



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

December 15 - December 28, 2023

Freedom of Expression

False bomb reports on RTS

Two false reports about bombs arrived at the address of RTS in the past two weeks. The first one arrived on December 14, and the second, which stated that "the bomb will explode at 11 p.m.," was sent to the RTS email address on December 19. This is the fourth false bomb alert that has arrived at the address of the national service in the past month, and this worrying trend is disrupting the daily work of employees. The authorities have not been able to stand in the way of this phenomenon, to which, in addition to the media, primary and secondary schools throughout Serbia are exposed.

Security hindered team N1

The security of the building where the seat of the Republic Election Commission (RIK) is located asked the N1 team, which had accreditation, to leave the building. After a short conversation, the team was still allowed to conduct interviews with members of the Parliament Srđan Milivojević and Marinika Tepić. Obstructing journalists in the performance of their work is an attack on freedom of expression and timely, complete and accurate information to the public.

An unknown person followed team N1

After the protest held in front of the Republican Election Commission on Wednesday, December 20, an unknown person on a motorcycle followed the N1 team, and then circled around the building where journalist Žaklina Tatalović lives. The police have identified the man, and further action in this case is expected by the prosecution. This is another example of intimidation of journalists which must be stopped urgently.

New threats to journalist Isidora Kovačević

The editor of Podrinske, Isidora Kovačević, is again exposed to targeting because of her independent, professional journalistic work. Through social networks, a message was sent to Isidora that she should be expelled from Šabac because of her statements about the chief of police from that city, who is sitting in the front row at the meeting of the ruling party. At the mentioned event, one of the leaders of the hooligans and thugs who attacked the citizens of Šabac who protested in 2021 sat behind the chief of police. When Kovačević wrote about this case, she was targeted on warrants dismantled all over the city, and the trial in this case is still ongoing. "It's extremely difficult to work as a journalist at the local level, especially if you're a woman and you don't want to keep quiet," said Podrinske's editor. The fact that since the beginning of the year there have been 73 cases related to attacks on journalists, and only 23 of them have been solved, does not inspire much hope in solving cases of threats directed at Isidora Kovačević, whose life has been in danger since 2021. Institutions have a duty to protect journalists, and the failure to do so entails bearing responsibility.

Thrown leaflets in the yard N1

Leaflets signed by the conservative movement Naši were placed in the courtyard of N1. This time the poster is also "signed" by the representative of the movement, Ivan Ivanović. The posters contain pictures of opposition politicians Marinika Tepić and Dragan Đilas, and the leaflets were inserted a day after the protest in front of the Belgrade City Assembly, when the police used excessive force against the gathered citizens.

The journalist was denied the opportunity to follow the conference

The journalist Senad Senko Župljanin was prevented from attending the press conference of the SDA Sandžak and the Civic Movement of Sandžak (GPS). As the reason for this action, the secretary of the SDA Sandžak, cited the impossibility of guaranteeing the journalist's safety due to the fear of potential negative reactions. It is inadmissible for journalists to be prevented from carrying out their work under any pretext, and the competent authorities are obliged to guarantee their safety and prevent any form of its endangering.

Suspended sentence for threatening a journalist

The High Court in Belgrade sentenced a man to a suspended prison sentence of one year and imposed a restraining order on him due to death threats against Danas journalist Vojin Radovanović. Death threats were sent to the journalist via Instagram in July of this year.

Freedom of Assembly

Students victims of dangerous targeting

Young activists who, after the election, protested in front of the Republic Election Commission (RIK) to express their dissatisfaction with the cancellation of the electoral will of the citizens of Belgrade, immediately found themselves the target of interest of the security services and pro-government tabloids. At the protest on the second evening, an unknown woman was filmed scrolling through the photos from the personal documents of the young activists who stood out at the protest the day before, when the cameras recorded their debate with representatives of the opposition. The tabloids came into possession of an image from the biometric ID card of an activist, which could only have come from police officers. Such behavior is not only punishable, but creates an atmosphere of fear and repression among citizens who want to peacefully engage in democratic processes. Intolerance towards protesting young people was also manifested at the protest on December 27, when two young men threw plastic bottles, glasses and cans at students. The treatment of young people in our country is particularly worrying, especially those who publicly, in a critical and free-thinking way, reflect on socio-political events and who are ready to fight for democratic values and better living conditions for new generations. Authorities abuse the security services and target young people through tabloids, sending a message that this country not only does not work in the interests of young people, but very actively works to dissuade them from wanting to build their own future in it.

Protest in Novi Pazar on the verge of an incident

At the opposition's protest in Novi Pazar, there was a verbal conflict with the representatives of the ruling Sandžak Democratic Party, whose supporters were in front of the City Administration building to allegedly watch a sports match. The police placed themselves between the two groups, and there was only a minor skirmish with the protestors.

