



Citizens  
associations:  
**Shrinking space  
for civil society's  
activism in  
2022/2023**

**Civic**  
 **Initiatives**

Authors: Alma Mustajbašić,  
Uroš Jovanović, Milica Branković  
Belgrade, January 2024

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The logo for Civic Initiatives features the word "Civic" in a grey, sans-serif font above the word "Initiatives" in a black, sans-serif font. To the left of the word "Initiatives" are three stylized human figures in red, standing side-by-side.

## Citizens Associations - Shrinking Space for Action 2022/2023

### *Authors*

Alma Mustajbašić, Uroš Jovanović, Milica Branković

### *Editor*

Dragoslava Barzut

### *Publisher*

Civic Initiatives

### *On behalf of the publisher*

Maja Stojanović

### *Design and Layout*

Fabrika ideja

### *Translation to English*

Jelena Marković

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# Introduction

## The context

Viewed from an institutional and normative perspective, the conditions for the operation of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Serbia can be qualified as unfavorable. Taking into account the broader socio-political context, primarily the dominant public discourse and narrative towards the civil sector, the overall environment in which CSOs operate can also be characterized as hostile. The constant targeting of CSOs as "anti-Serbian," "traitorous," "hostile," and the like has greatly influenced the creation of such an environment. Over the past two years, the level of threat to fundamental civil rights and freedoms has been steadily increasing. There has been a rise in the number of attacks, both physical and verbal, as well as pressures faced by citizens, activists, and journalists in our country. The unfavorable political climate, in which the erosion of democratic values and institutions has become a regular occurrence, has contributed to the creation of a hostile environment towards anyone who dares to think freely and critically and to act accordingly in the public sphere. The international online platform that monitors threats to civil society in countries around the world and assesses the civic space - the space for the functioning of civil society, CIVICUS Monitor, has characterized this space in the case of Serbia as "obstructed." This assessment has been influenced by numerous violations and restrictions of civil liberties.

In 2022 and 2023, civil society in Serbia was faced with various forms of pressure that fundamentally jeopardize its work and survival. Activists, journalists, and CSOs are regularly targeted by those in power, with the aim of discrediting their work and spreading distrust towards their activities among citizens. These campaigns involve spreading a narrative that has been created for decades about "domestic traitors and foreign mercenaries," which is further disseminated through pro-regime media and tabloids. This creates a hostile environment for the work of the civil sector, while

journalists and activists face numerous challenges in their work, often including death threats and even direct physical attacks that endanger their lives. Freedom of expression has been under attack for years, and the deteriorating situation in this area in our country is highlighted by numerous international actors. Due to the unfavorable socio-political climate, journalism has become one of the most riskiest professions. Serbia has been marked as [one of the most dangerous countries for journalists](#) in a statement by a group of media freedom organizations that visited Belgrade on 26 April 2023. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the Reporters Without Borders report, Serbia dropped from 79th to 91st place in [the 2023 World Press Freedom Index](#), placing it among the "problematic countries." All international and domestic reports express concern about the treatment of independent media by state officials, and the Reporters Without Borders report states that neither politicians nor institutions are willing to improve the situation and that authorities in Serbia are "playing with fire" due to their inflammatory rhetoric against professional media. Verbal threats, death threats, and physical attacks have become an integral part of journalism, and in recent years, exposure to SLAPP lawsuits has been highlighted as a particular form of pressure. SLAPP lawsuits are filed by individuals or legal entities that possess significantly more political and economic power than the defendant. The goal of such lawsuits is not to seek justice or obtain adequate financial compensation for the stress endured or the tarnished reputation of the plaintiff but rather to financially exhaust the sued media outlets, leading to a complete cessation of their work or at least the emergence of self-censorship out of fear for their continued existence. In addition to the media, activists who dare to point out the problems affecting our society are also exposed to lawsuits, with environmental activists being particularly vulnerable to this form of pressure. During 2022 and 2023, environmental activists fought against various forms of intimidation, ranging from physical attacks by police and private security staff to institutional pressures in the form of misdemeanor charges for participating in protests, detentions, and interrogations, to SLAPP lawsuits filed by companies or individuals due to activists exposing their illegal business practices or environmental threats.

The violation of citizens' right to freedom of assembly reached its peak with the subsequent decision by the authorities to ban the 2022 EuroPride. The negative attitude of the government towards the fundamental civil right of peaceful assembly was initially demonstrated towards one of the most marginalized social groups in Serbia. The environment for enjoying the freedom of peaceful assembly continued to deteriorate in 2023, when protests against violence, called "Serbia against Violence," began to take place across Serbia following two mass murders in May. High-ranking government officials have attempted to discredit the participants of the protests and those who support them in various ways. Despite the active measures taken by those in power to suppress civic activism and restrict the space for citizen participation in important processes, and despite the inability of occupied institutions to prevent the erosion of the democratic social order, the citizens of Serbia continue to bravely fight for the progress of society and the protection and defense of fundamental human rights and freedoms.

## Methodology

The report before you is based on the methodology applied in the previous report covering the year 2021. The analysis follows the findings that indicate the shrinking space for action in areas defined by the Monitoring Matrix on the Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, which was developed as a result of the work of the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) and its members. The Matrix monitors the situation in three broadly defined areas, which are further divided into sub-areas:

### **Area 1: Fundamental legal guarantees of freedom**

Sub-area 1.1: Freedom of association (the right to establish formal and informal organizations and groups; freedom from unauthorized state interference in the internal affairs of CSOs; freedom to seek and secure financial resources from various domestic and foreign sources);

Sub-area 1.2: Related freedoms (the right to freedom of peaceful assembly; the right to freedom of expression).

## **Area 2: CSO Financial Viability and Sustainability Framework**

Sub-area 2.1: Tax/fiscal treatment of CSOs and their donors (tax incentives for CSOs; incentives for philanthropic giving by individuals and legal entities);

Sub-area 2.2: State support (funding of CSOs, including institutional grants; transparency of procedures and practices for allocating public funds to CSOs; system of accountability, monitoring, and evaluation of public funding for CSOs; non-financial support from the state);

Sub-area 2.3: Human resources (comparative treatment of for-profit and non-profit organizations; policies and laws on volunteering; promotion of civic activism and citizen participation in decision-making through the education system).

## **Area 3: Government– CSO Relationship**

Sub-area 3.1: Framework for cooperation (strategic documents for civil society development; institutional framework for cooperation);

Sub-area 3.2: Participation in policy and decision-making processes (standards enabling CSO participation in decision-making processes; transparency and accessibility of policies and decisions, including free access to information; CSO participation in inter-sector working and advisory bodies dealing with policy and decision-making);

Sub-area 3.3: Cooperation in service provision (provision of services by CSOs; state funding for services provided by CSOs; equality in the market for services and public procurement between for-profit and non-profit organizations).

This report utilizes materials from the Civil Initiatives published during 2022 and 2023, primarily the bi-monthly reports "Three Freedoms Under the Magnifying

Glass," which were produced as a result of the work of the Three Freedoms platform. In April 2019, this platform was signed by 20 civil society organizations from Serbia, with the aim of protecting and advancing the three fundamental freedoms that determine the position of civil society - freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly. The platform, which contains demands addressed to domestic and international actors to improve the position of civil society in Serbia, states, among other things, that its signatories will act as a united front of civil society organizations to protect endangered freedoms and create conditions for unhindered citizen participation in public affairs through the development of civil society. During 2022, the bi-monthly reports "Three Freedoms Under the Magnifying Glass" registered **131 individual cases of human rights violations and infringements of fundamental freedoms**, of which 85 were related to freedom of expression, 30 to freedom of association, and 16 to freedom of assembly. Out of the 131 cases, 33 were physical attacks, 40 were verbal attacks, and 58 were cases of pressure. In addition to the "Three Freedoms Under the Magnifying Glass" reports, in 2022, violations of fundamental civil and political rights were also documented through special reports called "Elections Under the Magnifying Glass," which were published from 15 February to 31 March 2022, covering infringements of fundamental freedoms during the pre-election campaign leading up to the elections on 3 April 2022. These reports recorded an **additional 84 cases**, bringing the **total number of cases in 2022 to 215**, which represents a significant increase compared to the 131 cases recorded in 2021. As for 2023, up until 1 November 2023, **a total of 158 individual cases of human rights violations and infringements of fundamental freedoms** were registered, with 107 related to freedom of expression, 29 to freedom of assembly, and 22 to freedom of association. Out of the 158 cases, 35 were physical attacks, 53 were verbal attacks, and 70 were cases of pressure. This alarming statistics indicate a trend of worsening conditions for fundamental freedoms year after year.

In addition to the bi-monthly reports "Three Freedoms Under the Magnifying Glass," the report "Monitoring Matrix on the Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development - Serbia Brief 2022" was also used. This report is part of a series of reports covering seven countries in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia) and Turkey. The Monitoring Matrix was developed in 2013 by the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) with the support of its members and partners, and it represents the main principles and standards defined as crucial for considering the legal environment as supportive and enabling for the work of civil society organizations (CSOs). For the purpose of this report, data was collected through desk research, reviewing reports and studies from relevant domestic and international organizations, and analyzing publications in traditional and online media and on social networks.

## AREA 1: FUNDAMENTAL LEGAL GUARANTEES OF FREEDOM

### Sub-area 1.1: Freedom of association

*Activists with CSOs have been facing pressure in their work for decades due to the narrative of "foreign agents" being used against them. Environmental activists, CSOs dealing with transitional justice issues, human rights, and watchdog organizations that track the implementation of public policies are particularly targeted. Attacks come from high-ranking government officials and are then spread through media outlets close to the ruling SNS regime. In such an atmosphere, attacks on activists occur, sometimes resulting in serious physical injuries that land them in hospitals. CSO offices are also targeted by vandals. CSOs were especially exposed to attacks during the 2022 election campaign. Politicians from different parties used insults against CSOs in order to gain votes. This way, by creating a false perception of the role and funding of CSOs, long-standing distrust among citizens towards civil*

*society organizations and their activities is spread. What is particularly concerning is the inadequate response of institutions in cases of attacks on representatives of the civil sector and activists. By not reacting, violence is silently approved, thereby only encouraging and emboldening future attacks. The freedom of association is also threatened by the pressures faced by active workers through union activities.*

Decades-long propaganda aimed at creating animosity towards the existence and work of CSOs has often led to the hatred crossing the line of verbal attacks and escalating into open physical conflicts with activists or acts of vandalism, such as property destruction. A group of activists from Novi Sad was first verbally attacked in the tabloid "Alo" in articles published on 17 February 2022, and then physically attacked the next day. In the [published article](#) in the mentioned tabloid, activist Brajan Brković is referred to as a "traitor," "foreign mercenary," "terrorist," "madman," and many other names, as well as someone who "works on overthrowing the state." A group of civil society organizations from Vojvodina condemned this article about Brković, stating that the only reason behind these attacks is Brković's resistance to the existing regime through activism. Just a day later, a group of activists from the Youth Student Action, of which Brković is a member, [was attacked on the Freedom Bridge \(Most Slobode\)](#) in Novi Sad while standing near a hate graffiti at that location, which read "Srbe na vrbe" (Serbs on willows), with the organization's signature below it. Brković states that they learned about this graffiti from a local media outlet close to the ruling SNS, that they reported the case to the police, and then started to cover it up. During the painting, three men approached them and physically attacked them after a brief verbal argument. Brković has been subjected to various pressures multiple times throughout the year. He also announced that [he was filmed by a police drone](#) flying two meters from his terrace during the visit of the President of the Republic to Novi Sad on 19 March 2022. He adds that the day before, he was warned by members of the Ministry of Interior not to "cause incidents at the opening of the railway station, as it will end very badly for them." He also notes that in the morning hours on the day of the mentioned event, several members of the Ministry of Interior without uniforms patrolled in front of the entrance to his building.

[Environmental activist Miroslav Perović from Kosjerić](#), was beaten up at the entrance of his apartment building on 21 September 2022, as reported by the group "Eco Guard". According to the statement, Perović was attacked by three individuals wearing hoodies and dark jackets, who inflicted injuries to his head and body, requiring medical treatment. Perović had been receiving threats throughout the summer due to his support for the local residents of Kosjerić who were protesting against the construction of a quarry in the area. The quarry had its construction permit revoked and posed a danger to the residents and the environment, including the water source. Attacks on environmental activists occur in the context of an ongoing negative campaign led by government representatives. At a press conference on 20 January 2022, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić made [a series of accusations against environmental associations, activists](#), and international donors in relation to the government's decision to annul legal acts regarding the lithium exploitation project in Loznica. Brnabić specifically targeted international donors, labeling them as "hypocritical". She claimed that this "hypocrisy" was evident in the fact that foreign donors directly participate in the formation of environmental associations and fund their activities, including financing environmental protests against companies from the same countries where these donors are based. Brnabić also argued that the "hypocrisy" was also reflected in the fact that these protests, aimed at "breaking the spine" of Aleksandar Vučić, were known by the donors to be projects that the President of Serbia would "push forward". In response to these accusations, the embassies of the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom issued a joint statement, followed by their individual statements, and those from international foundations that completely rejected these allegations. Inter alia, the embassies stated that these were "harmful accusations" that were "particularly difficult to understand" considering their cooperation with the government and the National Assembly regarding reform processes and democratic institutions. Additionally, the USAID office emphasized that the grant agreement explicitly excludes the possibility of using funds for protests or political activities, that USAID has collaborated with every

government of Serbia in the past two decades, and that “any suggestion to the contrary is considered absurd”.

Aleksandar Šapić is particularly prone to insulting and targeting journalists, media, and activists. During a session of the Belgrade City Assembly held on 18 August 2022, [he targeted the Humanitarian Law Center](#) and its founder Nataša Kandić. After the "We Must" coalition councilors raised concerns about the appointment of former military official Svetozar Andrić as a member of the City Council, against whom the Center filed a criminal complaint for war crimes committed in the 1990s, Mayor Šapić stated at the assembly podium that "anyone against whom Nataša Kandić and the Humanitarian Law Center file a criminal complaint should be celebrated by the Serbian people." He also added that Kandić "accuses the Serbian people of genocide" and that she "believes that Serbs are absolutely guilty for everything that happened during the wars in the 1990s." The Humanitarian Law Center and Nataša Kandić, due to their decades-long engagement in dealing with the past and prosecuting war criminals, are frequent targets of right-wing public officials and politicians.

The targeting of civil society organizations (CSOs) by certain media outlets has continued. The Balkan regional portal of the Russian state television, "Russia Today," [RT Balkan, targeted prominent CSOs](#) operating in Serbia in an article published on 20 December 2022. The article lists the "highest-paid non-governmental organizations that received funding" from donors in the United States between 2018 and 2022. The highlighted organizations include the Roma Education Foundation, NGO Atina, Catalyst Foundation, Reconstruction Women's Fund, CANVAS, CRTA, Belgrade Center for Security Policy, and the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation. Additionally, the article lists Civil Initiatives, Krokodil Association, Kreni-Promeni organization, and the Center for the Protection and Assistance to Asylum Seekers. Media outlets, particularly the portals KRIK, BIRN, Danas, and Vreme, are also singled out. RT Balkan concludes by stating that "millions of US dollars flow into the non-governmental sector in Serbia every year," through which

"the Washington administration seeks to exert influence on society and the government in Serbia."

