
THREE FREEDOMS UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS



Civic
Initiatives

freedom of expression

freedom of assembly

freedom of association

Three Freedoms Under the Magnifying Glass Violations of Basic Human Rights in Serbia

November 3 - November 16, 2023

Freedom of Expression

Orchestrated campaign against Danas

Even before the start of the pre-election campaign, members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) started a campaign against the newspaper Danas. The reason for this was an article entitled "An Albanian in Belgrade: Who is Fahri Musliu, whom Vučić says is not his father?". Tendentiously deceiving the public about the content of the published text, the government representatives made accusations against Danas and its journalists. Thus Ana Brnabić called the journalists of this media "uncivilized sadists and haters", while Minister Tomislav Momirović went a step further and threatened Danas by saying "You will pay for this and you will also be purged in these elections". This orchestrated attack on critical media gives us a vivid indication of what the government's election campaign will look like in the coming period.

Media campaign against N1

After the daily newspaper Danas, the N1 television became the target of attacks by pro-regime media and government officials, and this time the immediate reason was the screening of the documentary film "I, Aleksandar: State Gambit", which presented the political biography of the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić. The author of the documentary, Jovana Polić, stated that only 8 hours after the screening of the film, 40 hostile texts were published, that presented untruths about the content of the movie, and some go so far as to claim that the film calls for the assassination of the President and his family. Thus, at the very beginning of the pre-election campaign, critically oriented media were labeled as political opponents, which threatens all democratic principles and freedom of expression.

Campaign against "ProGlas" initiative

A video targeting the signatories of "ProGlas" appeared on social networks. In the video, the signatories are labeled as "domestic traitors", "NATO lobbyists" etc. The "ProGlas" initiative, which is supported by a group of intellectuals and public figures, aims to invite citizens to participate in the upcoming elections. Shortly after the signing of the initiative, a campaign against those who support this action was launched. The attacks first came from the representatives of the government, so Maja Gojković and Miloš Vučević published a statement on the page of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Then, other prominent SNS members on their social networks, as well as in the pro-regime media, used the opportunity to insult and target the signatories of "ProGlas". Thus, SNS member Vladimir Đukanović, in his author's text, accused the initiative of being a "politically motivated project aimed at mobilizing voters for Đilas's list", and he called the initiators of the initiative "pseudo-elite". President Vučić also joined the campaign, accusing the signatories of the initiative of harmonizing with "foreign agendas" and "acting against national interests." Furthermore, the campaign continued through pro-regime tabloids. Characterized by highly critical, confrontational, and often accusatory tones, these articles paint "ProGlas" in a negative light, challenging its motives, integrity, and the credibility of its supporters. The media portrayal of the "ProGlas" initiative in Serbia offers a revealing glimpse into the interplay between politics and media in the country. The overwhelmingly negative coverage, seemingly orchestrated by media outlets under government influence, highlights the challenges faced by movements seeking political change.

One year after the threats to Danas

A year has passed since the email titled "Charlie Hebdo of Belgrade" was sent to the daily newspaper Danas, and the author of the email has not yet been identified. The email, whose title alludes to the shooting at the offices of the French satirical newspaper in 2015, vividly describes the attack on the editorial office of Danas, announcing that journalists, editors, and columnists are in "mortal danger". The author of the threatening email has not yet been identified, but the investigation by the Special Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime is still ongoing. The sluggishness of institutions in detecting those who threaten journalists indicates a worrying state of media freedom and freedom of expression in Serbia.

Freedom of Assembly

Initiation of misdemeanor proceedings against citizens for protesting

A request to initiate misdemeanor proceedings was filed against Željko Pejčić and Goran Jatić, and they are charged with violating public order and peace due to a protest in front of the Bačka Palanka municipal assembly building. During the protest, citizens expressed their dissatisfaction by scattering hay and manure in front of the entrance to the building. Protests have been held in Bačka Palanka since the summer, due to the inadequate reaction of the local authorities to the storm in which two people were killed. Pejčić, who lost his job due to the protests, believes that the aim of these lawsuits is to dissuade citizens from further protests.

Pressures on protesting farmers

Several men blocked the entrance, with cars, to the family house of Jovan Jovanov, one of the organizers of the agricultural protest in Bavanište. The men who blocked the entrance to Jovan's house, where his wife and two children were at the time, were led by Dragan Šljivovački, a local official of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). The police failed to remove the men who blocked the entrance, and they left the location themselves only after the locals came to support Jovan and his family. On that day, November 13, farmers blocked roads across the country due to dissatisfaction with the state's attitude towards agriculture and due to unfulfilled agreements reached with the authorities back in May. During the duration of the blockades, the police constantly stopped and listed the tractors, which put direct pressure on those who expressed their dissatisfaction with the protest.

Members of the Serbian Progressive Party interrupted the forum of the "ProGlas" initiative

The first public forum of the "ProGlas" initiative in Zrenjanin was interrupted by an official of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and deputy mayor of Zrenjanin Saša Santovac and SNS MP Stanislava Janošević. Members of SNS interrupted the forum when speakers started talking about the Chinese factory "Linglong" and thus Santovac and Janošević tried to provoke a reaction from those gathered, who did not accept the provocation and the forum of the initiative continued. On Monday, the first presentation of the "ProGlas" initiative was held in Zrenjanin, the idea of which is to invite voters to go to the polls in as large a number as possible.

Freedom of Association

Russian anti-war activist banned from entering Serbia

Another Russian anti-war activist was banned from entering Serbia. Ilya Zernov was supposed to attend the trial in Serbia in connection with the attack on him that took place in January 2023. We remind you that Ilya was attacked by far-right extremists while he was trying to paint over the graffiti that said "Death to Ukraine". The passport control officers didn't explain to the activist why he was banned from entering the country, and this is another in a series of cases in which Russian anti-war activists in Serbia are the target of institutional persecution and pressure.

Graffiti written on the entrance to the premises of the NGO Haver Serbia

At the entrance to the premises of the NGO Haver Serbia, graffiti "Haver get out of Serbia", "Israel is killing children", "Free Palestine", and "Down with Zionism, down with anti-Semitism" were written. Haver Serbia is a non-profit, non-governmental, educational organization that promotes a diverse and inclusive society in Serbia. Several organizations condemned the writing of graffiti in a statement, characterizing this incident as "anti-Semitic" and as "direct attack on the entire civil society and freedom of association". Women in Black stated that "the attack of the Israeli armed forces on the occupied Palestinian territory of the Gaza Strip, in retaliation for the attack of the terrorist organization Hamas on Israel, must not be a reason for attacks both on both Jews and Muslims".

European Commission 2023 Progress Report on Serbia

The regular annual European Commission 2023 Progress Report on Serbia was published, in which numerous problems and shortcomings were pointed out, such as the lack of progress in chapters 23 and 24 on the rule of law, the concerning situation regarding media freedom, the glorification of war criminals, etc. The European Commission's annual report points to the continuation of the practice of verbal attacks and targeting campaigns by high government officials against several CSOs and their funding. The report points out that "a strengthened civil society is a key component of any democratic system and that state institutions should recognize it as such and threat as such". Media freedom in Serbia continues to be challenged, especially given the cases of threats, intimidation, hate speech, and violence towards journalists. It also points to a significant and worrying increase in strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) especially against human rights defenders, but also against the media, which can lead to censorship. The annual report of the European Commission is the most important document for any country aspiring to EU membership and presents a picture of the situation in all key fields where progress is necessary for the accession process.

