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# THREE FREEDOMS PLATFORM

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Civic  
Initiatives

freedom of association

freedom of assembly

freedom of expression

## Three freedoms under a magnifying glass

### Review of cases of violations of basic human rights in Serbia

26 June- 8 July, 2020

#### Freedom of association, assembly and expression

- After the announcement of the new introduction of [curfew](#) due to the worsening of the epidemiological situation announced by President Aleksandar Vučić, dissatisfied citizens spontaneously gathered in front of the National Assembly building on July 7 to express dissatisfaction with the new ban. The protest began with a [peaceful gathering](#) of hundreds of citizens, and as time went on, the number of demonstrators grew larger and larger, reaching several thousand, and it is estimated that more than ten thousand people attended. An hour after the beginning of the protest, a group of citizens tried to enter the National Assembly. They succeeded in their intention and entered the hall of the Assembly, and soon after, the members of the police managed to throw them out. The protests continued, and the gathered citizens shouted slogans against the authorities and occasional skirmishes and verbal clashes, and members of the police started using physical force, pushing the demonstrators with shields and hitting them with batons. The situation spiraled out of control and escalated into open conflict on the streets of Belgrade after [police fired several tear gas canisters at a crowd of protesters](#), causing injuries and suffocation to those gathered, as well as a stampede due to fleeing from tear gas. Shortly after the first reaction of the police, clashes followed in which dozens of demonstrators and policemen were injured, with a large number of cases of inadmissible brutality by members of the police and persons in civilian clothes who identified themselves as members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. During the night police used batons, rubber bullets, tear gas, cavalry, police dogs, and before the end of the night, even riot dispersal vehicles were brought to the streets. One of the most brutal cases of violence was recorded by N1 television cameras in a video showing members of the gendarmerie (Serbian armed police force) [beating three men](#) sitting on a bench near the Serbian Presidency with batons, although it was obvious that they were not aggressive or resisted during the police interventions. Citizens also noticed other cases of severe injuries of the demonstrators and social networks were flooded with [videos](#) and [pictures](#) of people covered in blood. There was also severe violence during the apprehension of citizens, as there was a case where alleged members of the police were holding a man on the ground while tying his hands and [pressing his head with their foot](#), which is contrary to all rules of police conduct. Citizens were particularly upset and distrusted the armed forces because of a large number of suspicious-looking men posing as police officers in plainclothes who took part in the beating, abuse, and arrest of protesters. One of the videos shows four such men [hitting a man lying on the ground](#) and then taking him in an unknown direction. [Additional suspicion](#)

is caused by the fact that these people wore masks on their heads, not surgical ones, but [gas masks, and that they tried to hide their identity with hoods](#) while ruthlessly beating the citizens who were on the street at that moment. As the night wore on, there was an increasing number of members of the armed forces who used force to disperse the citizens, in which they also used [cavalry](#), and armored vehicles were parked to break up demonstrations. The general impression of the protesters was that the police used an enormous amount of tear gas, which is why many citizens who were at the protest, but also those who live in nearby buildings, complained about health problems during the evening and the day after, especially headaches and nausea.

- On the [second day of the protest](#), July 8, an even larger number of people gathered on the streets, but also a huge number of [members of the armed forces](#) who had taken up positions in the wider city center a few hours earlier was also noticeable. Throughout the day, citizens shared footage of convoys of police vehicles coming to Belgrade from other cities. The public's attention was attracted by the presence of a large number of men in Pionirski Park who [refused to answer the journalists why they came to the protest](#), which caused suspicion that they were supporters of the ruling party. On the second day, the protest spread to some other cities in Serbia, such as [Novi Sad](#), [Nis](#), [Kragujevac](#), [Smederevo](#) and [Krusevac](#). This evening was also marked by numerous cases of police brutality, with the use of an even larger number of means to deal with the protesters. Members of the Gendarmerie, the police brigade, and even the Special Anti-Terrorist Unit were deployed on the streets of Belgrade. After the quick and violent reaction of the law enforcement agencies, the mass of citizens gathered in front of the Assembly was broken into several parts, and the protesters were pushed hundreds of meters away from the National Assembly. That evening, the worst case of police brutality has been recorded, where a [young man was hit with batons and kicked by dozens of policemen](#) while lying on the ground. The young man is now in serious condition. On the second day, not only was there an increase in the number of uniformed members of the police, but also those in civilian clothes who claimed to work in the police. Citizens recorded numerous cases of their brutality, such as the case when a dozen of them [beat a young man](#) who was riding a bicycle and it's still not known if he even participated in the protest. One of the most shocking photos, which is being shared en masse on social networks, shows a [young man about 20 years old](#) with a severely injured right arm that lacks parts of the skin and subcutaneous tissue and flesh. That the police did not differentiate between the gathered citizens during the intervention is shown by the case of beating a fourteen-year-old boy who was beaten by a police inspector in Novi Sad. During the night, after the protest in Novi Sad, [Miran Pogačar was arrested](#), an activist of the "Roof over the Head" initiative, who is one of the initiators of the Novi Sad protest and the only one who officially addressed those present on Freedom Square, making demands on behalf of dissatisfied citizens, with constant calls for non-violence.