Targeting of CSOs was an integral part of the 2022 pre-election campaign, as some right-wing politicians saw it as a way to gain popularity among voters. Saša Radulović, the leader of the political party "Dosta je bilo" (Enough is Enough), targeted CSOs in several posts on the [social media platform Twitter](#) (now X). Sharing news about the submission of the electoral list for the upcoming elections, in which his party participated as part of the coalition "Suverenisti" (Sovereignists), Radulović stated that "Serbia is not for sale to global corporations or various NGOs that want to sell themselves as fighters against the sale of Serbia to those same corporations." CSOs also became targets of other members of the "Suverenisti" list. The presidential candidate of this list [Branka Stamenković](#) posted a video targeting CSOs. In the video published on 2 March 2022, on the candidate's Twitter page, it is stated that "non-governmental organizations funded by foreign governments and shamelessly wealthy individuals like Soros and Rockefeller greatly endanger Serbia's national interest." Stamenković claims that the money that has "entered" Serbia in the last 30 years has been used to "promote self-chauvinism," and that it is necessary to find a way for Serbia to "fight against this subtle and dangerous indoctrination." [The Serbian Radical Party](#) announced, as part of their pre-election promise, that they would ban the funding of CSOs engaged in "anti-Serbian propaganda" if they win the elections on 3 April. According to the deputy president of this political party, Aleksandar Šešelj, "anti-Serbian non-governmental organizations that spread anti-Serbian propaganda" are financed from the budget of the Republic of Serbia, and this propaganda relates to "an independent Kosovo, the Srebrenica genocide, blaming Serbs for being bombed, and insulting the Serbian national identity." [Miša Vacić, the president of the Serbian Right party](#), and a candidate in the presidential elections, targeted CSOs by making a series of familiar accusations aimed at discrediting their work. Vacić stated that "any interference by foreign ambassadors in the country's internal affairs, financing of non-governmental organizations that fight against the Serbian Orthodox Church, Serbian patriotism, and the state itself is unacceptable to

him.” He also finds it unacceptable to "tolerate media outlets that publish maps of Serbia without Kosovo and Metohija, accuse the Serbian people of genocide, and insult the feelings of the majority of citizens.”

LGBTQ+ rights organizations have been exposed to attacks and targeting for years. The Pride Info Center (PIC) in Belgrade is the most frequent target of these attacks, despite being located in close proximity to buildings housing the highest state institutions with twenty-four-hour protection and surveillance. [The premises of the Pride Info Center](#) were attacked by a man in the evening hours of 17 February 2022. The man entered the PIC premises, vandalized the inventory, and threatened the employees who were present at the workplace at that time. Security immediately responded and removed the attacker from the premises, but he continued to threaten and kick at the entrance door. The attacker was then arrested by the police, and the PIC received information that he was soon released. This was the 13th attack on the PIC, and the organization reminds that none of the previous 12 attack cases have been fully processed, and there is a lack of response from official institutions after the attacks. [The Ministry of Interior](#) issued a statement the next day, stating that a request will be filed to initiate a misdemeanor procedure against the suspected attacker. The premises of the Pride Info Center [were targeted again](#) on 7 June 2022, when the neo-Nazi group "Belgrader Jugend" placed stickers on the windows of their premises. This was the fourteenth attack since the opening of the PIC, and none of the attackers have ever been prosecuted. The Ministry of Interior issued a statement on 14 June 2022, stating that consultations were conducted with the relevant prosecutor's office in this case, and the prosecutor's office determined that "there are no elements of a criminal offense.” The Ombudsman institution also reacted to this attack by initiating a procedure to assess the legality and regularity of the police's work. The frequency of attacks on the PIC is concerning, as well as the lack of response from the systemic institutions that consistently fail to provide protection to LGBTQ+ rights activists. [The premises of the Pride Info Center were also robbed twice](#) on 9 October 2022. The organization "Da se zna” (Let It Be Known) announced that an unknown young person took money from the donation box, and on another occasion, with another

person, entered the PIC during the night and stole the remaining money from the box. The organization stated that the money was collected to support the process of psychological and legal assistance to victims of homophobia and transphobia. What is even more dangerous are the direct attacks on LGBTQ+ rights activists. [Volunteer of the organization "Da se zna" Lazar Savić was attacked](#) in Čačak twice in the same day, as stated in the organization's statement from 2 October 2022. Savić was verbally attacked by two men in front of a fast food restaurant, and one of them spat on him. Savić was also hit with a beer bottle. "Da se zna" states that this case, motivated by homophobia, occurred after Savić had spoken out publicly multiple times, and that these attacks "reflect the lives of all LGBT+ people who decide to speak out and talk about their lives."

The entrance to the premises of the organization [Women in Black](#) was vandalized on 12 July 2022, the day after a series of activities organized by this organization to commemorate the anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. As announced by this organization, an unknown person first presented themselves as a mailman, and then poured red paint on the entrance door and staircase. This is the third attack on this organization since October 2021, and none of the cases have been resolved by the competent institutions. Women in Black state that the attacks on them are instigated by state officials who consider them "political dissidents," and that the "climate of impunity" maintained by the current regime further encourages such attacks on them and similar organizations.

Activists for women's rights also face intimidation and attacks. [Activists of the non-profit organization "Women for Peace"](#) from Leskovac, which has been providing support to women victims of violence in this city for 15 years, have been exposed to open threats since 7 July 2022. The president of this organization, Ljiljana Nešić, announced that they criticized the allocation of money from the city budget to the convicted abuser Miodrag Stanković, for the opening of a new SOS office to combat domestic violence in this city, and that, after this, threats began, which at one point were also directed towards their family members. Nešić states that they were

threatened on the street, when returning from work, by younger people. He states that they were restrained in their decision to report these cases to the police, taking into account that the one in which they were beaten at the reported rally from 2016 did not experience an epilogue before the competent institutions. Regarding this case, the international organization [Front Line Defenders](#), also reacted, which published the details of these attacks and expressed concern about the fact that activists suffer threats because of their work in the field of protecting women victims of violence.

Verbal attacks on CSO representatives and death threats are the result of multi-decade propaganda against CSOs by government representatives and pro-regime tabloid media that regularly use epithets about "domestic traitors and foreign mercenaries" when talking about CSOs and activists. Director of the Institute for European Affairs [Naim Leo Beshiri again experienced threats](#) on social networks from anonymous profiles. Among other things, he was threatened that he would "end up in a cold storage". Beshiri told the media that this is not the first time he has been threatened and that he did not report the case to the competent institutions because they did not react when he filed the report the previous time, due to threatening pictures that were pasted in the building where he lives. On this occasion, Beshiri said that "we live in a society where violence as such is extremely tolerated" and that threats intensify when some sensitive topic is brought up again in the public eye, among others the topics of the wars of the 1990s, dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina or sanctions against Russia.

[“Kreni-promeni” \(Go Change\) campaign](#) announced on 3 July 2022, through a post on the Instagram network, that she is receiving threats directed both against the campaign itself and against Sava Manojlović, the director of this initiative. The post stated that the threats were inspired by negative and threatening statements made by the highest public officials against them, and some of these statements were compiled into a video that was attached to the mentioned post.

The situation with freedom of association has not changed even in 2023. [The "Black Ram" Cafe \(„Crni ovan"\)](#) in Novi Sad, known as a gathering place for antifascist groups and individuals, and where alternative events and fairs, activist seminars, and humanitarian actions are organized, it was attacked 9 times in 2023. One of the attacks occurred on 15 January when a group of masked neo-Nazis attempted to break into a local establishment, resulting in two people being injured. According to the owner of this establishment, Bojan Šovljanski, [the attackers, armed with cold weapons](#), prominently displayed Nazi symbols, including the swastika. However, the competent prosecutor's office classified the attack only as "hooliganism." In October, the attackers were sentenced to suspended prison terms, but such sentences do not give hope that it will prevent similar attacks that endanger the safety of all those who gather at this place. Šovljanski states that the guests of this establishment feel scared, especially after learning about the existence of a Telegram group that brings together more than 600 neo-Nazis, where information about this place and the people who come to it is shared. Šovljanski has also been subjected to threats after being targeted by Goran Davidović, the former leader of the banned neo-Nazi organization "National Front," as well as the leader of a similar organization, "Leviathan," Pavle Bihalija. Šovljanski emphasizes that neo-Nazis often confront him on the street, and the attack on 15 January was condemned by the mayor of Novi Sad and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality. Despite the swift arrests of the attackers, Šovljanski has stated that he does not expect the local authorities to take the necessary measures to provide him with protection. The "Black Ram" establishment [was once again targeted by vandals](#), when banners that were displayed on it were torn down on 25 March. [The latest attack in a series](#) occurred on the night between 13 and 14 October 2023. The attacker attempted to break into the establishment, and when he failed, he smashed the window and knocked over the tables in front. The attacker was recognized as a member of a neo-fascist organization by the "Black Ram" staff. The repeated attacks indicate justified concern for the safety of those who gather at this establishment.

Due to the display of the Ukrainian flag on the anniversary of the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, [the premises of the Crocodile Association](#), were attacked on 13 March 2023. The attack was carried out by three individuals who vandalized the property of this association by spray-painting messages with red paint. The creative director of this association, Vladimir Arsenijević, reminded that his colleagues [have been subjected to various attacks](#) due to the removal of a nationalist mural in downtown Belgrade. [Attacks on the Pride Info Center](#) are also recorded in 2023. The premises of the center were attacked on the night between 26 and 27 May 2023. Red paint was thrown on the storefront, and the security camera cables were cut. This is the 18th attack on the Pride Info Center.

In August 2023, in the Borča settlement where Sofija Todorović, the program director of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, lives, [graffiti appeared with a misogynistic message](#) targeting the activist. The Initiative states that the aim of such actions is to silence human rights defenders, and women active in political life are particularly exposed to attacks. It is especially concerning that the attackers have knowledge of the activists' places of residence, and the adequate response of the competent authorities in prosecuting the perpetrators is often lacking. The use of sexist insults against activist Sofija Todorović is indicative of the prevalence of misogynistic social attitudes, making female activists doubly targeted, both for their clear political views and for being women.

One of the most serious examples of violence against activists was recorded on 10 September 2023, when two cars chased and then knocked down the "Local Front" activist Predrag Voštinić, who then ended up in the hospital. [Voštinić was attacked](#) in Kraljevo when he was knocked off his bike by the driver of a car with Novi Sad license plates, and the activist suffered injuries to his hand and head. Voštinić was first thrown from two cars, and after they failed to push him off the road, the attackers turned around at the roundabout and returned to reach and hit the activist. The attacker was detained, and the "Local Front" believes that this attack was not accidental. Of particular concern is the information that the attackers included

students from the Police Academy. Some opposition parties have said that this is an [attempted murder](#) and the reaction of the competent authorities is expected if the state wants to send a clear message against violence against activists.

After the poaching of quails in the Toplička district was exposed, the activists of the Society for the Protection and Study of Birds of Serbia (DZPPS) [received death threats via social media](#). The association calls on the authorities to react because a large number of people are calling for the killing and physical injury of activists. Threats usually come from hunters, which is an additional reason to be alarmed and take threats seriously. Society has been facing threats from hunters for years, which comes as a direct consequence of their field involvement in exposing poaching.

Pressures on CSOs are not surprising, given the narrative spread about them by high-ranking government officials. Vladimir Đukanović, MP and high-ranking SNS official, called on the state through his account on the platform X (formerly Twitter) to pass a law to [“regulate the work of the NGO sector”](#) and thus “prevent them to receive money for their action from abroad”. A few days later, in response to the ban on former Montenegrin government minister Jovana Mirović entering Serbia, Đukanović stated that [entry should be denied to anyone who finances “non-governmental organizations that create chaos”](#). Đukanović continues to spread a negative narrative about non-governmental organizations, thereby fueling distrust among citizens towards the civil sector and creating a dangerous atmosphere for all those involved in civil society.

## Pressures on union representatives

Violation of freedom of association is also reflected in the pressures union representatives and members face. The freedom of trade union association is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, the Labor Law, and numerous international documents ratified by our country. Despite all of this, those

who organize themselves in unions are subjected to various pressures in their workplace.

The United Trade Unions of Serbia "Unity" announced on July 3, 2022, that the company "Valy Ltd. Valjevo" has filed [a lawsuit against the president of this union](#), Željko Veselinović, seeking a one-year prison sentence. The lawsuit followed Veselinović's repeated public statements about the alleged illegal layoffs of surplus employees in this company. Due to these public appearances, the company stated that Veselinović "intentionally intended to damage the business reputation and creditworthiness of the company." "Unity" stated that they consider the lawsuit as "open pressure on the union, workers, state, and judiciary," and that they "will not give up the fight for workers' rights" and "are not intimidated by the lawsuit." In October 2021, "Unity" spoke about [unclear criteria](#) based on which 150 workers of the company Valy were declared surplus, and later announced that [one of the dismissed workers died](#) from health problems, which Valy did not believe, "thinking she was pretending," which exposed her to discrimination, transfer from one department to another, and later dismissal, even though she had previously suffered work-related injuries in that company.

Dalibor Nikolić, a worker and union representative at the Jura factory in Niš, received a [warning before dismissal](#) after speaking about working conditions in this factory. According to media reports, Nikolić received information in the notification that he received at his home address that he "violated work discipline" because he spoke "inaccurate information" about the employer. These were information about dysfunctional air conditioners, which caused the temperature inside the factory to exceed 30 degrees, as well as information that the emergency services had to intervene multiple times. Threats of dismissal are attempts by company representatives to intimidate workers and prevent any possible public criticism of exploitative working conditions to which employees are exposed.

The United Trade Unions of Serbia "Unity" announced that the union representative in the Public Enterprise "Serbian Post" Stefan Mitrović [is facing pressure from his employer](#). It is stated that Mitrović has been subjected to two external inspections by the Zemun Work Unit, day after day, which is "not a practice or usual procedure," suspecting that Mitrović is being set up for dismissal. It is also stated that the call for reporting as part of the extraordinary inspection does not specify a specific legal basis according to the Collective Bargaining Agreement, nor a specific act of this company. Mitrović has previously been punished with a reduction in salary, and he has repeatedly spoken out publicly about unfavorable working conditions in which the workers of this company work.

Three union leaders at the Republic Geodetic Institute (RGZ), [were removed from their positions](#) in an opaque and unexplained procedure after publicly speaking out about incompetent management during the aftermath of a cyber attack on this state institution on 14 July 2022. Dijana Konstantinović from the Unified Trade Union Organization was unable to log into her computer when she arrived at work on 27 July 2022, and after addressing the issue with her supervisor, she was informed that there was an email stating that she was suspended. She did not receive an official suspension notice. Nebojša Pejčinović from the Independent Republic Geodetic Institute Union confirmed to the media that there is information circulating in Viber groups, where RGZ employees are present, that criminal charges have been filed against the union leaders, as well as parts of the suspension notice that were never delivered to the union leaders themselves. Pejčinović indicates that in these groups, the reason for initiating disciplinary proceedings is stated as "the union leaders speaking to the media without permission from the company's management." He also added that the proceedings against them are unlawful because "their job is to represent the interests of their members and colleagues, including all employees." The Association of Free and Independent Trade Unions [protested against the accusations made by the director](#) of RGZ, Borko Drašković, that the three union leaders in this institution, including their representative, "participated in the cyber attack on RGZ." The Republic Geodetic Authority was subjected to a cyber attack on 14 July 2022,

and the mentioned unions and their representatives publicly spoke about the problems in the real estate cadastre system, also sending open letters to the Prime Minister and the President of Serbia.

The state is obligated to guarantee workers' right to associate and act through unions and to prevent all cases of repression, both by public enterprises and private companies, that use means of coercion and threats in an attempt to silence the voices of workers in their fight for their inalienable labor rights.

