



Violations of basic freedoms in Serbia

July 16 - 27, 2021

The past period has been marked by very dangerous cases of pressure on journalists, starting with the organized campaigns conducted against journalists of the investigative portal KRIK in pro-government tabloids, followed by death threats expressed against journalists by politician and MP Aleksandar Šapić, as well as new lawsuits by the company Millennium Team and its owners against local media reporting on its business dealing. Unfortunately, none of these cases were followed up by a reaction from the competent authorities, which raises suspicions that this represents a planned and systematic denial of the rights and freedoms of citizens.

Freedom of expression

- The editorial board of the Crime and Corruption Investigation Network (KRIK) and editor-in-chief Stevan Dojčinović were the target of an organized pro-government media campaign after an [article](#) was published on that portal outlining transcripts of the interrogation of Veljko Belivuk, head of a criminal group suspected of serious crimes. works. The reason for the attacks lies in the fact that Belivuk claimed during the hearing that he has been a member of the ruling party since 2011, as well as that he met with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić on whose behalf he participated in numerous cases of violations of citizens' rights and freedoms. among other things, during Vučić's inauguration in 2017, when journalists and gathered citizens were

physically attacked by private security. Days after the publication of the text about the government media, on the front pages and in the broadcasts, they accused KRIK of being in direct contact with a criminal group and of working together on the political overthrow of Aleksandar Vučić. The [Journalists' Association of Serbia](#) condemned this campaign, emphasizing that in that way the safety of KRIK journalists is endangered, especially emphasizing that labeling journalists as members and sympathizers of criminal groups is absolutely unacceptable. The [Coalition for Freedom of the Media](#) pointed out in its statement that the job of journalists is to deal with issues that pose problems in the country, especially if there are doubts about the connection between crime and politics, and that no one should be endangered due to journalistic work. For that reason, the Coalition called on the competent authorities to do everything in their power to stop the campaign against KRIK. This campaign was also condemned by international organizations, primarily the [Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\) and Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)](#). CPJ Program Director for Europe and Central Asia Gulnosa Said stated that it is necessary to stop the attempts to silence KRIK immediately, as well as that the state has an obligation to protect all journalists. Her statement also points out that the practice so far has shown that the government in Serbia is extremely intolerant of criticism, but also that threats, slander and other types of pressure that state officials apply to investigative journalists significantly endanger their security. The representative of Reporters Without Borders for the European Union and the Balkans, Pavol Salaj, stated that such campaigns deliberately create confusion by equating journalists and criminals, reminding that organized criminal groups have endangered the safety of KRIK journalists in the past. Salaj also pointed out that it is extremely worrying that a similar campaign was already conducted against KRIK in March this year, and that there is obviously a continuity of systemic pressure on journalists.

- Along with this, the same channels ran an inexplicable campaign to publish photos of severed limbs and butchered bodies of the victims of this criminal group, which made the public extremely upset. Apart from the lack of rational explanation and legitimate purpose, showing such content also represents disrespect of basic media standards and codes of ethics, but also a serious threat to the course of criminal proceedings, bearing in mind that these photos represent evidence on which the indictment will be filed. On

that occasion, in addition to the [mother of one of the injured young men](#), the [Journalists' Association of Serbia](#) also appealed to the media not to disturb the public and that they are obliged to respect the right to dignity of victims. The statement states that the publication of the photos violated the Rulebook on the protection of human rights in the field of providing media services, as well as Article 4 of the Code of Journalists of Serbia. Due to the publication of such photos on PINK television, [Judita Popović](#), a member of the Council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), announced that she would file a complaint against that television, but pointed out that she did not expect her initiative to be supported. The statement of the President of the REM Council [Olivera Zekić](#), who stated that the publication of these photos is of educational content, also says that it is necessary for the citizens to get acquainted with the current situation in the country and the justification of the fight against crime. This body was left without a reaction to this case, as well as to the dangerous campaign that was conducted against KRIK journalists, but also against opposition actors who were also linked to Veljko Belivuk's criminal group without evidence. However, the [parliamentary group of Democrats and Socialists in the European Parliament](#) reacted to that, whose representative Demetris Papadakis stated in his address that the practice of connecting the opposition with criminal groups, without giving a chance to respond to such allegations, must stop immediately. These cases prove that in Serbia there is no political will on the part of the authorities to lower social tensions in order to establish the normalization of political and social life and to enable the media, as well as other actors, to carry out their duties without hindrance and without fear for their safety.

- Journalists and co-authors of the show "Good, Bad, Evil" [Marko Vidojković and Nenad Kulačin](#) filed criminal charges against the Vice President of the Main Board of the Serbian Progressive Party and the President of the City Municipality of New Belgrade Aleksandar Šapić for threatening them with death in a private conversation. guest appearances on Pink TV. These threats were first made in a phone call when Nenad Kulačin invited Aleksandar Šapić to be a guest in their show, and the reason is that Šapić considered certain statements about him that were made in previous shows of these two journalists offensive. After filing criminal charges, Vidojkovic and Kulacin pointed out that they did not feel safe, bearing in mind that the threats came

from a politically extremely powerful person, but that they did not believe that the institutions would do their job and protect them from possible threats. Bearing in mind that several weeks have passed since the first mention of these threats and that the prosecution has not filed a criminal complaint against Šapić ex officio, there is a suspicion that there is discrimination in the actions of the prosecution and courts and that the laws do not apply to all citizens.

- The show "Serbian Mother" within the series "Heroes of the Evil Age", which dealt with the character and work of the famous folk singer [Svetlana Raznatovic](#), was removed from YouTube due to alleged copyright infringement. This happened after the legal team of Ms. Raznatovic unsuccessfully tried to put pressure on H1 television and the production company JSP and the authors of the series in order to prevent the publication of the episode, all under the threat of filing lawsuits and initiating court proceedings. This case is an example of attempts and partially successful media censorship, which is proof of the inability of journalists to do their job freely.

Freedom of assembly

- Members of the communal police [fined the citizens](#) who supported the protest of the Joint Initiative "For a roof over your head" in front of the Presidency building on the occasion of moving out of the Kocic family's apartment, despite the fact that the entire debt was previously paid. Among the participants in the protest were members of the Kocic family, who tried to enter the Presidency building in order to seek protection from the perpetrators, but were prevented from doing so by the communal militia. The communal police filed misdemeanor charges against the gathered citizens, and one of the reasons is that they did not postpone the things that the members of the Kocic family took with them during the eviction. Punishing citizens who do not endanger anyone's security with their protests is an act of discrimination and an attempt to restrict freedom of assembly and the right to express one's opinion.

Freedom of association

- The owners of the company Millennium Team, which has filed numerous so-called SLAPP lawsuits against the media in recent months, for reporting on their alleged involvement in corrupt dealings, said they had waived unrealistically high damages and reduced them to a symbolic amount of 100 euros. In the explanation of their decision, they state that at no time did they want to abuse the SLAPP lawsuits, but that they only cared about establishing the truth. However, shortly after this announcement, new lawsuits against the [Info Vranjske](#) portal followed, and after the Millennium team sued the JUGPress association, the founders of that company, Ivan Bošnjak and Stojan Vujko, now did the same as individuals. These cases show that in practice there has been no cessation of pressure on the media and journalists, but that it is intensifying and that similar actions can be expected in the future. Such moves significantly endanger the work and financial survival of local media and represent a direct violation of the right to freedom of association.