Police attacks on journalistic teams

Several journalist teams were attacked by the police while reporting on the protests that have been held every evening since the election in front of the Republic Election Commission. At the protest held on December 24 in front of the Belgrade City Assembly, there was a reaction from the police, who dispersed the gathered citizens with smoke bombs and pepper spray. On that occasion, the police officers also used force against the journalists who were reporting from the meeting. A journalist from the Nova.rs portal was hit on the hand with a baton. The policemen also attacked the Al Jazeera television crew when one policeman grabbed the cameraman by the neck and pulled him away so that he would not record the arrest of the protestors. A policeman tried to snatch the camera from photojournalist Beta as well. The Coalition for Media Freedom and the SafeJournalists network remind in their announcement that "police officers are obliged to enable journalists and media workers to work safely, provide the necessary information and cooperate so that the movement of journalists and their crews is unhindered." However, at this protest, the police acted contrary to that and thus most directly threatened the safety of the journalist crews as well as the timely and complete information of the public about the events of that day.

Police violence against citizens

Since December 17, when extraordinary parliamentary and local elections were held in Serbia, opposition and student protests have been held every day, pointing to the irregularities recorded during the election day. Numerous examples of irregularities such as the mass migration of voters with the aim of altering the electoral will of citizens and buying votes have been pointed out by domestic and international observation missions. As the institutions remained silent on allegations of election theft, citizens decided to seek answers on the street, gathering every evening in front of the Republican Election Commission. Since the start of the protests, everyone participating in them has been exposed to pressure, and day by day tensions have grown, culminating on December 24 with brutal police violence against citizens. On December 24, after the RIK, the protest rally continued in front of the building of the City Assembly, when MPs from the opposition parties tried to enter the building. Their entry was prevented by strong police forces securing the Assembly building. Soon a group of hooded men threw stones at the entrance. The Coalition of Serbia against Violence announced that these are hooligans who were planted by the government in order to cause riots at the protest. The police then threw smoke bombs and pepper spray at the crowd and began to break up the protest. Numerous examples of violent behavior of the police towards the demonstrators were recorded in the videos and photos, and several people were injured in the police assault. Several press teams were attacked during the protest. 38 people were arrested, including 4 students, who were taken into a civilian car by armed persons. A group of organizations gathered around the Three Freedoms Platform condemned police violence and called for an immediate reaction from the authorities in condemning police brutality, which represents a gross violation of the fundamental principles of the rule of law, in which the police should be a service to citizens, not a tool of repression. A few days before the protest in front of the City Assembly, pro-government tabloids published a video of a young man allegedly admitting that opposition politicians were paying him to cause riots. The young man, who is visibly scared in the video, later stated that the police harassed him and forced the aforementioned statement from him, which is a gross violation of the rights of a detained person. The abuse of the police and judicial authorities for political purposes is absolutely unacceptable, and the relevant authorities should take actions to preserve the rule of law, the security and rights of citizens, and the integrity of democratic processes in Serbia, and not do the opposite.

Attacked journalist N1

N1 television journalist Mladen Savatović was attacked while reporting from the protest on December 25. The unknown man first verbally attacked the journalist, and then got in the face of the journalist who was joining the program live. The man then attacked the journalist and hit him with his hand. President Vučić spoke about this case in a shameful way, saying that "some man just said 'boo' to the N1 journalist". This physical attack takes place in a situation of heightened political tensions after the elections, and journalists who have been targeted by high-ranking state officials for years are particularly at risk of verbal, but unfortunately, as this case shows, physical attacks.

Freedom of Association

The Prime Minister targeted CRTA

The Prime Minister of Serbia targeted the organization CRTA (Center for Research, Transparency and Responsibility) and accused them of "working to destabilize the state". Prime Minister Brnabić's accusations come after the CRTA presented evidence of organized migration of voters on election day, December 17, which affected the electoral will of citizens, primarily in the capital. On the very day of the election, CRTA's observers in Odžaci were attacked and their vehicle was destroyed on that occasion. The attack took place in an atmosphere of constant incitement of hatred against representatives of civil society, an incitement in which Prime Minister Ana Brnabić regularly participates with her statements.

Aida Ćorović convicted

The misdemeanor appellate court issued a final verdict against activist Aida Ćorović for throwing eggs at a mural dedicated to Ratko Mladić in 2021. However, the verdict does not mention the mural itself, and the activist is accused of violating public order and peace because she threw eggs at the wall and insulted the plainclothes policemen who were "guarding the wall" at the time. Based on the verdict, the human rights activist must pay a fine of 100,000 dinars or face a prison sentence. This judgment shows that the institutions of the system in our country are on the side of those who promote violence, intolerance and glorify war criminals, thereby spreading intolerance in society and insulting the families of the victims. This is a verdict against all those who fight for a different society in our country, a society in which freedom, peace and respect for human rights are the primary values on which institutions of the system are based.