## Sub-area 1.2: Related freedoms

### Freedom of expression

*Due to the unfavorable socio-political climate, practicing journalism has become one of the riskiest professions in Serbia, as evidenced by the fact that Serbia was identified as [one of the most dangerous countries for journalists](#) in a statement by a group of media freedom organizations that visited Belgrade on 26 April 2023. Some of the criticisms they mentioned include: poor safety conditions for journalists, insufficient rule of law, media capture, and an expressed climate of hostility towards critical reporting, which means that the possibility of physical attacks on independent journalists in Serbia is high. This opinion is shared by [the International Press Institute](#), which warns about the state of media freedom and journalist safety in Serbia. As they state, the climate of hostility is perpetuated by current politicians, and until this is resolved and the public discourse on critical journalism is normalized, tangible progress will remain unattainable.*

*Journalists were faced with physical and verbal attacks, serious death threats and pressure from various social actors throughout 2022 and 2023. In the first 6 months of 2023, the Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS) recorded 67 cases of threats to journalists through its database, which is one case more than in the same period last*

year. Journalists are regularly labeled as "foreign mercenaries", "traitors" and "enemies of the state", and this kind of rhetoric comes directly from high-ranking government officials and then spreads through media close to the government. Such rhetoric encourages anonymous actors to threaten independent journalists with death via social networks, which has become an integral part of the job they unfortunately face. Sometimes, threats go beyond the digital sphere and manifest themselves through physical attacks that directly threaten the lives of journalists. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the Reporters Without Borders report, Serbia dropped from 79th to 91st place in [the 2023 World Press Freedom Index](#), placing it among the "problematic countries." All international and domestic reports highlight concerns about the behavior of state officials towards independent media, and the Reporters Without Borders report states that neither politicians nor institutions are willing to improve the situation and that [the authorities in Serbia "are playing with fire"](#) because of inflammatory rhetoric against professional media. This was especially seen before and during the election campaign when attacks on journalists were intensified, which indicates that there was no improvement in political awareness on the part of public officials about the existence of responsibility for the publicly spoken word. One of the types of pressures that journalists are exposed to is censorship and the impossibility of performing journalistic work through prohibitions and denial of the right of journalists to attend public officials' events. This kind of censorship particularly affects the local media. Their position is difficult considering that, in addition to cases of difficult access to relevant information and being ignored by local authorities, they were often victims of undisguised censorship. The practice of dividing journalists into eligible and ineligible has resulted in the impossibility of doing work for many local media who perform their work professionally and in accordance with the rules of the journalistic profession.

In addition to journalists, activists who deal critically with important social issues are also exposed to attacks. Particularly exposed to attacks and various types of institutional pressures in recent years are environmental activists who throughout the country fight against harmful projects of both private companies and the state, which

carry with them a danger to the environment. Activists are exposed to the use of excessive force by the police, and then to various misdemeanor charges that try to prevent their further work. They are also exposed to targeting by representatives of the authorities, which aims to discredit their work. What is particularly worrying in the case of attacks on journalists and activists is the absence of adequate institutional reactions, which creates an atmosphere of impunity. For this reason, [CIVICUS, through its Monitor watchlist](#), sent a recommendation to the Government of Serbia to conduct urgent and impartial investigations into attacks on journalists and to bring the perpetrators to justice, as well as to refrain from intimidating environmental activists and appeal to companies to desist from SLAPP lawsuits against environmental activists and CSOs.

Throughout 2022 and 2023, the practice was continued of filing strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP lawsuits), which are directed against journalists, media, activists and CSOs, with the aim of depleting their physical and material resources and further preventing their active political and socially engaged activities and their professional and critical reporting. [The CASE coalition](#), which keeps track of SLAPP lawsuits across Europe, has published an updated report with data collected in 2022. Among 35 European countries, Serbia took 10th place on the list, with 28 registered SLAPP lawsuits. As the coalition only publishes data on cases it has been able to verify, the actual number of lawsuits is potentially higher. The intention of these lawsuits is to exhaust the resources of journalists and activists in order to prevent them from critical reporting, advocacy and political participation. Such lawsuits are initiated by the party that always has greater political and economic power than the defendant party, and abuses them and thus directly threatens freedom of expression with the aim of stifling criticism, but also with the aim of sending a message to all those who would dare to speak critically in public in the future. The defendant is then obliged to defend himself in processes that often last for years and are exhausting materially, physically and emotionally instead of freely and unhindered engaging in his journalistic and/or activist engagement. In addition to activists, for whom the material costs of court proceedings are the biggest

*challenge, SLAPP lawsuits are also a great threat to local media, which are often unable to pay high compensation claims and are therefore often forced to suspend their work completely.*

## Attacks on journalists and activists

Attacks on journalists continued in 2022 and 2023. Of particular concern are physical attacks, as well as targeting and pressure from high-ranking government officials. The dangerous rhetoric that labels independent media and activists as "enemies of the state, traitors and criminals" contributes to the creation of a hostile atmosphere in which further attacks on them are encouraged, which directly threatens their security and smooth work.

Physical attacks on journalists continue to show a growing trend. During the environmental protest and roadblock near Užice, [journalist from the Nova.rs portal was attacked](#) by a person whose car was in the convoy formed due to the roadblock. The woman got out of the car, then started shouting and cursing, and then hit the journalist on the hand, knocking the phone out of her hand. In one case, journalists were attacked together with activists. [Journalists of the Bulgarian National Television \(BNT\)](#) and several environmental activists were attacked on 14 June 2022, during an attempt to record a program about environmental pollution in the area of the "Podvirovi" mine in the municipality of Bosilegrad. According to the media, journalists and activists approached the entrance to the mine when 6-7 people attacked them with stones, and among the attackers were: the director of the company "Bosil metal" Miodrag Vukajlović, the head of the mine's security and workers in the mine.

Employees of OK Radio from Vranje have been targeted and threatened multiple times in the previous period. In June 2022, [the windows of this radio station's premises were bricked up](#), and prior to that, their inventory was destroyed and glass was shattered. The employees of this radio station are regularly subjected to death threats by local controversial businessman Dejan Nikolić Kantar, who is the owner

of an illegally constructed building next to the media's premises. After publicly expressing support for the employees of OK Radio, [posters featuring Veran Matić, a member of the Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists.](#), appeared on the streets of Vranje in June 2022. In the court proceedings regarding this case, all four individuals suspected of posting the posters were acquitted, and Matić [called the Court's decision](#) “scandalous“. Another member of the Permanent Working Group was also subjected to threats due to her support for OK Radio. Ljiljana Stojanović, the editor-in-chief of JUGpress portal, stated to Civil Initiatives that she has been under continuous pressure because of the support she provided to OK Radio from Vranje as a member of the Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists. In a separate conversation with Civil Initiatives, Stojanović mentioned receiving threatening messages during a visit to Vranje, where it was stated that it was known exactly who she met with and what was discussed in the meetings. The case of OK Radio had its judicial conclusion in 2023 when [Dejan Nikolić Kantar](#) was sentenced to a year and a half in prison for endangering the safety of OK Radio's owner, Olivera Vladković, and the financial director, Svetlana Ivanova. However, even during the reading of the verdict, Kantar made accusations and threatened the victims.

Death threats have unfortunately become an integral part of the job that journalists in Serbia face. An email titled ["Belgrade Charlie Ebdo"](#) was received by the daily newspaper Danas, alluding to the shooting at the offices of the French satirical magazine in 2015. The email vividly describes an attack on the Danas editorial office, announcing that journalists, editors, and columnists are in "mortal danger," threatening them with "salvos of bullets" that will "shatter their windows and ricochet above their heads" before "passing through their skulls and sending them to limbo." The threatening message states that the motive for this attack is Danas' reporting on Kosovo, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro, and further accuses Danas and other independent media of openly siding with "Albanian separatists." [Death threats](#) were also sent via email to the N1 television station, with the message stating, "You paid American mercenaries should be slaughtered like rats for all the lies you spread." Verica Marinčić, [a journalist for the IN Media portal](#) from Indjija, received threats

after writing about a local priest who was removed from a store by the police for refusing to pay a bill. [A journalist for Nova.rs](#), Pero Jovović has received multiple death threats via social media throughout 2022, and the threats against him have not stopped in 2023. The editor-in-chief of Podrinske, [Isidora Kovačević](#), received threats from an unknown person via social media. After publishing an article criticizing a functionary of the Serbian Progressive Party and the director of the Pension and Disability Insurance Fund in Šabac, Aleksandar Pejanović, Kovačević received threats stating that she "should stop writing, otherwise they will start making posts about her until she ends up in a mental institution." Isidora Kovačević was targeted in 2021 after reporting on protests against Rio Tinto. Posters in the form of wanted notices for the journalist and two citizens of Šabac appeared throughout the city. [The trial of the accused](#) in this case, Milan Filipović, is still ongoing. [Insults and death threats](#) have been sent to journalist Snezana Congradin via social media, as she has been regularly subjected to this type of pressure in recent years. Threats are increasingly being directed at the family members of journalists, and attackers often know their home addresses. Journalist [Dinko Gruhonjić](#) along with his family, has been the target of threats and insults. A person claiming to be a "Serb and Chetnik" threatened Gruhonjić via Facebook, calling him a "traitor." In September 2022, [a journalist for the Pančevo.SiT portal](#), Slobodan Dukić, was subjected to death threats when unknown individuals left funeral wreaths at the entrance to his property in Kovin. Dukić stated that these threats came after he published an article questioning the higher education diploma of a person close to the president of the Kovin municipality, Dusan Maksimović. [Supporters of the Partizan club](#) chanted against Brankica Stanković, the editor-in-chief of Insajder television, at a basketball game held on 22 May 2022, in Belgrade, following the re-broadcast of the series "Powerlessness of the State." Insajder portal states that the relevant institutions did not react to this case, even though it happened in front of a full arena and was broadcast live. [The chanting of hooligans](#) against the journalist was repeated in June 2023. Stanković exposed the connection between football fans and criminal groups 14 years ago, as well as the state's powerlessness in combating them, and due to these threats, Stanković was under police protection in 2009. [The editor of Drvotehnika](#),

Dragojlo Blagojević received death threats because of an article published in the print edition of this magazine. The article discusses "forestry moguls who resell wood at double the prices, and the state tolerates or encourages all of this for a long time." Late at night, Blagojević received a call on his landline, threatening him with death. A journalist and editor of Kurir newspaper [were verbally attacked](#) after publishing an article on 1 August 2022, about an allegedly illegal nursing home called "Royal," which operates without a license and where the living conditions and working conditions of employees are very poor. The owner of the mentioned facility and his brother sent a series of threatening messages to the author of this article and the editor of Kurir. The messages contained sexist insults and threats of lawsuits and face-to-face confrontations, emphasizing that they and their brother have a privileged position because they are "part of the system" and "support the ruling party." After publishing an article raising doubts about the legality of the work of the humanitarian organization "28. jun," [death threats](#) were also sent to Jelena Skenderija, a journalist for Vecernje Novosti.

It often happens that independent journalists are exposed to attacks by pro-government media that target them and thus directly expose them to danger. This was the case with [journalist Nenad Živković](#), who was subjected to verbal attacks by the Banatska istina portal. In the controversial article on the mentioned portal, Živković was characterized as a "traitor and foreign mercenary" and as someone who "hates the Serbian people." This is not the first time that the Banatska istina portal has written about Živković in this way, and the NUNS sees this case only as part of a campaign against independent journalists. After such an orchestrated campaign in the tabloids Informer and Alo, [death threats were sent to journalist Jelena Obućina](#), which speaks to the influence that tabloid campaigns have on later death threats from anonymous individuals.

During 2022, there were several cases of media property damage. Several unknown men with hoods on their heads [vandalized the premises](#) of a Hungarian media company in Subotica. The premises of another local media outlet were also targeted

by attackers, indicating the vulnerability of local media. The official premises of the weekly newspaper [Glas Podrinja](#) from Šabac were damaged on the night of 12 June 2022. The newspaper stated that a concrete block was used to break the window of their office in the city center and that they reported the case to the police. The RTV team was also subjected to an attack with a chauvinistic connotation when [their official vehicle was damaged](#). First, the license plates were removed from the vehicle, and then the attacker carved the Latin letter "U" onto the vehicle, which was parked in front of the Croatian Cultural and Artistic Society in the city at that time.

The situation with attacks on journalists and media has not improved even during 2023, and the seriousness of the circumstances in which this profession finds itself is evidenced by the fact that one journalist, Marko Vidojković, had to be [relocated out of the country with his family](#) due to constant death threats he was exposed to. The International Association of Poets, Essayists, and Writers (PEN) recommended the urgent relocation of Vidojković from Serbia, urging the Serbian authorities to urgently investigate all cases of threats he had been subjected to. Marko Vidojković and Nenad Kulačin, the hosts of the show "Dobar, loš, zao" (The Good, the Bad, the Evil), are regularly subjected to threats and attacks, both by unknown individuals on social media and by high-ranking state officials and media close to the authorities. Even the fact that Vidojković had to be relocated was not a sign to the government representatives to stop endangering the safety of the two journalists. As a result, Milimir Vujadinović, [an MP of the Serbian Progressive Party](#) Milimir Vujadinović accused Marko Vidojković of "satanic speech" and referred to the DLZ podcast as a "satanic temple." He also stated that the SNS will continue to fight "against that madness that comes out of Marko Vidojković's mouth."

Despite numerous warnings from non-governmental and international organizations, physical attacks on journalists continue to occur. [Reporter Marko Dragoslavić from the FoNet agency was physically assaulted](#) while on assignment on 7 March 2023. During the protest called "Students for Kosovo," Dragoslavić was physically attacked by being repeatedly hit in the head by an unknown person, who then quickly left the

scene. Several journalist teams were also attacked on 1 May while on assignment for the International Workers' Day in Belgrade. [Journalist team of the Radio-Television of Serbia](#) was attacked and insulted by an unknown person, and during the incident, the camera crew was also damaged. At another location in the city, [the crew of Prva TV](#) was attacked with a fork by an individual who was subsequently arrested. A photojournalist for Pančevac newspaper, [Milan Šupica was physically assaulted](#) on 4 May 2023, in Pančevo, after completing his assignment. Three masked individuals verbally and then physically attacked him near his home, after he got out of his car. The attackers tore his bag, which contained his camera, and struck him several times in the chest. When he tried to call the police, they took his phone. In one recorded case, even the children of N1 journalists were attacked. During the move to a new apartment, [journalist Dušan Mladenović and his family](#) were verbally attacked by the new neighbor, threatening to make their lives a living hell, and then poured a bucket of water on their children. The attacker received support on Twitter, where one user stated that they would do the same if someone working for N1 lived next to them. Vojin Radovanović, a journalist for Danas newspaper, was physically assaulted when an unknown man attacked him, accusing him of working for "mercenary media." After Radovanović published a statement from the Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS) criticizing the Prosecutor's Office for inadequate response to the physical attack on him, he received [a death threat](#) through Instagram, stating that he should be "killed as an example." The editor-in-chief of Niška inicijativa, [Srđan Nonić fw as physically assaulted](#) in Niš while on assignment on 14 January 2023, by Nikola Panić, an employee of the City Administration. After journalist Nonić attempted to film Panić visiting a betting shop during working hours in the city, Panić threatened him in an attempt to take his phone. Nonić tried to escape from Panić and ran into a nearby police station seeking protection, but Panić caught up with him at the entrance and attacked him. Nonić stated that this attack was "motivated by hatred" towards his work, particularly his involvement in verifying and monitoring the work of employees in local government. The physical assault of a journalist by a public official is the result of a years-long targeted campaign against independent media led by representatives of the ruling party.

One of the most well-known cases of attacks on journalists in recent years, the burning of Milan Jovanović's house, finally reached a judicial conclusion in 2023, five years after the incident occurred. Former president of the Grocka municipality, [Dragoljub Simonović, was sentenced to five years in prison for inciting the arson of the “Žig info” journalist's house](#). The perpetrators of this act, Aleksandar Marinković, Vladimir Mihajlović, and Vladimir Novaković, have been sentenced to four and a half years, four years, and three and a half years in prison, respectively. This is the second first-instance verdict, as the Court of Appeals overturned the first one, sentenced Simonović to four and a half years in prison, and ordered a retrial. The Second Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade has announced that they will appeal this verdict, requesting stricter punishments. After the trial, which lasted for 5 years, Jovanović stated that the court's decision was a "victory, but not the end of the battle for media freedom" that younger journalists must win. The non-governmental organization [Reporters Without Borders](#) has described the first-instance verdict in the case of journalist Milan Jovanović as a victory against impunity for crimes committed against journalists in Serbia and beyond. The verdict against a former political official of the Serbian Progressive Party is an encouraging step by institutions towards punishing those who endanger the lives of journalists in Serbia. However, the fact that a journalist's house was set on fire because of his reporting on a politician's scandals is a grim indicator of the state of freedom of expression in Serbia.

