on associations, activists and the free media. The space in which they operate is increasingly narrowed as the number of attacks, threats, intimidation and insults increases.

We believe that regularly collecting and publishing cases of violation of these rights can help to raise the visibility of this trend that is growing rapidly and draw attention to the seriousness of the problems we face.

Here is an overview of key violations of freedom of assembly, association and expression in 16-31 August 2019.

Follow two-week newsletter with overviews which are showing instances of violations of the freedoms of association, assembly and expression.

Representatives of 20 civil society organisations signed in Belgrade the [Three Freedoms Platform](#) for the Protection of Civic Space in the Republic of Serbia, in order to protect and promote the freedom of association, assembly and information. The Platform is intended to act as a joint block of civil society organizations (associations, professional organizations, foundations, endowments, and other forms of associations including informal groups of citizens) to stand for the protection of endangered freedoms and create conditions for unhindered participation of citizens in public affairs through civil society development.

In March this year Serbia was placed on the CIVICUS Monitor Watch List as a country where these freedoms are seriously threatened.

* Civic Initiatives as a partner of CIVICUS Monitor for Serbia send bi-weekly reports in English since August 2018. Learn more about the CIVICUS Monitor [here](#).

Freedom of Expression

The Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS) published a [hidden report](#) by the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (REM) on the representation of political actors during the election campaign from March 4 to April 21, 2016. Although it was announced on the official website of REM on April 6, 2016, that the report would be published after the end of the election process, so as not to affect the course of the election campaign, the same body stated on December 2, in response to a request from the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia (NUNS), that they did not possess the required report. The report, which remained secret until it came into possession and later published on the CINS website, points to a pronounced uneven representation of electoral actors with a drastic advantage in favor of the ruling party, to a deterioration compared to that established in the 2014 Report, as well as the indicative facts that privatization of the media, especially local ones, has led to an even greater imbalance in the media market. This is just one in a series of problems related to the operation of REM that shows the complete collapse of REM as an independent institution and under the control of the ruling party. When it comes to national television coverage (TV Prva, RTS1, RTV, Pink, B92, TV Happy), the list of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, led by Aleksandar Vucic, got 32% of the time, while the opposition Democratic Party ranked second with 14%. The most drastic difference was the representation on two national television stations, TV Happy and TV Pink. In the well-known talk show that aired on prime time on TV Happy "Cyrilic", during this campaign, Aleksandar Vucic was given a total of 5 and a half hours out of the 11 that aired during that period. When it comes to Pink Television, the ruling party has received half-time representation. For example, more than 300 minutes were devoted to the SNS, as much as 15 times more than that devoted to the Democratic Party. An unpublished report from 2016 indicates an increase in uneven representation compared to 2014, especially with regard to central news programs. In this respect, TV Prva is the first to devote 50% more time to the SNS than in the 2014 election campaign. Particularly interesting, but above all worrying, is the fact that the greatest disproportion was observed in the work of those media outlets that were privatized in 2015, such as Radio Television Kragujevac, TV Studio B, Palma Plus and TV Most

The news Portal „Juzne vesti” published an [interview with a former member of the Serbian Progressive Party's "bot team"](#) who described the way that "bot team" members function, control, reward and punish. The aim of the "botting" operation is to leave a large number of commentaries on the same news content, all with the aim of glorifying the policies of the ruling party or President Vucic, or discrediting opposition representatives and civic organizations and activists. After the interview was published on the „Juzne vesti” portal, [a reaction by the „bot team” followed](#), which, in addition to numerous comments, was followed by an enormous amount of reactions to them (over 22500 reactions that approve or disapprove of the comment). It is interesting that all the reactions came from the same IP address, which is part of a network called "SNS", and was registered at the address of Palmira Toljatija 5, Belgrade - the address of the seat of the Serbian Progressive Party. Former After the interview was published on the Southern News portal, a reaction by the bot team followed, which, in addition to numerous comments, was followed by an enormous amount of reactions to them (over 22500 reactions that approve or disapprove of the comment). It is interesting that all the reactions came from the same IP address, which is part of a network called "SNS", and was registered at the address of Palmira Toljatija 5, Belgrade - the address of the seat of the Serbian Progressive Party. Former Commissioner for Free Access to Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, Rodoljub Sabic, on the occasion of this case, emphasized that disclosure of this information is in the public interest.

