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# THREE FREEDOMS PLATFORM

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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  
16-30 November 2019

### Freedom of Association

The president of the Serbian Radical Party and the convicted war criminal, [Vojislav Seselj](#), criticized the appropriations intended to co-finance projects and assist civil society organizations within the draft on Law on Budget. His son, also SRS PM [Alexander Seselj](#), went a step further and emphasized that organizations such as Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, the Humanitarian Law Center, the Human Rights House, Open Society Fund and Civic Initiatives, are "anti-Serbian" and promoters of "Kosovo independence", in particular by organizing the Mirdita festival. The long-created narrative that civil society organizations are "foreign mercenaries and traitors working against Serbia's interests" is further stimulated by giving space to individuals and organizations that, through the media or through the institutions of the Republic of Serbia, influence the creation of citizens' awareness by making false and illicit claims at the expense of organizations and individuals from the civil society sector.

The Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government presented the [Draft Law on Referendum and People's Initiative](#), which should replace the 1994 law of the same name. In addition to positive developments in certain areas, the Draft Law contains certain provisions whose implementation could lead to the deliberation and restriction of citizens' freedoms, first of all by introducing the obligation to pay the fees for verifying the collected signatures, leaving out the precise definition of the right of participation of representatives of the initiative committee in all stages of decision-making by national initiatives as well as ineffective and vaguely defined judicial protection.

### Freedom of Expression

Smear media campaign against [TV N1 program director Jugoslav Cosic](#), continued, and they are led by pro-government tabloids, accusing him of non-transparent funding and receiving a "bloody US-sifting cache" to act against Serbia's interests. Considering that these were continuous attacks without any response from the authorities, [Cosic's lawyer](#) announced that he would seek a security assessment of his vulnerability. We recall that the attacks on Cosic culminated after his interview with Kosovo's new candidate for Prime Minister, Albin Kurti. The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia once

again called for urgent investigation of the investigation and facilitating unhindered work for all journalists. Considering the manner and persons leading this campaign, as well as the absence of reaction, even in the form of condemnation by state officials, it is clear that this is not an individual case of threat, but rather a systematic attack on media freedom in Serbia.

After being victimized by the highly indecent behavior of President Aleksandar Vucic, who labeled him inappropriate as an opponent of Serbia's alleged progress, [N1 television](#) journalist [Miodrag Sovilj](#) became the target of all pro-government tabloids, close government analysts and [senior Serbian Progressive Party officials](#) who blamed him for the poor health of the President. During the press conference, Sovilj asked Aleksandar Vucic several times about a document proving that the Minister of Police's father, Nebojsa Stefanovic, had been engaged in affairs related to the Krusik weapons factory. We remind you that whistleblower Aleksandar Obradovic has been arrested for discovering this affair and that he is still under house arrest. A few hours after the conference, President Vucic was admitted to the Military Medical Academy due to health problems. After his hospitalization an intensive campaign was launched by tabloids close to the authorities with [the aim of blaming Sovilj](#) for the President's poor health. The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia responded with a statement calling on those in charge to "finally justify their purpose of existence" and to protect N1 journalists from persecution to which they were exposed for objective reporting and informing citizens.

Without notice and without further explanation, the public was informed of the sale of television [„Naša"](#) to an unknown owner, as well as the cancellation of all broadcasts on that television. That this was a surprising event is evidenced by statements made by the broadcasters on that television, Marko Vidojkovic and Djordje Vukadinovic, who were not informed that the sale of that television was planned. Such a turn of events justifiably raises doubts, given that it is a television that was frequently hosted by opposition politicians, as well as a [campaign for months against its owner Zoran Basanovic](#).

Whistleblower from "Krusik" factory, Aleksandar Obradovic, is still under house arrest after informing the public about the suspicious business of the company, which allegedly involved the father of the Minister of Police and Deputy Prime Minister, Nebojsa Stefanovic. In the meantime, the campaign by the close media does not stop the campaign against Obradovic and his mother, who was the director of the factory in the previous period, personally led by President Aleksandar Vucic. On the other hand, the [Council of Europe](#) has included this case in the official record of existing threats to media freedom and has directly designated the State of Serbia as the main source of those threats.

The Rector of the University of Belgrade, [Ivanka Popovic](#), and members of the BU Professional Ethics Committee have been targeted by top officials and pro-government media after passing a final decision that the [PhD of Sinisa Mali](#), ex-mayor of Belgrade and Minister of Finance, is [plagiarism](#). Top officials who called the decision "political" have shown that they do not respect the University's autonomy. The campaign to discredit the University is led directly by President Aleksandar Vucic and Prime [Minister Ana Brnabic](#), who said that this case would not affect Sinisa Mali's position, while Minister Zorana Mihajlovic and Education Minister of Education, Mladen Sarcevic, described the case as "a private matter that somebody wants to politicize".

Activist [Milinka Nikolic](#) has been repeatedly questioned by police officers, and the last in a series was a polygraph examination because of "inflammatory speech" held in September in front of the Presidency building in Belgrade to protest the construction of mini hydropower plants. Milinka, who performs the job of secretary general of the Stara Planina Union of Local Communities, was initially questioned in the village where she lives, after which she was summoned to the police station in Pirot. Eventually, she was sent to the Nis police station to have her testimony checked on a polygraph. This case is a continuation of the pressures on the activists in the Stara Planina area that

culminated in physical assaults conducted by private security who were hired by the investor to oversee illegal work in those areas.