Exposure to threats has become an integral part of the journalistic profession, regardless of the topic journalists write about. Due to his criticism of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) after Patriarch Porfirije insulted women, [journalist Nikola Krstić from Danas](#) received numerous threats and insults within a day. He shared an article about the patriarch on social media, after which, as he says, threats started pouring in from all sides - from right-wing extremists and tabloids to government associates and opposition representatives.

Distributing leaflets with threatening content to newsroom premises has become a new regular practice of targeting independent media and journalists. In most cases, these leaflets were signed by the far-right conservative movement "Naši," and the messages on them were mostly nationalist and chauvinistic in nature. Such leaflets have been thrown into the offices of N1, Danas, and NDNV multiple times. So far, no one from this movement has been held accountable for these activities, which continue to go unpunished. Additionally, in 2023, video clips targeting journalists and media outlets were shared on social media, with epithets regularly used for attacks on independent media, such as "traitors," "foreign mercenaries," "enemies of the state," and the like. Some of these videos with such content were also broadcasted [on TV channels with national frequency](#), which is particularly concerning, considering that the same television channel aired a video targeting a Serbian politician from Kosovo, Oliver Ivanović, who was shortly after that killed.

In addition to journalists, activists also face various types of pressure. [Activist Aida Ćorović](#) was attacked on 3 January 2022, in the street where she lives in Belgrade, just five days after being attacked while giving an interview to the Dutch television channel RTL News. According to Ćorović, a young man followed her from a nearby kiosk and then poured a bottle of Coca-Cola on her in the street while recording with his phone. During the interview, two young men splashed her with paint while she was near a mural dedicated to convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić. Although she reported both attacks to the police, Ćorović doubts that "anything will happen." Ćorović has been subjected to attacks by right-wing organizations for years due to her activism, which is a regular occurrence for human rights activists in Serbia.

In Novi Sad, on 19 February 2022, [a suspended student](#) of the Faculty of Law, Stefan Karanović, was attacked. Karanović was stopped by three men while he was running, and after a brief verbal altercation, they attacked him with death threats. Karanović managed to escape to a nearby gas station, where he called the police, who soon arrested one of the attackers. The student is involved in numerous lawsuits against the Faculty of Law in Novi Sad, which suspended him for 36 months and refuses to

issue him a certificate of withdrawal and confirmation of passed exams, after raising suspicions that Karanović was behind a series of articles about alleged corruption at the faculty. He had previously [received death threats](#), after the Administrative Court ruled in his favor and overturned the disciplinary measure that expelled him from the faculty. Attacks on students in Novi Sad have occurred multiple times in 2022. Students and activists Mladen Cvijetić and Srđan Đurić [were physically assaulted](#) in the premises of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad on 13 April 2022, on the day of the student parliament elections at this institution. The deputy of the election commission, Aleksandar Gajić, and another man physically attacked the students, after which the police arrived at the scene and informed the assaulted students that official proceedings would be initiated against the attackers. After the departure of the police officers, Gajić repeated the attack, attempting to take the students' phones. The students state that the incident occurred when they tried to stick a sticker with the inscription "Elections without elections" on the ballot box as a form of protest because the faculty election commission invalidated the election list "Student Reaction," whose members are Cvijetić and Đurić, resulting in only one election list participating in the elections.

## Elections and the endangered freedom of expression

### The 2022 Elections

Extraordinary presidential, parliamentary, and local elections in 12 municipalities (including Belgrade) were held on 3 April 2022. During the pre-election campaign period, brutal campaigns were conducted against independent media, activists, and civil society organizations primarily by representatives of the authorities and media close to them, but also by other political actors, participants in the elections, mostly representatives of right-wing parties and movements. Civic Initiatives kept a record of all attacks and pressures within the report "Elections under the Magnifying Glass."

Pro-government tabloids conducted an orchestrated campaign against independent media, which particularly intensified in the period just before the elections held in April 2022. In February and March, NUNS registered 8 individual cases of attacks and pressures on journalists directly related to the pre-election campaign. Shortly before the announcement of the elections, several pro-government tabloids conducted a coordinated campaign in which Danas was accused of conducting a secret operation ("Operation Noose 2") to "take down Vučić's head" because they want to "overthrow the state" and "break Serbia" with the help of "spins and lies in the media." In addition to state officials and the ruling party, attacks on the media also came from other actors on the political scene. During his campaign, presidential candidate Miša Vacić stated that he would advocate for the ban of all "foreign media" with informative programs.

Activist "Group of Citizens Critical Mass for Victory in Kula" Rade Obradović, [was physically attacked](#) in that place on 25 February 2022. As he states, he was attacked by a man he knew, who got out of a car and punched him. Obradović quoted that he was attacked because of an article in which he exposed suspicious business activities carried out by the attacker's wife. Obradović mentioned that he only shared an article from the VOICE portal that was about the then Minister in the Government of Serbia, Marija Obradović, and the State Secretary in her ministry, the attacker's wife, which discussed their involvement in pig farming within a cooperative that was established with individuals close to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. However, Obradović stated that he had shared this article a long time ago and had encountered the attacker before in this place, but nothing had happened between them. He claims that this attack is politically motivated and is a consequence of Obradović's process of collecting signatures of support to participate in the upcoming elections as part of the mentioned Group of Citizens.

Director of the campaign "Go Change" Savo Manojlović announced that [activists of this campaign were physically attacked](#) on 15 March 2022, during a pre-election rally of the Serbian Progressive Party in Vranje. As stated, the promotional stand of this campaign was first removed, and then the "Go Change" activists entered the rally

carrying banners. After that, they were attacked by unknown individuals, and during the incident, the phone used to record the event was smashed.

## The 2023 Elections

Extraordinary parliamentary, provincial, and local elections in several cities and municipalities, including the city of Belgrade, were held on 17 December 2023. The pre-election period, like in previous years, was marked by a dirty campaign of the ruling party, and the atmosphere of fear in which independent media and activists are constant targets of attacks has led to numerous violations of fundamental rights.

At the very beginning of the election campaign, organized attacks on free media began. Joining in, [representatives of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party](#) started a campaign against the Danas daily. The reason for this was an article titled "Albanian in Belgrade: Who is Fahri Musliu, for whom Vučić says he is not his father?". Misleading the public about the content of the published article, government representatives made accusations against Danas and its journalists. Ana Brnabić called the journalists of this media outlet "uncivilized sadists and haters," while Minister Tomislav Momirović went a step further and threatened Danas, saying, "The biggest scum! What an unsung scum! You will pay for this, and you will also be cleaned up in these elections."

Local journalists were also subjected to pressure and intimidation directly related to the election campaign. Danijel Radić, the owner of KTV in Zrenjanin, has been for quite some time [subjected to pressure and attacks](#) by, as he claims, local criminals connected to the authorities in that city. The latest incident occurred on November 15 when Radić noticed that the screws on the wheels of his car were loosened. The journalist believes that the incidents are politically motivated due to the "[KTV reporting](#) that does not favor the Serbian Progressive Party." Radić regularly reported

the attacks he was subjected to, but he was also subjected to pressure from the police, who, on one occasion, stopped him without reason and tested him for alcohol and drugs, and one of the police officers told him that they "received an order to be careful until the elections because this is a private state and private police."

Attacks on freedom of expression have intensified during the pre-election campaign. Targeting activists and representatives of civil society organizations primarily comes from the highest government officials, so it is not surprising that there have been recorded cases of physical and verbal attacks, as well as pressures that citizens of Serbia are exposed to. Legal consequences in such cases are often absent, and the perpetrators remain unpunished, which is particularly concerning.

[Veljko Raković, a civic activist and one of the organizers of the](#) "Raška against Violence" protest, was attacked on 29 November in that city. Three unknown men intercepted the activist, knocked him to the ground, and kicked him. Raković sustained minor injuries.

Dragan Subotić, [a pensioner from Obrenovac](#), was detained on 15 November in the Mirijevo neighborhood where he was at the time due to business obligations. Dragan was taken into custody, and then his family home was searched and his phone was confiscated. The reason for such action, according to the police, was this pensioner's writings on the X platform (formerly Twitter), which were deemed as a threat to the security of President Aleksandar Vučić. In the end, Dragan was not charged, but what remains is a warning and a threat to anyone who criticizes the government that every criticism has repercussions.

The pre-election period was also marked by the campaign of the "ProGlas" initiative, which brought together a group of prominent intellectuals and public figures with the aim of encouraging citizens to vote. It is in the interest of any government that aspires to be democratic to have a high voter turnout. Elections and the government authorities formed after elections should ideally have greater legitimacy with higher

voter turnout. However, the Serbian government felt threatened by this campaign and decided to take action against anyone associated with "ProGlas". The attacks initially came from government representatives, with Maja Gojković and Miloš Vučević issuing an official statement on the Serbian Progressive Party's website. Other prominent members of the Progressive Party also took to their social media platforms and pro-regime media to insult and target the signatories of "ProGlas". Using the occasion, [SNS member Vladimir Đukanović](#), accused the initiative of being a "politically motivated project aimed at mobilizing voters for Đilas' list" in an authored article, and referred to the initiative's founders as the "pseudo-elite". [President Vučić also joined the campaign](#), accusing the signatories of aligning with "foreign agendas" and acting against national interests. The targeting campaign continued through pro-regime tabloids, with numerous articles characterized by highly critical, confrontational, and often accusatory tones, portraying the "ProGlas" initiative in a negative light and questioning the motives, integrity, and credibility of its signatories. The media portrayal of the "ProGlas" initiative provides insight into the intertwining of politics and media in the country. After the statements from SNS officials and the orchestrated tabloid campaign, the targeting of "ProGlas" initiators continued on social media. A video appeared on social media [targeting the signatories of "ProGlas"](#). In this video they were labelled as "domestic traitors," "NATO lobbyists," and "second Serbia supporters". The extent of the government representatives' hostility towards the "ProGlas" initiative is evident in the incident where [members of the SNS disrupted the first initiative's panel discussion](#). A representative of the Serbian Progressive Party and the deputy mayor of Zrenjanin, Saša Santovac, along with SNS member of parliament Stanislava Janošević, interrupted the first panel discussion organized in Zrenjanin. The SNS members interrupted the panel when the topic of the Chinese factory "Linglong" was brought up, attempting to provoke a reaction from the attendees. However, the attendees did not fall for the provocation, and the initiative's panel discussion continued. Even the police targeted those in any way associated with "ProGlas". A police officer approached Pavle Cicvarić, a student and member of the informal group "Students Against Violence," and his colleagues at the Prokop railway station, without

providing any explanation, [and proceeded to check and photograph their identification cards](#). The students were on their way to the "ProGlas" initiative's panel discussion in Novi Sad, and Cicvarić interprets this incident as an attempt to intimidate them.

In the absence of a way to deal with the overwhelming support that the citizens of Serbia have given to the initiative, the government has turned to the traditional mechanism of targeting non-governmental organizations. Civil Initiatives have been subjected to an orchestrated campaign in pro-government media outlets, which have extensively shared the text originally published on the RT Balkan portal. In this text, the author "reveals through investigative work" that the organization "ProGlas" is backed by Civil Initiatives because the internet domain of ProGlas was registered by the organization. The article "reveals" that it is a "Go out the vote" (GOTV) campaign, which has been clearly communicated by "ProGlas" from the very beginning. However, media outlets close to the government have attempted to discredit Civil Initiatives and "ProGlas" through pompous headlines and established phrases about "pro-Western non-governmental organizations" and "foreign mercenaries". The orchestrated campaign against Civil Initiatives coincided, whether by chance or not, with the publication of [research](#) conducted by Civil Initiatives in collaboration with BIRN. The study revealed how a network of phantom organizations was siphoning off money from public calls. In this way, at least five million euros were diverted from the Ministry of Family and Demography in 2021 through calls intended for women, youth, and families. Instead of directing the funds to organizations that are dedicated and responsible in providing much-needed services to the community, the money was redirected to a network of connected organizations that falsified reports on their activities. The Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime has initiated proceedings based on the criminal complaint filed by the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) against former Minister for Family and Demography, Ratko Dmitrović, for abuses in public calls.

Besides Civil Initiatives and organizations, CRTA found itself targeted by government representatives and pro-regime media on the very day of the elections and afterwards. On the day of the elections, [CRTA observers in Odžaci were attacked](#) and their vehicle was destroyed. Immediately after the elections and the publication of CRTA's report on all irregularities recorded during the election day, this organization became the target of ruling SNS officials. The Prime Minister of Serbia [targeted CRTA](#) and accused them of "working to destabilize the state." Prime Minister Brnabić's accusations come after CRTA presented evidence of organized voter migration on 17 December which influenced the manipulation of the citizens' electoral will, primarily in the capital city where citizens of the Republic of Srpska were filmed being brought by buses to vote in Belgrade. As a result, protests followed the elections, and political tensions and human rights violations did not cease after the elections. Young activists stood out at the protests, and their engagement in the protests did not go unnoticed. Young activists who took part in the protests in front of the Republic Electoral Commission (RIK) to express their dissatisfaction with the manipulation of the citizens' electoral will in Belgrade immediately became [the focus of security services](#) and pro-government tabloids. On the second evening of the protest, an unknown woman was filmed scrolling through photos from the personal documents of the young activists who had stood out at the protest the day before when cameras had captured their debate with opposition representatives. Tabloids obtained a picture from the biometric ID card of one activist, which could only have come from police officers. Such behavior is not only punishable but also creates [an atmosphere of fear and repression among citizens](#) who want to peacefully engage in democratic processes. Intolerance towards protesting youth was also demonstrated at the protest on 27 December, when [two young men threw](#) plastic bottles, cups, and cans at students. The treatment of young people in our country is particularly concerning, especially those who publicly and critically reflect on socio-political events and who are willing to fight for democratic values and better living conditions for future generations. Authorities abuse security services and target young people through tabloids, sending a message that this country not only does not work in the

interest of the youth but actively works to discourage them from building their own future in it.

The violation of basic civil rights reached its peak on 24 December, when [the police used excessive force](#) against the gathered dissatisfied citizens. As the institutions remained silent on allegations of election fraud, the citizens of Belgrade decided to seek answers on the streets. Tensions grew night after night, culminating on 24 December with the brutal violence of the police towards the citizens. The protest continued on 24 December, after the RIK, in front of the City Hall building when opposition members of parliament tried to enter the building. Their entrance was prevented by strong police forces securing the Assembly building. Soon, a group of men with hoods on their heads started throwing stones at the entrance. The coalition "Serbia against Violence" stated that these were hooligans planted by the government to provoke unrest at the protest. The police then threw smoke bombs and pepper spray at the gathered crowd and started to disperse the protest. Numerous instances of police violence towards the demonstrators were captured on video and in photographs, and [several people were injured during the police charge](#). Several news crews were also attacked during the protest. [38 people were arrested](#) including [4 students](#), who were taken away in a civilian car by armed individuals. [A group of organizations gathered around the Three Freedoms Platform](#) condemned the police violence and called for an urgent reaction from the authorities to condemn the police brutality, which represents a gross violation of the fundamental principles of the rule of law, in which the police should serve the citizens, not be an instrument of repression. Several days before the protest in front of the City Hall, pro-government tabloids published a video of a young man allegedly confessing that opposition politicians were paying him to cause unrest. The young man, visibly frightened in the video, later stated that [he was mistreated by the police](#) and coerced into making the mentioned statement, 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 action to preserve the rule of law, the safety and rights of protesters, and the integrity of democratic processes in

Serbia, instead of doing the opposite. The elections held on 17 December 2023, showed that democracy in our country is seriously endangered, and human rights are being violated more brutally and openly without any accountability from the competent authorities and without repercussions for those who incite such violence from their positions of power.

### Threats to freedom of expression by public officials

Journalists from independent media outlets, as well as activists and civil society organizations, are regularly subjected to attacks by officials from the ruling party, who treat them as political opponents, and this narrative is then further spread through media campaigns close to the government. Attacks coming from the highest state officials create a hostile atmosphere that later encourages individuals to target and attack activists, civil society organizations, and journalists who report in accordance with the demands of their profession and in the public interest. The insults used by anonymous attackers are identical to those used by public officials in their public addresses.