[The daily Danas did not receive accreditation for monitoring the match](#) of the last stage of the Champions League qualification between Red Star and the Swiss team "Yang Boys" due to the alleged "high media interest". The rationale sounds unusual given that it is a newspaper that has been in existence for more than 20 years and regularly reports from all major sporting and other social events. It is indicative that the denial of accreditation followed shortly after the same newspaper wrote about the write-off of a 10m-euro deposit insurance agency. The fact that after the previous match of the Red Star in European competitions, the head of the PR team of the club warned the journalist of the newspaper Danas that they "almost did not grant accreditation" for writing about winning the title in 1946. [The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia will inform international associations](#) of journalists about this illegal and unreasonable attitude towards Danas. This case is an unequivocal violation of the Law on Public Information, where it is clearly stated that any discrimination against journalists and the media is prohibited.

The owner of the Novi Sad Channel 9, Maja Pavlovic, went on hunger strike for the third time because of the silence of the competent institutions regarding the obstacles her television faces due to the pressures suffered by institutions that selectively interpret and apply regulations governing the work of local media. This is her third hunger strike. The last one lasted 23 days in the spring and ended with a meeting with Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, at which she was promised that the relevant institutions would work on her case. During the strike, [she received a promise from the Presidential Advisor](#) that she would be admitted to the meeting with Aleksandar Vucic, which happened on August 30, after which Maja Pavlovic [adjourned the strike](#) because she "received firm guarantees that Vucic would contact the competent authorities in the next 10 days. institutions to see how that television can be solved ""The key demands of Maja Pavlovic are to reduce the excessive tariffs that local broadcasters have to pay to the Organization of Phonogram Producers of Serbia (OFPS), the Organization of Music Authors of Serbia (SOKOJ), the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (REM), as well as to the Public Broadcasting Company and connections (ETV)." This case shows that the Government is only declaratively talking about dialogue but is not taking any further steps. The involvement of the President of the Republic in solving problems of the local media is an overstatement of his powers and a violation of the Constitution.

N1 reporters tried to get a comment from Red Star fans about placing a tank in front of the northern trumpet of Rajko Mitic Stadium before a rematch of the last Champions League qualifying round but [were disabled due to a physical attack](#) by supporters of the club. It is a controversial case of placing a tank in front of the northern stand of the stadium, which was told on numerous news and fan portals that it was a seized tank from the Vukovar battlefield during the civil war of the 1990s. Top officials have also dealt with the case, denying it was a fighting vehicle, but rather a model, and even President Vucic called in and said he would "personally allocate money for that tank". After starting a conversation with one interviewee, a group of hulgans began a derogatory tussle by labeling reporters as "spies", "thieves" and "foreign mercenaries". Some of them continued to follow the reporting team and tried to break their recording equipment. At that moment there were no uniformed police officers nearby. The rhetoric against the media, especially against N1 television, comes from top Serbian officials, including President Vucic. It is a signal to everyone that they are allowed to attack journalists and not be punished for it. Particularly problematic this time is that [this attack](#) comes from sport hulgans who are believed to be under state control.

The Vojvodina Research and Analysis Center (VOICE) , through court, has come to the information that [the owner of the portal Istraga.rs is a certain Luka Rakocevic](#), co-owner of Best Vision Productions, together with Lav Pajkic, the presenter of Kontravizija on Pink TV, known for offensive content and fake polls ridiculing opponents of the government. The portal "Istraga.rs" is known for a series of compromising articles aimed at discrediting individuals and organizations that are not close to the ruling party. The latest in a series of articles refer to the alleged funding of the weekly [NIN](#) and [Vreme](#) accusing them of receiving money from abroad in the past.

Freedom of Association

The Draft Law on Accounting provides for [the abolition of a separate chart of accounts for non-profit organizations](#), which is not in line with the standards of a supportive environment for civil society development. In this way, the treatment of non-profit equals the position of for-profit legal entities without taking into account objective differences regarding the purpose of incorporation. These differences are also reflected in the various regulations governing their establishment, financing, income and expenditure structure, operations, status changes, etc. We would like to remind you that a special chart of accounts for non-profit organizations, which includes associations, has been in force since 2014 as a result of a strong multi-year civil society campaign aimed at recognizing the specificity and special nature of non-profit organizations. If it were abolished, there would be a further deterioration of the institutional framework in a part that should be aligned with [the EU Guidelines for Civil Society Support](#) in the enlargement region.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that the civil society organizations CRTA (Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability) and CESID (Center for Free Elections and Democracy) [were "so-called" and stressed that they were "false" organizations](#). On that occasion, he emphasized that he accepted all five requests they made, although by the Constitution he does not have the authority to decide on these issues (adoption of emergency procedure, public hearings, meaningless amendments in the Assembly, adoption of reports of independent institutions in the Assembly, special debate on the budget.) He also stressed that this was a malicious intention of the political bloc and the civil sector, thereby identifying civil society organizations with opposition organizations in order to discredit their expertise and disrupt the public image. This is merely a continuation of the practice of damaging CSOs' reputation by top state officials and publicly labeling those actors who do not explicitly support current government.

