



## Three freedoms under a magnifying glass

### Review of cases of violations of basic human rights in Serbia 26 February- 11 March, 2021

#### Freedom of association, assembly and expression

- Journalists of the KRIK portal found themselves under attack by tabloids, which launched a scandalous and dangerous campaign against them, bringing them into contact with an organized criminal group headed by the arrested Veljko Belivuk. The campaign is, among other things, based on incorrect claims that Belivuk gave information to KRIK, which is a very dangerous untruth which not only discredits the work of investigative journalists, but also directly endangers their physical safety. The Human Rights House pointed out in its [statement](#), adding that "when government officials and media close to them constantly accuse independent journalists and media of being traitors, foreign mercenaries, an extended arm of the opposition, ignorant people and liars, advocates of virus victory the corona, and now even the associates of the suspects in the most serious acts of organized crime, the government and the media close to them bear full responsibility for endangering the safety of journalists, media freedom and the lack of the rule of law. The statement calls on the competent institutions, primarily the Prosecutor's Office and REM, to take adequate measures in order to stop such dangerous targeting of the media and journalists. [The Inter-sectoral Group on Freedom of Expression and the Media and the Working Group on Chapter 23 of the National Convention on the European Union \(NCEU\)](#) also condemned the campaign, noting that its aim was to divert attention from the links between top state structures and organized crime groups. KRIK wrote exactly after the arrest, as well as during the previous years. [The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia](#) also demanded an urgent reaction from the authorities, but also pointed out that a huge problem is that the attacks launched by the tabloids reach an incomparably larger number of citizens compared to the denials of those attacked, which further contributes to their vulnerability.

- The program director of the Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina and university professor Dinko Gruhonjić is again the [target](#) of a dangerous tabloid campaign and death threats sent to him via social networks. The campaign matrix relied on the frequent practice of targeting dissidents as enemies of Serbia, to which journalists and activists have been exposed for decades. We remind you that this is just a continuation of the campaign against Gruhonjić, and that this case was preceded by the writing of hate graffiti at the entrance of the building where he lives with his family.
- Civic activist and representative of the association Let's Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina (ORSP), Aleksandar Jovanović Čuta, was brought in for [an informative conversation](#) after appearing on the show "Impression of the Week". The explanation for the arrest is the need to examine the possibility of committing a crime, due to the announcement of a mass rally in Belgrade called "Environmental Uprising", as well as the announcement that if necessary, activists will block some roads. Unfortunately, this is not the first case of such pressure on ORSP activists, but only a continuation of a permanent campaign of institutional intimidation in order to deter future activism. In addition to the answer to the question what is the legal basis and the real reason for Jovanović's arrest, the public also expects an answer to the question why the collection of information from citizens was conducted by the Service for the Fight against Organized Crime.
- The Member of Parliament and one of the high-ranking officials of the ruling party, Aleksandar Martinović, again verbally attacked everyone who dared to express a critical position at the National Assembly session. This time, the target of the attack was the organization CRTA, which has been monitoring the work of the National Assembly for many years through its Open Parliament initiative. This time, Martinović accused CRTA of attempted coup and call for the assassination of the President of the Republic, and announced that SNS deputies would deal with them. CRTA filed a report against MP Martinović for gross violation of the Code of People's Deputies, to the Administrative Board of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, headed by Martinović. This is just one of the numerous attacks by the ruling party's deputies on civil society organizations and all those who express critical views, who in this way abuse the rostrum in the National Assembly, while the reaction and sanctions, as always, are absent.
- The public in Serbia is [faced](#) with an unprecedented precedent in the form of public publication of photos of decapitated bodies of victims suspected of killing members of an organized criminal group arrested in early February 2021. The photos were shown at a press conference after the National Security Council session, by the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior. This conference was broadcast live by all televisions with a national frequency, as well as a large number of cable broadcasters, a total of thirteen televisions. The professional public reacted very negatively to the publication of those photos, emphasizing that there is no public interest that required the publication of such photos, especially since the public did not receive any new information regarding the involvement of state officials in criminal activities. Judita Popović, a member of the Council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media, pointed out that in this way the investigation conducted by the prosecution was endangered, and that the whole process was turned into reality. She also pointed out that she would personally advocate that REM initiate proceedings against the televisions that broadcast that part of the program, but that the experience from her work in that body so far does not instill confidence in her that the proposal will get the required majority. The publication of the photos was not prevented by a public appeal not to show the recordings and photos, which were sent by the mothers of young men who have been listed as missing for years or months, and who are suspected to be victims of arrested members of an organized criminal group. The explanation by the [Prosecutor's Office](#) for Organized Crime is also surprising and worrying, stating that the publication of the photos did not jeopardize the investigation, but that it was done in order to

identify the victims. Such an explanation is an insufficiently substantiated justification for the public degradation of judicial institutions and jeopardizing the investigation.

- Journalist Isidora Kovačević was the [target](#) of sexist statements by the acting Director of the public utility company "Stari grad Sabac" Nikola Begovic. This reaction followed public criticism of the work of the new ruling majority in Sabac, although, according to Isidora Kovacevic, she never mentioned Begovic in her speeches. He also states that this is not the first attack on a personal basis in order to discredit her, but that it is a long-term practice.
  
- According to the [report](#) of the international organization Freedom House, Serbia is the country with the most drastic decline in political rights and civil liberties in the last decade, but according to the overall ranking, unlike the United States, which still belongs to the group of free countries, Serbia is in the category of partially free countries, along with Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Macedonia. The report also highlights key issues in 2020, highlighting three key developments: a boycott of elections by much of the opposition and an attempt to mitigate the boycott by lowering the electoral threshold, unjustified and excessive use of force during the July 2020 protests, and non-transparent crisis management during the pandemic corona virus. Confirmation of the accuracy of Freedom House's findings followed the publication of the news about that report by the [Radio Television of Serbia \(RTS\)](#), bearing in mind that RTS kept silent about key parts of that finding. The report did not mention the suspicious business of certain ministers, as well as their connection with organized crime. It was also silenced that the ruling party undermined political rights and civil liberties by putting pressure on independent media, the opposition and civil society. The [research](#) conducted by CRTA also speaks about this thesis, stating that in the last seven months, the parties of the ruling majority have received as much as 92% of the time in the central news programs of television with a national frequency. On the other hand, the opposition received only 8% of the time and they were mostly presented in a negative tone, as much as 63%.