[Vukašin Obradović](#), a journalist and editor at the Danas newspaper, has become the target of attacks from pro-government tabloids and officials of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party due to an article published in this newspaper. The article in question explains that the business activities of the closest family members of high public officials are of public interest. Obradović wrote about the business activities of President Aleksandar Vučić's son, Danilo Vučić, which was the reason for the journalist to come under attack. In response, a member of the ruling SNS party, Darko Glišić, accused Obradović of "attacking the children of President Vučić" and "spreading the most heinous lies." Obradović characterized these attacks as an "attempt to intimidate journalists who dare to mention Danilo Vučić," while the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) condemned the targeting of Vukašin Obradović and reminded Aleksandar Vučić and other officials that they "must not refuse to speak to critical media" and "that they are public servants

employed by all citizens of Serbia and are accountable to them.” NUNS also reminds that, according to the Code of Journalists of Serbia, "the right to privacy of public figures is limited, and in the case of the son of the President of Serbia, who has been seen and photographed multiple times with individuals from the criminal milieu, it is in the public interest to know information about his private life.” Despite numerous warnings and appeals from journalist associations, attacks on Danas and other independent media have continued whenever articles that are not favored by representatives of the ruling party are published. Danas has once again come under attack and pressure from state officials and members of the Serbian Progressive Party following an article about the inability of state institutions to find the residence of President Aleksandar Vučić. Several SNS officials, including [Prime Minister Ana Brnabić](#), and then Minister of Interior [Aleksandar Vulin](#), as well as many other SNS members, including pro-government tabloids, reacted to this article. Brnabić, in her traditional manner, called Danas a "tycoon pamphlet," calling on the relevant institutions to react due to "violation of the Law on Data Protection," while Minister Vulin referred to Danas as a "tabloid" that endangers the security of the president and his family by publishing his address.

Vladimir Đukanović, a member of the Serbian Progressive Party and a member of the High Judicial Council, is particularly prone to insulting journalists and attacking civil society organizations. In one instance, Đukanović [threatened journalist Nedim Sejđinović](#) after his article was published in the weekly magazine Vreme. The editorial staff of Vreme stated that Đukanović is "targeting this journalist because he did not like his article.” Đukanović insulted the journalist on his X platform account (formerly Twitter), calling him a "journalist with a pig's head.” Throughout the year, Đukanović also participated in campaigns against N1 and Nova S. In December 2022, [attacks on media within the United Media group](#) reached their peak, prompting the company to issue a statement stating that it is under "one of the most dangerous targeting campaigns”. The statement came after a special program was aired on Pink TV, in which Vladimir Đukanović was among the guests. For several hours, the guests of the show referred to United Media's television channels as "traitorous"

because they "collaborate with the government in Priština to endanger the security of Serbs in Kosovo". In response to these appearances, United Media stated that their journalists are being targeted for their critical reporting on the actions of officials, and that the attacks have become worse and include death threats. Previously, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić also made a series of accusations against United Media, stating that the company does not pay taxes in Serbia because it is "registered in Luxembourg".

Member of SNS and former member of parliament in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, [Lav Gligorije Pajkić](#) insulted the editors of the Danas, N1 and Nova S portals through his Instagram account. On that occasion, Pajkić shared the invitation of the Danas editorial office to young people for the school of journalism, publishing a picture from the film "Dara from Jasenovac" in which there are members of the Ustasha movement, and he tagged these media on them. All of this is followed by the description that "the views of Danas columnists on the matter of banning the president from visiting Jasenovac motivated him to describe to the students of their school what an average lecture would look like". Another member of the ruling party, [Nebojša Bakarec](#), targeted N1 and Nova S through a post on social networks. Bakarec accused N1 television of running a "hate campaign" against the President of the Republic, stating additionally that these media are waging a "special war" and that "instead of snipers for Vučić, they decided to shoot with a shotgun."

Local media are also exposed to pressure imposed by the ruling party branches. [The city committee of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party \(SNS\) in Kragujevac](#) made a series of accusations against the information portal Glas Šumadije, after an article was published on this portal about the organized departure of SNS activists to a commemorative rally on the occasion of the anniversary of Operation "Storm". This article provides information about the "terrible pressure" on employees of public companies to go to the anniversary celebrations in Novi Sad. The article also mentions the short conversations that the journalists had with the people who were gathering near the bus, from which it was concluded that they were going to the rally

under pressure from the ruling party or out of sympathy for the President of Serbia. On the occasion of this text, the Serbian Progressive Party also reacted, accusing the portal of working according to a "project assignment" with the aim of belittling the meeting and because of "hatred towards the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić", as well as that it was "financed with dollars".

[A journalist from the Hungarian newsroom of Vojvodina Radio and Television,](#) Renata Bađi Ribar was targeted by Anamarija Viček, the state secretary in the Ministry of Education and the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM). Viček made the verbal attack in a Facebook comment, after the publication of the interview Bađi Ribar conducted with SVM official Balint Pastor. Due to the question that Bađi Ribar addressed to Pastor on that occasion, regarding the controversial "Monument to the Innocent Victims of 1944/45", which includes the names of convicted war criminals from the World War II, Viček stated that Bađi Ribar "he is talking about another man with so much hatred just because he is from SVM" as well as that she "is taking over the rhetoric of the Serbian opposition, spreading hatred and constantly talking of some list".

At the end of 2022, President Vučić used the media conference again to target television and journalists from N1. On that occasion, he called them [an ominous term "locators"](#). Vučić criticized the journalists from N1 for their coverage of the military machinery stationed near the border with Kosovo during the weeks of tension in the northern part of Kosovo. During the press conference, he accused the N1 journalists of being "locators", meaning that they were revealing the positions of Serbian security forces. This term was used in the 1990s as part of a systematic campaign to target journalists, accusing them of being "locators" during the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Public officials continued the practice of insulting the media in 2023. Prime Minister Ana Brnabić regularly uses her guest appearances on national television to target independent media, and she often comments on the writings of these media on her

social networks and counts the texts she does not like. In these appearances, she most often calls them "tycoon media" with the aim of discrediting their work. However, in an attempt to divert attention from major state affairs, the Prime Minister targeted the media in another, more dangerous way, [accusing investigative journalists of collaborating with criminal groups](#). She made a series of accusations against investigative journalists writing about the activities of criminal clans and the court proceedings in which members of these groups are tried. Brnabić has repeatedly accused research portals of cooperating with criminal clans with the aim of criminalizing Danilo Vučić, the son of President Aleksandar Vučić. The editor-in-chief of the Crime and Corruption Research Network (KRIK) Stevan Dojčinović states that "he is sure that the prime minister was referring to KRIK", considering that she had previously made similar accusations in the same context. Dojčinović states that the campaign of attacks on them is an attempt by the authorities to remove responsibility from themselves, taking into account that KRIK previously wrote about the government's ties with criminal clans in Serbia. He concludes that he is often faced with verbal attacks on the street and on the networks, even when the highest political office holders do not name journalists because the attackers assume who they meant.

Aleksandar Šapić, the current mayor of Belgrade, regularly addresses journalists from independent media in an inappropriate manner at media conferences. During his statement to the media on 11 April 2023, he made a series of accusations against the Nova S and N1 media outlets. On that occasion, journalists asked him to comment on a recording that has reached the public, on which his chief of staff can be heard offering to set up a public procurement to a private company that manages the ticket collection system in Belgrade's public transport. He also said that the video can be edited, and when asked by N1 why he did not answer the questions of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, which reported on this video, [Šapić said that he "doesn't talk to liars"](#).

The animosity of government officials towards journalists who ask questions that displease them is expressed to such an extent that President Vučić told a journalist from N1 during a conference that ["she deserved to be kicked out of the conference"](#). On 14 May 2023, when asked by N1 television journalist Žaklina Tatalović to comment on Prime Minister Ana Brnabić's tweet mocking the participants of the protest against violence, the President of Serbia stated that he would not kick her out of the conference, even though she deserved it. Minister of Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure, [Goran Vesić accused](#) the media operating under United Media company of waging a propaganda war against their own country and inciting people to violence and conflicts. Another member of the ruling party, SNS, also directed the same insult towards these media outlets. [The leader of the SNS parliamentary group](#), Milenko Jovanov, on 1 June 2023 accused the opposition of wanting a civil war and escalating tension among the people through Šolak's media. A member of the SNS main board and also on Instagram. A member of the SNS Board and [the director of the transportation company "Lasta", Vladan Sekulić](#), posted on his Instagram account a video entitled "Stop Foreign Propaganda" targeting journalists and presenters from N1 and Nova S. The video calls for action to combat "evil". The author of the video is unknown, and the director of "Lasta" removed it from his account after N1 reported on it. Some officials from the same party, including Vladimir Đukanović, a member of the presidency, also shared the video, stating that he "really liked" it.

In September 2023, an attack on the Kosovo police occurred in Banjska, resulting in the death of one Kosovo police officer and three attackers. Following this event, media outlets that reported professionally and impartially on what happened became targets of attacks by those in power. They often took the opportunity in their public appearances to label independent media as "state enemies", putting journalists in a security-risk position in a situation of high tensions and hostility towards Kosovo. During his public address, president Aleksandar Vučić [accused N1 journalist](#) Sanja Sovrlić of insinuating that Serbia was responsible for the attack on Kosovo police officers that occurred on 24 September 2023. After the president's statement, the

journalist asked if there was any information about the attackers who killed the Kosovo police officer and the origin of their uniforms, to which the president accused her of insinuating that Serbia was responsible for what happened. It is extremely dangerous, in a situation of tensions in Kosovo, to portray journalists as national enemies, directly endangering their safety. The rhetoric used by the highest officials of the party is then spread to local branches, which continue to target local media. The Vranje branch of the SNS issued a statement labeling [Vranje News](#) as the "mouthpiece of terrorist and war criminal Albin Kurti". NUNS warns that such rhetoric "directly endangers the safety of journalists and makes them targets for further attacks" and calls on the SNS to condemn the statement issued by its local branch in Vranje.

## Censorship and obstructing journalistic work

Journalists regularly face obstacles in carrying out their work, which undermines and prevents professional reporting in the public interest. In recent years, there have been cases where journalists have been denied access to press conferences held by public officials, stifling freedom of expression and jeopardizing the right of citizens to be timely and fully informed about important issues.

[N1 television journalist Milan Stojanović](#), was attacked while reporting from a location in Niš where workers from the Public Utility Company "Naisus" were digging up a street where water had been leaking for days. Five workers from this public company surrounded the journalist, getting in his face and attempting to remove him from the site. News teams from Nova S have been physically attacked multiple times while reporting from the field. On one occasion [they were attacked in the Mirijevo neighborhood in Belgrade](#) while trying to film buildings that were under investigation for controversial legalization. They were also attacked while reporting [in front of a restaurant in Belgrade](#).

[Journalist Vanja Đurić and cameraman Ivan Žugić](#) from N1 television were verbally attacked on 14 April 2022 in Belgrade during an interview with the interlocutor. As stated in the press release of the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), the journalists of N1 were attacked near a bank, when a security employee approached them and told them that they had "intruded" on the bank, and then he sent them threats and insults. The journalists state that they were on a public surface, where they had an appointment with an interlocutor. They were soon approached by a security guard who was explained by the N1 team that the bank was not being filmed and that the camera was facing the other way. However, the security guard continued to threaten them, which is why the journalist and cameraman immediately assumed that he had a problem with N1 being in that place. Due to threats and insults, the shooting had to be stopped until the attackers left.

[The reporting crew of the N1 television](#) was disturbed while reporting on the strike of Vietnamese workers at the "Linglong" factory in Zrenjanin in June 2022. After arriving at the facility where the workers are housed, they were approached by private security who told them to "pack the camera", and after refusing to do so, the same worker said that they were "not filming the building". After this, they were approached by a man, whom N1 assumes is one of the managers, who was filming the reporter and N1's official vehicle. Throughout 2021, the journalists of N1 television also faced problems when reporting on the inhumane working conditions of workers employed in "Linglong".

[A journalist and correspondent of "Večernje novosti" from Loznica and Šabac, Vladimir Mitrić](#), was verbally attacked in the village of Draginac near Loznica, where he was on an assignment. Mitrić stated that when he entered a restaurant in this village, accompanied by the police, he was verbally assaulted by an individual who used derogatory language towards him. During the incident, he was also threatened with being beaten again. Mitrić has been under police protection since he was assaulted 17 years ago at the entrance of the building where he lives by a former police officer. He mentioned that the person from the restaurant is also a former

police officer. He expressed concern for his safety and stated that this attack has proven his claims that he could be attacked again if his police protection is revoked.

Member of the extremist organization "People's Patrols" Damjan Knežević, [interrupted the live broadcast](#) of the Zagreb TV N1 editorial office on October 12, 2022, while they were conducting an interview with the editor-in-chief of Danas, Dragoljub Petrović, at Slavija Square. Knežević was talking about president Aleksandar Vučić, but he also addressed Petrović, accusing him of writing about the People's Patrols "without asking for their opinion." Petrović denied this, and Knežević then returned to his vehicle, which he had stopped nearby.

[Journalist from Radio Television of Serbia, Tamara Tankosić](#) was verbally and physically attacked on 17 October 2022, while on assignment at the Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade. An unknown female individual first struck journalist Tankosić without any communication, and then proceeded to follow her and hit and scratch her at the entrance doors, while saying, "I know who you are." During the incident, the assailant threatened the journalist by saying, "I will find you after the event at the Faculty."

Media censorship is reflected in the denial of access to journalists to official events of government officials, as well as other organizers. Journalists from the investigative portal VOICE [were denied accreditation](#) to cover the session of the local assembly in Bač, scheduled for 14 November 2022. The local parliament justified this decision by citing "limited space" and the inability to provide technical conditions because one television crew will already be present. The VOICE portal states that they do not understand this decision. The Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV) stated that this is a "direct attempt to censor freedom of speech," linking this decision to a previously published investigative story by the VOICE portal on environmental pollution in the municipality of Bač.

The editorial office of the local Pešter TV in Tutin states that the local [authorities in Tutin have been discriminating against this television station](#) for two years already. According to the statement, local officials do not invite their journalists to municipal events or to the sessions of the crisis headquarters of this municipality, both during the pandemic and more recently, after the declaration of a state of emergency due to floods. Additionally, journalists from Pešter TV do not receive answers to the questions they ask municipal leaders, nor do they respond to calls to participate in the programs of this television station.

Journalist Aleksandra Reves from the portal 021.rs [was prevented from attending the Public Session](#) of the Commission for Spatial Planning in Sremski Karlovci, as announced by this media outlet on 28 November 2022. The competent authorities stated that allowing the journalist to attend the public session would be a violation of the municipal regulations, and that only the presence of citizens and associations who had objections to the proposed spatial plan was allowed. Therefore, it was stated that the presence of the journalist "would mean that all citizens could attend the session." The portal 012.rs stated that they have never had any problems during their long-standing coverage of the sessions of the Planning Commission in Novi Sad, and they see this treatment towards journalist Reves as preventing reporting from a public event and informing the public about the held sessions.

Pressure and censorship of journalists continued in 2023. Milan Nikić, a correspondent for TV N1 in Kragujevac, was [subjected to pressure several times due to his work](#). Initially, on 3 March 2023, he was verbally attacked during his coverage of the protest of employees at the Kragujevac Waterworks, when an unknown person shouted at him and then approached him, asking to talk to him privately. That person withdrew after Nikić turned on his camera with the intention of recording him. On that occasion, Nikić asked several workers to accompany him to his car and stated that he felt disturbed. Just a day later, he noticed a car with its lights off parked near the apartment where he lives, stating that one person was sitting in it. He stated that he went out with his camera on in an attempt to record the event, and shortly after

that, the driver started the car and left. In conclusion, he stated that this was the seventh time he had experienced threats and harassment because of his job, that he would continue to report such incidents, and added that a previous case of an attack had resulted in a several-month prison sentence for the person who attacked him at a protest.