During these two days, the journalist teams that reported from the scene had a particularly difficult job. In addition to the fact that they were constantly exposed to a huge amount of tear gas that [interfered with their work](#), there were cases of violence against journalists and obstruction of their work. [The journalist of the BETA news agency](#) was beaten by the gendarmerie, although he identified himself as a journalist, after which he ended up in the Emergency Center. The victims of police violence were also journalists of the Nova.rs portal [Milica Božinović and Nataša Latković](#). At one point, members of the police tried to stop the reporting of the N1 television journalist, [Jelena Zorić](#), when the cameras recorded the beating of protestors. RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) journalists Milan Srdić and Lazar Vukadinović [were physically attacked by protesters](#) in Novi Sad. On that occasion, the cameraman Vukadinović's hand was injured and the camera was broken, while Srdić suffered verbal insults. In Nis, the RTS journalist team experienced physical assaults and verbal insults, and protestors poured water their camera. Journalists from Južne vesti came to the aid of their colleagues from RTS and prevented further escalation.

The overall assessment of the two days of the protest is that in too many cases there was a gross violation of authority by members of the police, but also reactions that can be characterized as blatant cases of police brutality. Despite numerous recordings and evidence, the director of the police, Vladimir Rebić, [denied that there was an overstepping of authority](#), emphasizing that "tear gas was fired as much as was necessary." This statement was followed by an address by the Minister of Police, Nebojša Stefanović, who [stated that the protesters threw tear gas](#), and that the police did not react even though they should have. According to unofficial data, in the two days of the protest, hundreds of tear gas canisters were fired at the gathered citizens. Stefanović also stated that the protests were not allowed and that they were organized for the purpose of a violent takeover of power, although according to the Law on Public Assemblies, spontaneous assembly of citizens without registration is allowed. The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, [accused the protesters of being aggressive political extremists](#), announcing that the state would not give up and that all those who participated in the riots would be severely punished.

By the end of the day on July 8, over 30 citizens who had been tortured by the police contacted the Belgrade Center for Human Rights. Citizens continue to contact the Belgrade Center for Human Rights, as well as the Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights. Lawyers throughout Serbia are offering free legal aid to protesters through social media. In addition to numerous reactions from state officials, non-governmental organizations, journalists and prominent individuals within the domestic public, the protests and violent reactions of the authorities have also attracted the attention of the international public. [The New York Times](#) published the news that the protests in Belgrade are the largest ever seen in connection with the coronavirus pandemic, but also that such a violent reaction of the police has not been seen since the rule of Slobodan Milosevic. On the occasion of these riots, the chair of the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee, [Tanja Fajon](#), also spoke about the brutality of the police with the message that the health of citizens comes first, but that this must not be done by repression. European Parliament (EP) Rapporteur for Serbia [Vladimir Bilchik](#) also expressed concern and condemnation of violence against protesters. The group [Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament](#) also spoke out, emphasizing that President Aleksandar Vučić ignored the safety of citizens for too long for personal political gain.

- [The cameraman of KTV Zrenjanin](#) was attacked for reporting from the polling station during the repeated voting in Tomaševac. On that occasion, the team of KTV Zrenjanin noticed numerous irregularities, including a group of people who carried the lists, probably keeping a parallel record of voters, which is a gross violation of the rules of the election process. Officials of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party were spotted among the people running the parallel lists. This behavior is another proof of the meaninglessness of the election process and the attempts of violent censorship of the media that try to inform the public objectively and truthfully.
- [The Minister of Culture and Information, Vladan Vukosavljević](#), sent an open and insulting letter to the journalist Nedim Sejdinović, regarding his writing for the daily Danas. Sejdinović commented on Vukosavljević's statement of condolences over the death of communism to the first editor-in-chief of that paper, Grujica Spasović, after which Minister Vukosavljević said that Sejdinović would "benefit from returning to his natural habitat, where such members of the fauna normally live". Such an answer represents not only impermissible pressure on freelance journalists, but also damage to the reputation of the institution of the Minister of Culture and Information due to the inappropriate and vulgar speech of the current holder of that position. [The Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina](#) demanded the urgent removal of Minister Vukosavljevic, emphasizing that the absence of a reaction would be very dangerous for the further functioning of the media community in Serbia. [The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia](#) also demanded the departure of Vukosavljevic from the ministerial position and called on state officials to harmonize their public appearances with the public function they perform and basic decency.

- [The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia](#) (NUNS) condemned the behavior of President Aleksandar Vučić towards the journalist of the Radio Television of Serbia, Olivera Jovičević, during his guest appearance on the show "Questionnaire". NUNS stated that the president's behavior was outside the framework of decent behavior and unworthy of the function he performs, which is why they call on Aleksandar Vučić to send a public apology to journalist Jovičević. This is not the first case of indecent behavior towards journalists by President Vučić, so it can be stated that cynical, aggressive and underestimating reactions to every critical issue have become a regular manner of Aleksandar Vučić.
- [The correspondent of the N1 television](#) was forbidden to record the site after the collapse of a part of the old building of the Kragujevac market, which occurred after the workers who are reconstructing it undermined a part of the foundations of that building. On that occasion, the manager of the contractor verbally threatened the N1 journalist, and after that, the head of the Secretariat for communal affairs of the city of Kragujevac, Radosav Vulović, asked the N1 reporter to say whether he had a recording permit and asked to identify himself. The Association of Citizens of the Šumadija Region requested that the names of the people who sent threats against the journalists of that television be made public. This case is just one in a series in which journalists are prevented from doing their job, and journalists of N1 television, which has been the target of a cruel tabloid campaign and attacks by government officials for months, even years, were most often exposed to such attacks.