A security officer at the Mitros factory in Sremska Mitrovica [attacked N1 journalist Maja Đurić](#), first verbally and then physically. The worker attempted to remove the N1 crew from the public area in front of the factory and in doing so, pushed the journalist. Private security workers obstructed the N1 crew during their reporting in Hercegovačka Street. On that occasion, Belgrade Waterfront security officers [also prevented the N1 crew from filming a report](#) in a public area. The worker approached the crew and stated that Hercegovačka Street was private and that filming was prohibited there, suggesting that they could film on the road instead. Later, the security chief appeared and "allowed" the crew to film in the public area.

[The N1 Television reporting crew](#) was temporarily prevented from entering the fenced area for journalists near the Serbian Parliament, where accredited media crews were covering the "Serbia of Hope" rally. According to the reporting team, this was ordered by the police "chief". The cameraman entered a bit later, while journalist Žaklina Tatalović was only allowed in after 40 minutes, despite being properly accredited. Government representatives often avoid answering questions from independent media journalists during press conferences and events, or simply do not allow them to ask questions. However, on 27 July, they went a step further by keeping N1 and Nova journalists [behind locked doors](#) to prevent them from physically approaching the Prime Minister and ministers. This case was also documented by the Coalition for Women in Journalism in their July report [on "The Status of Media Freedom for Female Journalists"](#). Camera operators and photographers [were not allowed to enter the Assembly Hall](#) during the extraordinary session on 5 September 2023. The parliamentary security blocked their entrance, so the cameramen and photographers could only capture footage and take photos from the doorway.

Critical media outlets have also faced pressure from church authorities. [The Niš Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church discriminated against critical-oriented media](#), by excluding them from the accreditation invitation for the unveiling of a monument to the late Patriarch Irinej in Niš on 22 April 2023. As reported by the newspaper Danas, the "internal proposed list of media for accreditation" by the Niš Diocese consisted almost exclusively of public broadcasters, pro-government media, and tabloids, while independent media such as Danas, N1, Nova, local Južne vesti, and others were excluded.

### Institutional pressures on journalists and activists

The low level of functioning of institutions in Serbia is not only reflected in their political subordination to the source of political power, i.e., the ruling party, and the consequent lack of response in certain situations where a reaction was necessary, but also in exceeding their own powers and excessive reactions towards certain individuals. This sends a clear message that institutions are overly prompt and proactive in cases where they perceive a basis for action against journalists and civil activists, while on the other hand, they were unacceptably passive in situations where these actors needed protection.

The Ministry of Interior announced in a statement on June 27, 2022, the initiation of [misdemeanor proceedings](#) against activist Mirko Medenica for insulting a public official, due to the events described in his authored text about the case of racial profiling at Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade. In the [text](#) published earlier that day, Medenica pointed out the behavior of two police officers at the border control who, as Medenica states, inappropriately spoke to two individuals of "darker skin color" and then separated them along with several other passengers of the same "darker skin color" who were standing in line for inspection. After numerous warnings to the officers about their behavior and the officers' statements that "he doesn't know who all comes, who they are, what they do in Serbia, and how they endanger people," he

was taken to a separate room under the threat of a misdemeanor report. After a thorough examination, a police inspector told him that he would receive a misdemeanor report for insulting a public official. The Ministry did not investigate the mentioned case but stated in the announcement that Medenica's allegations are "shameful and aim to attempt to tarnish the reputation of members of the Serbian police, the Ministry of Interior, and the Republic of Serbia." The Ministry cites "raised voice" by Medenica and calling the "police officers on duty racists and other derogatory names" as well as "insulting all members of the Ministry of Interior" as the reason for initiating the proceedings.

Martin Bežinarević, a councilor in the Municipality of Majdanpek and an activist, [was forcibly taken for questioning](#) on 3 October 2022, by a court decision. Bežinarević was informed that he was being taken because he did not respond to a court summons, which he denied, stating that he never received any summons. The summons was allegedly delivered to him on a day when he attended a session of the local parliament, and no summons was sent to his home address. This is a legal process against Bežinarević following a lawsuit filed by the Chief of Police in Majdanpek, Srđan Milutinović, for defamation. The lawsuit followed an incident in 2020 when Bežinarević publicly spoke about a case of physical assault by the Chief of Police on a citizen named Dijana Ilić.

[The Novi Sad Communal Police](#) fined an activist on 25 August 2022, who was collecting signatures against the erection of the controversial monument "Innocent Victims 1944/45" in Novi Sad, which included the names of war criminals and fascists among the victims. Mladen Cvijetić stated to N1 that he had submitted a request for the use of public space in accordance with city regulations in order to set up a stand for collecting signatures, but he received no response even after 10 days. He was fined not only for the unauthorized placement of the stand but also for refusing to comply with the order to remove it. By refusing to respond to the request for the use of public space, the police deliberately put the activist in a situation where he would be penalized.

The situation regarding freedom of expression in Serbia is evident from the fact that journalists are called in for informational interviews regarding their articles and opinions. Journalist, civic activist, and editor of the Niška Inicijativa portal, Srđan Nonić, [was questioned by the police regarding a caricature](#) he published on his personal Facebook account. It is stated that Nonić made a caricature in which the likeness of Niš police officer Marko Petrović is "suggested". Nonić stated that he was questioned at the police station whether he "poses a threat to the life and body" of police officer Petrović, and when he reacted that the caricature cannot definitively determine who is depicted, the police told him that they "know who he meant". After this questioning, he asked the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office which criminal offense is being prosecuted, but he did not receive an answer to this question. The police also questioned another person who commented on Nonić's caricature. Police officer Petrović is already known to the public, as opposition parties have announced that he has signed several misdemeanor reports against participants in environmental protests in Niš, which were later invalidated by the Misdemeanor Court due to unlawful acquisition of data on offenses. Nonić is [also charged with multiple offenses](#) related to his participation in environmental protests in 2021. Nonić states that misdemeanor proceedings have been initiated against him and that he is charged with "bold and reckless behavior" for pasting posters with the inscription "Trg kralja Aleksandra Vučića" (King Aleksandar Vučić Square) during the protests. This misdemeanor request was signed by Police Major Marko Petrović, which is why Nonić was called in for an informative conversation. It is not known how the police had information that Nonić participated in the protests, considering that he was not identified on that occasion.

Institutional pressures continued in 2023 as well. [Journalist Nenad Paunović was interrogated](#) at the police station in Pirot on 8 January 2023, during an attempt to film the site of an environmental accident in this city, when several ammonia tankers derailed at the end of 2022. Paunović states that he tried to capture the moment when one of the tankers was supposed to be lifted by a crane, by asking another person,

whom he found at the accident site, to use their drone for that purpose. However, a police officer removed them from the location, stating that filming was not allowed, and then they were taken to the police station to give a statement. The lawyer for journalist Paunović stated that the questioning at the police station focused on personal documents, considering that Paunović showed his ID card to the officers, which he had previously reported as lost and then found, while the person he was filming with the drone did not have their ID card with them. The lawyer states that very little was said about the filming itself, nor were they presented with a reason for giving a statement, adding that there must have been some notice of the filming ban, and that numerous TV crews had already filmed reports earlier at the same location. Taking all this into account, the lawyer states that the most likely reason for the officers' actions is the fact that Paunović had been reporting on this accident for several days, during which he revealed one of the victims of this accident and had a discussion with Minister of Environmental Protection Irena Vujović, who was in Pirot after the accident.

Even a foreign journalist found herself subjected to pressure from the domestic authorities, and [Reporters Without Borders](#) also commented on this case. Reporters Without Borders condemned the arrest of Russian journalist in exile Nataša Tiškevič, which took place on 7 August at Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade. Because she did not have a visa in addition to the travel document issued to her by Germany, Tiškevič was detained at the airport for more than 40 hours, after which she was returned to Malta, and Reporters Without Borders deemed this as a "disproportionate measure".

[The police harassed two female citizens](#) who wanted to deliver a protest letter to Vučić in Bosilegrad. The opposition party, Freedom and Justice Party, announced on 11 March 2023, that two citizens, Daniela Mihajlović and Miljana Stoiljković, were detained by plainclothes police officers after attempting to deliver a protest letter to Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. While traveling from Surdulica to Bosilegrad, where the Serbian President was staying, they were stopped by police officers who confiscated the letter they were carrying. Jelena Milošević, a member of the

opposition party SSP, stated that Mihajlović and Stoilković were unlawfully deprived of their freedom and were prevented from calling a lawyer after being stopped again near Bosilegrad. Mihajlović told N1 that the police officers did not identify themselves, that the names of local police officers and one female name were mentioned in the interrogation report, but no woman was present during the questioning. Furthermore, she stated that they refused to hand over their mobile phones to the officers, and that mobile phones were also confiscated from the individuals they were sitting with in a café where they were detained, and recordings of the arrest were deleted. Mihajlović and Stoilković planned to deliver the protest letter to the Serbian President in an attempt to draw attention to the abuses of a local power figure and the mayor of Bosilegrad, Vladimir Zaharijev.

[Dimitrije Dimić, a law student at the University of Niš, was arrested in Belgrade](#), on 31 August and his posters featuring caricatures of Aleksandar Vučić, Aleksandar Vulin, and Bratislav Gašić were confiscated. Dimić said that the police officers approached him from behind, asked for his ID card, and then handcuffed him and took him to the Police Station in Vračar, where they also took away the sign with the name of police inspector Slobodan Milenković, who uncovered the Jovanjica marijuana plantation. Dimić gained public attention when he went on a hunger strike in mid-July 2023 in Pionirski Park, expressing his solidarity with protests against violence. It is unclear why the police arrested Dimić, raising questions about whether they intended to intimidate the student and send a message to anyone who publicly expresses their political views that oppose those of the authorities.

Russian anti-war activists living and operating in Belgrade were subjected to institutional pressure throughout 2023. The public first heard about cases of pressure on Russian activists in the case of Petar Nikitin, the founder of the "Russian Democratic Society," who was [banned from entering Serbia by the Security Service, BIA](#). Nikitin was detained at the airport for two days without any information about the reason for his detention. Another activist from the same organization was also subjected to pressure from Serbian institutional authorities. Yevgeny Irzhansky, the

organizer of concerts by Russian musicians in Serbia, and his wife Elizabeth were ordered [to leave Serbia within a week](#). Before the official announcement that they had to leave the country and the one-year entry ban, Yevgeny was interrogated by the BIA, where he was questioned about his relationship with Putin, the war in Ukraine, and his relationship with the Russian Democratic Society, which organizes anti-war rallies and events in Serbia. Yevgeny is the organizer of concerts by musicians who are mostly banned from performing in Russia due to their anti-war activities and open opposition to Putin's regime. The main question arises as to what the main goal is behind taking such measures against activists who openly oppose the war in Ukraine and Putin's regime.

In October 2023 the Misdemeanor Court in Belgrade issued a verdict sentencing [activist Aida Ćorović](#) or disturbing public order and peace, due to her throwing eggs at a mural dedicated to Ratko Mladić in November 2021. However, the verdict does not mention that the activist targeted a mural dedicated to a convicted war criminal, nor does it address the inappropriate behavior of the police during her arrest. Ćorović stated that she will not pay [the fine of 100,000 dinars](#) and that such a verdict will not intimidate or silence her. With this verdict, the court once again sided with those who glorify war criminals and spread hatred and intolerance in society.

## SLAPP Lawsuits

The most insidious form of suppressing freedom of expression and limiting the work of professional media and activists is the so-called "SLAPP lawsuits" (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation). This phenomenon did not originate in Serbia but has been previously used in other countries. Its primary goal is to intimidate journalists, media outlets, and activists, financially drain them to the point of near or actual destitution, and ultimately stifle media freedoms, discipline "disobedient" media, and intimidate them into self-censorship. It also aims to intimidate activists into abandoning their activities and engagement in political participation and public advocacy. This is achieved by filing numerous lawsuits against them, seeking

exorbitant amounts of compensation. On the other hand, the amount of the compensation claim directly affects the amount of court fees that the defendant must pay. In the event of losing the lawsuit, the defendant would be forced to not only pay the compensation claim but also cover all the legal costs of the plaintiff. In practice, both foreign and domestic cases usually involve financially powerful individuals or companies for whom a loss in a legal proceeding results in negligible economic damage, while for the defendant, losing the case often means the end of their business and activities due to insurmountable financial problems. [The CASE Coalition](#), which keeps records of SLAPP lawsuits across Europe, published an updated report in 2023 with data collected in the previous year. Among 35 European countries, Serbia ranked 10th with 28 registered lawsuits. As the coalition only publishes data on cases it has been able to verify, the actual number of lawsuits is potentially higher.

In recent years, investigative media outlets have been particularly targeted by SLAPP lawsuits, with KRIK standing out as the most sued among them. The Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) has been engaged in investigative journalism on crime and corruption for years, often addressing the roles of government officials in various scandals, which makes them a regular target of lawsuits from those they report on. The aim of such lawsuits is to divert the resources of KRIK's staff towards lengthy and exhausting legal battles instead of continuing their investigations into the connections between the government and suspicious social structures. In 2022, KRIK was [convicted in a SLAPP lawsuit](#) filed by the former head of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) and current Minister of Interior, Bratislav Gašić. KRIK was convicted for reporting news from a trial in which Gašić was mentioned. Therefore, they were convicted for doing their journalistic job, for reporting information from a trial. KRIK stated that the verdict in this case was surprisingly swift and delivered by a judge close to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. This case reached its conclusion in late May 2023 when [the Appellate Court in Belgrade overturned the verdict](#) against KRIK. However, the fact that KRIK was initially accused sends a strong message to critical media outlets about what can happen to them if they report on major state affairs. KRIK and its editor Stevana Dojčinović,

also received a lawsuit from the [former State Secretary](#) at the Ministry of Interior, Dijana Hrkalović, who is currently facing charges of illegal influence peddling. The lawsuit alleges that the KRIK portal has violated Hrkalović's "honor and reputation," and has undermined her "presumption of innocence," seeking compensation in the amount of 6,000 euros. The lawsuit relates to several articles published on the portal in early 2022, which Hrkalović claims are untrue and have linked her to criminal clans, stating that the portal did not contact her regarding these articles. KRIK stated that they attempted to contact Hrkalović through her defense attorneys, but every request for an interview was declined. KRIK also mentioned that they were not contacted for any changes to the articles or for the publication of a denial, but they have been investigating Hrkalović's work at the Ministry of Interior for years, gathering numerous pieces of evidence indicating that the former State Secretary had contact with certain criminals through intermediaries, which is why she had to be questioned about these contacts and connections. This was the 11th lawsuit filed against KRIK. Dijana Hrkalović has [also sued Danas](#) for 9 articles on the same issue, seeking compensation of one million dinars with interest. Danas reported that Hrkalović had previously filed a total of 16 lawsuits against media outlets, seeking compensation for articles published in them. In addition to the aforementioned cases, KRIK has also been sued by Stanko Subotić, Nikola Petrović, Bogoljub Karić, Predrag Koluviija, the company Mineco, and others. Another first-instance decision against KRIK was issued in 2023. In the first-instance ruling of the Higher Court in Belgrade, [KRIK was convicted](#) in a lawsuit filed by Predrag Koluviija. Judge Bojana Čogurić concluded that KRIK violated the presumption of innocence with their article "Start of Trial for Jovanjica 2 Scheduled" by labeling Koluviija as an "accused drug lord." KRIK's editor, Stevan Dojčinović, pointed out that the use of such terms is common practice in well-known international media when reporting on accused leaders of drug cartels, and that it is not desirable to burden the text with complex and difficult-to-understand legal formulations. It is clear that this case is also a SLAPP lawsuit aimed at preventing further investigation into the nexus between crime and state structures, which is in the public interest.

Just for reporting news from the trial, [BIRN portal was also exposed to a SLAPP lawsuit](#) by Predrag Koluvića, the owner of the company "Jovanjica", who is on trial as the leader of a criminal group that grew marijuana. As stated in the publication of BIRN, Koluvića claims that he was caused mental pain by the transmission of information from the trial, for which he is demanding damages in the amount of 200,000 dinars. BIRN states that, in accordance with the Law on Public Information and the Media, it transmitted the information that was presented at the main trial as part of the Koluvića trial, and that this lawsuit contains all the elements of a SLAPP lawsuit, which aims to intimidate journalists and deter them from further informing the public. [Two lawsuits against BIRN](#), for articles concerning his villa in Trieste and the illegal legalization of the building on Bežanijska kosa, it was announced on 29 March 2023. Šapić demands that BIRN pay him a total of 12 million dinars for mental pain. Members of Šapić's cabinet also sued BIRN. [The Chief of the mayor's staff](#), filed a lawsuit against BIRN for publishing a text about agreements with the Turkish company Kentkart on June 2023. He claims that his reputation and honor were hurt by the text, and he is asking for 200,000 dinars in compensation. This is the fourth lawsuit against BIRN in 2023.

Aleksandar Šapić was very active in initiating SLAPP lawsuits against journalists during 2022 and 2023. In February 2022, he filed [a lawsuit against the authors of the show "The Good, the Bad, the Evil"](#), Nenad Kulačin and Marko Vidojković because of the alleged insults that were uttered against him. The lawsuit states that, among other things, Šapić was offended by comments that Vidojković published in one of his texts. Because of this, Šapić is seeking monetary compensation in the amount of 350,000 dinars. This is not the first time that Šapić is suing Kulačin and Vidojković, he did the same in 2021 when he asked for compensation of as much as 1.1 million dinars.

[Also sued for defamation](#) was a Euronews Serbia journalist, Minja Miletić, as it was published on 24 November 2022. Miletić was sued by Vladan Zagrađanin, a member of parliament and official of the Socialist Party of Serbia, after she interviewed the

Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Serbian government and leader of this party, Ivica Dačić.

Public figures, including singer Jelena Karleuša, have also filed lawsuits alongside political officials. [Karleuša has filed criminal charges](#) against the editors and journalists of N1, Nova S, and Danas for what she claims to be the "publication of lies and false information." This lawsuit comes after the media outlets Karleuša sued published information about the enormous sums of money that the state-owned Telekom Serbia allocated for the singer's projects, which she received after publicly supporting the Serbian Progressive Party and President Aleksandar Vučić on multiple occasions. Serbian citizens have the right to be informed about how state-owned companies like Telekom spend their money, and in this case, there is an apparent intention to prevent the media from doing so.

Local media outlets are especially vulnerable to SLAPP lawsuits, as judgments against them could result in their closure due to the high amounts they cannot pay. The Independent Society of Journalists of Vojvodina (NDNV) announced on 18 March 2022, that [the portal "Autonomija" has been definitively convicted](#) and received a fine of 100,000 dinars for disseminating the position of a political party. According to the statement, the Appellate Court in Belgrade has upheld the ruling of the Higher Court in Belgrade, ordering the "Autonomija" portal to pay the damages based on the lawsuit filed by Đorđe Iskrin from Novi Sad, claiming "defamation and damage to reputation". The lawsuit ensued after the portal published a press release from the Democratic Party titled "DS: Remove the school director who refuses cross-border project." The court characterized the published text as the "editorial stance" because the press release was not placed in quotation marks, except for certain parts of the text. The Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV) notes that "the judiciary fails to understand the role of media and journalists in a democratic society" and describes this ruling as "unprecedented," suggesting that media outlets cannot disseminate the views of political actors without facing legal consequences and penalties if anyone sues them for publishing someone's political stance. They

consider this ruling a "direct attack on media freedom" and on the "right to express opinions, engage in public debate, political freedoms, and pluralism."

The Higher Court in Belgrade [dismissed the lawsuit filed by Millennium Team](#) company against the JugPress agency, the founder of the "Center for Democracy and Development of Southern Serbia" NGO, and the editor-in-chief Ljiljana Stojanović on 5 December 2022. The Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) was filed by Millennium Team, seeking compensation for "damages to business reputation" in the amount of 100 euros, reduced from the initial claim of 100,000 euros due to public pressure. The lawsuit was based on the previous publication of the opposition party People's Party (Narodna Stranka) stance on the portal, criticizing the company's work. In this case, the court recognized it as a SLAPP lawsuit, but it is necessary to work on amending the legislation to establish a legal standard for appropriately identifying and promptly dismissing all SLAPP lawsuits. Only in this way can this practice of intimidating and obstructing journalists and activists in their work be effectively addressed.

Former Chief of the Police Directorate in Pančevo, Igor Arsić, filed a lawsuit against the editor-in-chief of the Pančevo Si Ti portal, Nenad Živković, on 24 February 2023. In addition to Živković, Ljiljana Spasić, the executive director of the Civic Action Pančevo, the founder of the mentioned media outlet, was also sued. The reason for this lawsuit was a satirical article published earlier on this portal, in which Arsić was the main character. Nenad Živković and Ljiljana Spasić are often subjected to pressure and threats due to their articles and their critical activities towards the authorities, so there is no doubt that the aim of these SLAPP lawsuits is to obstruct their further work.

Activists are also targeted by SLAPP lawsuits, which are most often filed by actors with greater economic and political power. The damages sought from activists directly jeopardize their future work and even their livelihoods, and the main goal of these lawsuits is to prevent and suppress public (critically oriented) activities.

One of the prominent examples of SLAPP lawsuits is being filed against the association "Defend the Forests of Fruška Gora" and their activist Dragana Arsić. Environmental activists and associations, who have been pointing out irregularities in land purchases on Fruška Gora by the [Galens company](#), for years, are being sued by the owners of this company who are seeking imprisonment and monetary fines for causing emotional distress. The "Defend the Forests of Fruška Gora" and "Fruškać" associations state that they have received multiple SLAPP lawsuits in previous years from the owners of this company, Sanja and Nebojša Petrić, which serve as a means of pressuring and intimidating these associations, as well as discouraging other citizens from highlighting the irregularities taking place within the Fruška Gora National Park. The Petrićs are seeking compensation in the amount of 2 million dinars and a year of imprisonment for Dragana Arsić from "Defend the Forests of Fruška Gora" for "damaging the business reputation and creditworthiness of Nebojša and Sanja Petrić." [The first preliminary hearing](#), in one of the 5 lawsuits against the activists of the "Defend the Forests of Fruška Gora" association was held on 10 February 2022. The trials in this case continued throughout 2023. On 24 January 2023, the Basic Court in Novi Sad [rejected the lawsuit filed by the co-owner of the company Galens](#) Sanja Petrić, who sued the environmental activists of this movement for trespassing on her land within the Fruška Gora National Park. The verdict states that the activists did not act unlawfully when protesting on Sanja Petrić's land, as the existing regulations on nature and forest protection allow equal access to forests for everyone, and access and stay in the National Park can only be restricted under prescribed conditions and by authorized personnel, not by private landowners. The verdict further states that the environmental activists did not act unlawfully when cutting the wire fence enclosing this private land and that such action is a symbolic gesture expressing dissatisfaction with the work of institutions and drawing public attention to the mentioned problem, falling under the freedom of expression of activists fighting for the public interest. The court also referred to Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, stating that the activists' action was directed against Sanja Petrić's property, but the right to freedom of expression is not limited

by the wire fence enclosing the property, and Article 10 applies regardless of the environment in which it is expressed. The Appellate Court in Novi Sad [dismissed another lawsuit by Sanja Petrić](#), in September 2023, in which she sought 800,000 dinars from activist Dragana Arsić. In this lawsuit, Petrić sued Dragana Arsić for damaging her reputation and causing fear due to protests against the enclosure of a part of the Fruška Gora National Park, but this SLAPP lawsuit also did not succeed in court. Despite the fact that the lawsuits were dismissed, the fact that activists are forced to spend several years dealing with legal proceedings instead of activism fulfills the main purpose and objective of SLAPP lawsuits.

Companies often resort to SLAPP lawsuits as a means to intimidate activists and organizations. The residents of the village of Dragovo, near Rekovac near Kragujevac, have also faced such a threat. They announced that they received [a warning of a lawsuit](#) from a company conducting geological investigations in the area. The warning sent by this company to a few residents states that damages have been incurred due to road blockades and hindering the company from conducting the mentioned research, resulting in penalties for missing deadlines and breaching the company's obligations regarding these investigations. The company has calculated a compensation of 140,000 euros and has announced additional claims due to the decline in the value of its stocks on the stock exchanges. Miroljub Popović, one of the activists, emphasized that the warning serves to intimidate the residents and aims to halt the protest. Local residents in the municipality of Rekovac are fighting against the announced excavation of lithium and boron ore in this municipality, preventing exploratory work and drilling.

[The President of the municipality of Inđija, Vladimir Gak](#), has filed a private criminal lawsuit for defamation against Milan Milosavljević from this municipality, as reported by the Vojvodina Research and Analytical Center (VOICE) on 2 February 2023. Milosavljević states that he received the lawsuit because he commented on a post on the municipal Facebook page, where he referred to the President of the municipality as a liar. Lawyer Veljko Milić states that Gak could have initiated a

civil lawsuit against Milosavljević if he believed that his honor and reputation were violated, but he opted for a criminal proceeding that could lead to more severe sanctions. This case is reminiscent of the case of activist Aladin Paučinac from Novi Pazar, against whom the acting director of the General Hospital in that city, Meho Mahmutović, filed a total of 9 lawsuits, both criminal and civil, because the activist criticized the management of the hospital in Novi Pazar during the coronavirus pandemic on protests and social media. In April 2023, Paučinac was [convicted and fined 250,000 dinars](#) for insulting Meho Mahmutović in 2020.

## Freedom of Assembly

*Violations of the freedom of assembly by the authorities in Serbia have become a regular occurrence. Intimidation before protests has become a common practice in recent years, used by those in power to prevent citizens from participating in protests. Citizens receive warnings that they will be criminally or administratively prosecuted if they participate in protest gatherings. Sometimes these threats are realized, and citizens receive administrative reports at their home addresses, even if they were not identified during the protests. Although a large number of such reports filed for participating in environmental protests at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022 were dismissed, it still happens that participants are persecuted in this way after the protests end. The aim of this practice is to intimidate and discourage dissatisfied citizens from expressing their views publicly by participating in protests. During various protest gatherings in 2022 and 2023, numerous cases of violations of this right were recorded, as well as a large number of incidents in which citizens protesting suffered physical injuries. There have also been cases where police officers, as well as private security personnel, exceeded their authority and unjustifiably used force against participants, and in an even greater number of cases, it was determined that police officers did not do their job and protect the safety of citizens and property.*

The ban on EuroPride in 2022 highlighted the high level of endangerment of the freedom of assembly in Serbia, and numerous incidents and pressures related to the

"Serbia Against Violence" protests, which have been regularly held throughout Serbia since May 2023, indicate that the situation in this area is not improving, but rather deteriorating.

## Intimidation before protests

In recent years, there has been a noticeable trend of intimidating citizens and activists before protests in order to prevent their organization. It is increasingly common for police officers to visit not only the organizers but also potential participants of protest gatherings, verbally warning them that they will be prosecuted and punished if they attend such events. If citizens still decide to participate in protests, the police use various methods to prevent them, which constitutes an unacceptable violation of the freedom of assembly.

[Activists from the neighborhoods on the left bank of the Danube in Belgrade](#) faced threats after announcing a protest due to the unfulfilled promise of public officials regarding the construction of sewage systems in this part of the city. As one citizen stated to the media, prior to the protest scheduled for 20 February 2022, they received threats through phone calls, followed by sirens being set off in the Kotež neighborhood and the arrival of armored vehicles. Due to these threats, they were forced to officially cancel the gathering, demonstrating the effectiveness of such intimidation methods.

A group of activists from the villages of Slatina and Krivelj [were prevented from reaching Belgrade](#) for a protest organized by the Ecological Uprising and the "We Must" coalition on 19 March 2022. They were stopped by the police at the toll booth in Paraćin when entering the highway to Belgrade, and were detained for three hours. Activist Miodrag Živković stated that they were stopped under the pretext of a routine vehicle inspection, but he believes it was an excuse to prevent them from attending the scheduled protest in Belgrade. The police sent the mentioned vehicle for a

technical inspection, and Živković claims they were also monitored several days before the protest. As reported by the Istmedia.rs portal, they were previously followed by inspectors from the Bor police when leaving the city of Bor.

The Ministry of Interior in Čačak [exerted pressure on environmental activists and residents](#) of surrounding villages after the announcement of a protest and road blockade on 26 March 2022. According to the group "We Won't Give Up Our Ancestral Land," Miloš Nikolić and Miloško Čosić, who announced this gathering, were called in for an informational conversation at the Čačak police station, where they were threatened with criminal charges if they held the protest. The group stated that the protest would still take place despite the pressure. Residents of the surrounding villages in Čačak protested due to the inability to collect compensation for their expropriated property in the process of building a new highway.

A group of young men attempted to [intimidate one of the organizers of the farmers' protest](#), Mileta Bata Slankamenac, by coming to his village on 15 May 2023. Mileta was alerted by friends that they were looking for him, so he went into hiding and informed the police, after which he and his family received protection. According to Slankamenac, he did not find out who tried to intimidate him, but he knows that they left the village as soon as the news spread on social media about the threats. The farmers' protests, which began on 16 May 2023, were organized due to the poor conditions under which they produce and sell their products, and they are demanding assistance from the government in the form of subsidies and guaranteed better prices for agricultural goods.

After several days of protests for better working conditions on 19 May 2023, a group of farmers set off for Belgrade to join another protest in the city center, but they were [prevented by the police](#) in various ways. Those who set off from villages near Kragujevac were first stopped near Velika Plana, and then near Požarevac, where the police issued them fines. A similar situation occurred with [farmers from Rača](#), who

were repeatedly stopped by the police and eventually turned back at Smederevo, not allowing them to go to Belgrade with their tractors.

Challenges arise within the framework of freedom of assembly, not only in relation to protests but also in the organization of certain events. Certain events have become targets of right-wing organizations, and various pressures have been exerted with the aim of dissuading the organizers from holding the planned events. The organizers of an event at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade were also subjected to such pressure. On 16 March 2023, [posters with the inscriptions](#) "Traitor" and the emblem of the KLA, as well as photographs of some of the lecturers at the faculty - Assistant Professor Jelena Lončar, Assistant Professor Stefan Surlić, and Associate Professor Marko Veković, appeared in front of the faculty. The reason for this was the announced gathering of researchers from the Faculty of Political Sciences and the Faculty of Philosophy in Priština, which was subsequently canceled due to threats of physical attacks on the participants.

A group of about 50 men attempted to disrupt a panel discussion against hate speech and homophobia in Kruševac, at the Alternative Cultural Center "Gnezdo". During the incident, [one LGBT activist was attacked](#). The group gathered in front of the venue and sang derogatory songs even before the event started, and the present police officers did not react. The gathering dispersed only when the organizers managed to bring reinforcements through the police chief.

## Incidents at protests

The unprofessional conduct of the police, who in most cases did not attend protest gatherings or did not react in situations where public order and peace were violated, led to the endangerment of citizens' safety and open physical conflicts in which several individuals sustained injuries. Due to the absence of police officers who would protect the right to peaceful assembly of citizens, several individuals were

physically attacked during environmental protests and road blockades held on 15 January 2022. For example, during a road blockade in Preljina, one driver attempted to break through the blockade and hit several people, and then got out of the car and started arguing with the gathered protesters. After this incident, another driver tried to break through the blockade. Eyewitnesses report that plainclothes police officers did not react but were filming the events the whole time. In Šabac, one man attempted to break through a blockade and injured a person who required emergency medical assistance. At the same time, the police in Niš identified 20 individuals as organizers of unreported public gatherings and initiated appropriate proceedings against them, threatening them with fines ranging from 100,000 to 150,000 dinars. Many of those who received these charges claim they have "nothing to do with it" and demanded "valid evidence" from the police.

The act of cars driving into gathered citizens has become a very common and highly risky occurrence at various protests. These incidents are not surprising considering the narrative being spread about protesters in pro-government media. During a protest held on 15 February 2022, near the Palace of Serbia in Belgrade, [four traffic incidents occurred](#) in which unknown individuals drove their cars into the protesters who were blocking the roads. One of the videos related to the incident shows an unknown person hitting a protester with the front of their car and then accelerating while carrying the person on the hood. As stated by an undercover police officer after the incident, the driver of the mentioned car was arrested. High-ranking government officials contribute to the negative image of the protesting citizens, such as the former Minister of Interior and current director of BIA, Aleksandar Vulin, who, using the well-known discourse of "foreign mercenaries," [accused the protest organizer](#), Sava Manojlović, of costing the state "around 333,000 euros" for his protest. According to the statement from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Sava Manojlović was labeled as "Soros' man," and the participants of the protest were described as "allegedly gathered for some ecology." It is stated that the gathered citizens "attacked" the President of Serbia and gathered with the aim of preventing the arrival of important figures at the ceremonial awarding of orders on the occasion of Sretenje - Statehood Day of Serbia.

The statement also mentions that Minister Vulin "understands" Sava Manojlović because he "received a million from Soros a few days ago" and is "funded by Rockefeller," and that Manojlović "must justify the money he received." Such statements by the Minister of Internal Affairs represent a continuity of pressure and verbal attacks faced by activists in Serbia, who are labeled as "foreign mercenaries," "traitors," and "Soros' people" by the highest state officials.

Environmental activists are increasingly exposed to police brutality and harassment, but in recent years there has been a noticeable trend of attacks against them by private security workers hired by companies whose projects the activists are protesting against. One prominent case of an attack on environmental activists that marked the year 2022 occurred in Majdanpek. [Environmental activists from Majdanpek](#), who are fighting to preserve Mount Starica, were victims of violence by both the police and private security. Private security personnel destroyed a camp set up by the activists protesting against the planned mining by the company Zijin, and some security workers later went to the media with information that they had been hired by the Ministry of Mining and Energy to be filmed beating the activists. The Ministry denied these claims. In September 2022, several people witnessed the police brutality that the activists were subjected to, including beatings, coerced confessions, and the prohibition of communication with lawyers and family members. According to witnesses, the activists were taken to the local police station on 27 September 2022, for an informational interview, and later they were seen being brought by police officers to the local Health Center with visible injuries. The activists were in a serious condition and unable to walk independently. Activist Dragan Dmitrović publicly testified that police officers hit him on the head and back, threatened to kill him, and forced him to sign a statement incriminating three other activists for the events on Mount Starica when a Zijin company worker was attacked. Due to speaking out about the physical violence he endured, Dmitrović was also subjected to [institutional pressure from the police](#). The Bor Police Directorate announced on 4 October 2022, that a report would be filed against the activist. The statement states that Dmitrović was questioned at the Police Station on 3 October 2022, regarding the allegations of

violence suffered, and then he was sent to the Health Center in Majdanpek, where no injuries were confirmed. The statement concludes that a criminal complaint has also been filed against Dmitrović on suspicion of attacking four workers of the Chinese company "Zijin" on 18 September. The events on Mount Starica, and especially the harassment of activists, were one of the reasons why Serbia was once again placed on [the watchlist](#) of the global network CIVICUS. CIVICUS Monitor is an online platform that monitors threats to civil society in countries around the world and assesses the civic space - the space for the work of civil society, which in the case of Serbia has been characterized as "obstructed".

Environmental activists at Šodroš were concerned for their safety. A group of environmental activists, who were camping within the green oasis of Šodroš in Novi Sad, stated to the media that they were worried because [they had noticed members of the security forces and unknown vehicles](#) near their location. The activists had observed members of the Gendarmerie in their vicinity, as well as unknown vehicles that they deemed "suspicious." The environmental activists are trying to prevent deforestation for the construction of a new bridge with a bypass road, with the intention of thwarting the destruction of the "last green oasis" in this city. Their concerns were ultimately justified, as [the police used physical force against them](#) on two occasions during protests held in October 2022. The activists attempted to prevent the installation of a construction fence by workers from the Chinese company CRBC at the construction site, for which the company did not have all the necessary permits. Fully equipped police officers soon appeared at the location, [pushing the activists](#) deeper into the forest and allowing the fence to be installed. One of the activists stated that two police officers hit her in an attempt to push her away, [and a student](#) also reported being struck by a police officer and having to go to the hospital due to an injury. The media reported that at least 10 people [were detained on that occasion.](#), and several activists were injured. The Civic Initiatives were informed by the activists that the emergency medical service refused to come to the scene and provide medical assistance to the injured individuals, telling them that they first had to seek help from the police. [Pressure on the activists from Šodroš](#) continued in 2023,

when the police announced that misdemeanor charges would be filed against 7 individuals, and during a protest in March, [there was another clash with the police](#).

One of the biggest incidents during the protests occurred in Novi Sad when private security personnel used excessive force against the citizens who were protesting against the General Urban Development Plan of this city. Private security personnel, on multiple occasions, exceeded their legal authority and used excessive force against the participants of the protests in Novi Sad on 21 July 2022. Upon arriving [in front of the Vojvodina Assembly building](#), where a session was being held to adopt the General Urban Development Plan of this city, which was the reason for the protest, activists were stopped by private security personnel who were behind a metal fence. After the activists attempted to pass through the gate and past the security towards the entrance of the building, a commotion ensued, leading to a greater number of incidents marked by the excessive use of force by the security personnel against the participants of the protest. In the footage available on media portals and social media, it is possible to see a security personnel [pushing one of the activists](#), who then falls to the ground from the force of the impact, while another video shows [the arrest of an activist](#) also with the excessive use of force. The most brutal footage also showed the excessive use of force against one activist, with a security personnel [holding his knee on the neck](#). In response to these cases, [the "Three Freedoms" platform](#), also reacted. In the statement, a cessation of repressive measures by security forces and the initiation of proceedings against those who have used excessive force against protesters were demanded. No one has been held accountable for the violence inflicted on activists. [The Basic Court in Novi Sad dismissed the criminal complaint](#) filed by the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP) regarding the violence perpetrated against citizens protesting the City Urban Development Plan. SSP member Danijela Grujić filed the criminal complaint after the protest held on 21 July 2022, but the complaint was dismissed in August 2023. Grujić stated that this decision is "just further evidence of the legitimization of violence against dissenters that this regime has been promoting for a whole decade." With this decision, the competent institutions have chosen to turn a blind eye to the repression and force used against

the gathered citizens. Intimidation of citizens continued leading up to the second announced protest against the City Urban Development Plan. [Stickers featuring the image of activist from Novi Sad](#) Brajan Brković appeared in the parking lot behind the Police Directorate building in Novi Sad on 28 July 2022, just before the planned protest. Stickers with Brković's image, along with Ustasha symbolism, appeared at the location where the protest was supposed to begin, which was organized in response to the previous protest where excessive force was used by private security against activists. Activist Brković is often subjected to threats and pressures, and one such case occurred in February 2022 when he was [targeted in a campaign](#) by pro-government tabloids, which spread hatred towards activists and exposed them to danger and potential attacks.

Incidents at protests continued in 2023 as well. Several incidents were recorded at protests on Mount Kablar organized by environmental activists opposing the construction of a glass lookout on the mountain. In the early days of the protests on Kablar, [the police and private security prevented citizens and activists](#) from reaching the mountain top. During one protest, environmental activist from the “Guardians of Kablar”, Miloš Kuvekalović was attacked. He was [physically assaulted by a construction worker](#). The worker attacked Kuvekalović, took his phone, and knocked him to the ground. As the activist explains, the worker later apologized and said he "had to do it." A month later, during the visit of Ana Brnabić to inspect the construction works, a conflict broke out between activists and the police, resulting in the arrest of three activists. [The police clashed with environmental activists /](#) who were waiting for the Prime Minister on Kablar to express their dissatisfaction with the plan to build a glass lookout on the mountain. Member of the Parliament of the Environmental Uprising, Aleksandar Jovanović Čuta, stated to the media that the police "pushed them onto the sidewalk" and then arrested three activists, who were held by the police for 8 hours. [The activists](#) were released later that evening after a protest organized by activists in front of the police station.

During the blockade of the Sava embankment on 10 September 2023, [a physical altercation occurred between a participant in the protest and a participant in traffic](#), resulting in the activist sustaining minor head injuries. Members of the informal association "Sava Embankment" organized the road blockade because traffic is prohibited in that area, but owners of illegally built weekend houses do not respect this rule. During the blockade, a woman drove her car towards the gathered citizens and activists, leading to a confrontation with one of the blockade participants, which ultimately resulted in a fight.

### Institutional pressures during protests

In addition to the pressures before holding public gatherings and the ignorant attitude of the police that resulted in numerous incidents at the gatherings themselves, the freedom of assembly is in many cases limited by the exercise of institutional pressures and the exceeding of authority by police officers even during the duration of the protest. Environmental activists gathered on 28 November 2022 in the center of Belgrade, and during the meeting [they were exposed to pressure from police officers](#). On several occasions, the police legitimized several participants, but also tested them for the presence of alcohol and psychoactive substances. Nebojša Petković from the association "Ne damo Jadar" ("We won't give up on Jadar") announced that they experienced this behavior of the police as a form of pressure.

[Members of the "Bravo" movement](#) they tried to hand over a bulletproof vest to the mayor of Novi Sad, Milan Đurić on 31 August 2023, before the reception ceremony of the student champions, but the police prevented them from doing so. Activists were stopped at the gate of the school in Futog, where they were identified and detained for an hour to establish their identity, after which they were released because there were no grounds for criminal or misdemeanor charges. The intention of the members of the "Bravo" movement was to point out the issue of safety in schools, a

topic that became a particularly sensitive issue after the mass murder at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Primary School in Belgrade.

## Sanctions and pressures after protests

Given that previous attempts at intimidation to deter citizens from participating in protests have proven ineffective, and that repressive measures implemented during the protests often have the opposite effect of what was intended, further motivating citizens to take to the streets in even greater numbers to express their dissatisfaction, the government has resorted to a third modality of restricting the freedom of assembly - punishing participants after the protests have concluded.

Invitations to hearings by activists have become a tool in the hands of the authorities aimed at intimidating activists and preventing their future activism. Activist and member of the "Fortress Movement" from Smederevo, Nikola Krstić, received a summons on 23 February 2022, to report to the Misdemeanor Court in that city. As stated in the [summons for the hearing](#), Krstić is charged with misdemeanors from two articles of the Law on Public Gatherings, i.e. for holding gatherings without reporting to the competent authority and for not maintaining order at the gathering. As reported by this movement, they see the invitation to the hearing as a continuation of the pressure on them, especially after Krstić was detained earlier for participating in the protest, during which a misdemeanor proceeding was also initiated against him.

Against three activists from Novi Sad [a criminal complaint has been filed for interrupting a session](#) of the city commission where amendments to the city's General Urban Development Plan were to be discussed. Activists Brajan Brković, Srđan Đurić, and Mladen Cvijetić disrupted this session on 7 March 2022, by unfurling a banner and igniting pyrotechnic devices. The activists claim that they see this process as political persecution, that there was no violent behavior during the interruption, and that no one was endangered. They referred to their action as a political performance. In response to this, organizations associated around then ["Three](#)

[Freedoms” platform](#) expressed concern about the qualification of the criminal offense charged against them and the threatened sanctions, but also about the "double standards" of the authorities. The Platform states that the exclusion of the public from the decision-making process leads to citizens increasingly resorting to non-institutional mechanisms to protect their rights, which could be seen in the example of environmental protests, after which they become targets of state repression. It is stated that the qualification of this act as a criminal and not a misdemeanor, as well as a high sanction, would further discourage activists and demotivate the enjoyment of freedom of expression.

In addition to being exposed to the brutal use of force by members of private security, the citizens of Novi Sad who protested against the General Urban Development Plan on 21 July 2022 also faced institutional pressures after participating in the protests. Portal 021.rs reported that the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office (OJT) in Novi Sad launched [an investigation against 12 people](#) who participated in the protests, charging them with violent behavior and assault on an official in the performance of his duties. OJT, on the other hand, did not initiate any proceedings against members of the private security, who violently knocked down and detained the participants of the protest that day. Several civic initiatives and organizations have spoken out on this occasion, stating that the goal is to "discourage and intimidate citizens in expressing their opinions." They called the actions "political persecution" and "selective application of the law", and that there were no reactions regarding the violence against the participants of the protest from the institution of the Protector of Citizens, but also from the Department of Internal Control of the Ministry of the Interior, which did not respond to the complaints received.

Misdemeanor reports have become a way of persecuting those citizens who participate in various protests. The fact that protest participants are almost never legitimized at the protest itself is considered particularly problematic, but misdemeanor reports arrive at their home addresses. Workers who decide to protest and demand improvement in working conditions are also exposed to reports.

Thus, three workers of the Fiat company from Kragujevac [received misdemeanor fines for the protest blockade of the road](#) of the Kragujevac - Kraljevo road from 20 July 2022, organized due to the uncertain fate of the workers in the car factory after the company began the process of temporarily suspending production. As stated for the media by the representative [of the "Nezavisnost" union](#) Igor Andjic, during the protest, was not identified by the police officers, and he was informed by the officials at the police station that the "commander of the station ordered the fine." Zoran Miljkovic, the vice president of the Independent Union of Fiat Plastics, also spoke to the media, reiterating that [he was not made to present his ID during the protest](#), and that he was not warned by the police about committing an offense, even though the offense report states that such a warning was given. The police entered their personal ID numbers on the offense reports, which they could not have known since they never asked for them.

According to the same template, the police massively issued misdemeanor fines for blocking traffic to the participants of the environmental protests, which were held at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, while the misdemeanor courts, as of 4 July 2022, issued more than 60 acquittals. In those cases which are nevertheless contested before the courts. More than 60 acquittals proved the abuse of norms by institutions for the purpose of repression of activists, it was announced [at a special media conference of Citizen Initiatives](#) on this matter. It was stated at the conference that "police officers in plain clothes" filmed the crowd without authorization or recognized them and recorded their presence, and they forwarded this information to the traffic police, who then issued fines for misdemeanors, due to being stuck on the road. In addition, these actions were performed according to the instructions of the managers - the police officers testified that they had the "task" to recognize the participants, as well as to only "recognize" the participants, without identifying potential violations. One of the police officers "had the task of recognizing two faces on the video." It was concluded that the participants of these protests were under the pressure of staged processes, and the police, based on the recordings and informal recognition of the rules, filed a file on everyone who was at the protest. By

prosecuting citizens for misdemeanors, the police directly threaten the constitutionally guaranteed right of citizens to protest gatherings.

Due to his speech at the protest where he highlighted the poor working conditions at the Belgrade City Transport Company, Sima Šarik [was fired](#), as announced on 9 September 2022. In a statement to the media, he stated that two of his colleagues were also fired for giving speeches at the protest. He mentioned that he was fired for alleged speeding, failure to report arrivals and departures from work, and for speaking at the mentioned protest. The infringement of workers' freedom of expression is the most blatant violation of basic workers' rights guaranteed by numerous domestic and international documents.

## Cancellation of EuroPride

One of the biggest blows to the freedom of assembly happened with the ban on holding EuroPride in Belgrade, just a few days before the announced march in September 2022. [President Aleksandar Vučić](#) was the first to announce the possibility of banning the gathering in Belgrade, and then the Government of the Republic of Serbia issued a statement stating that "[there are no conditions for safely holding EuroPride](#)". On this occasion, "[Three Freedoms](#)" platform issued a statement urging the competent institutions to clearly and unambiguously guarantee the safe organization of "EuroPride 2022". It was stated that "manipulating this issue by framing it in the context of endangering national security and an energy crisis undermines the fundamental human rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution and confirmed by international agreements, including the right of citizens to freedom of peaceful assembly". The Platform stated that there are specific reasons why human rights can be restricted, and that the way in which state officials spoke about EuroPride unjustifiably encroached on the freedom of assembly, and that damage to the freedom of assembly had already been done before the final decision of the institutions on this matter, as citizens have the impression that their basic rights and freedoms depend on the will of state officials. Of course, the ban on EuroPride is primarily an attack on the rights and freedoms of LGBTQ+ citizens of this country

and an indication that the state is not willing to work on improving the position of this multiply marginalized community in society. The Ministry of Interior officially [banned the march](#) on 13 September 2022. In addition to the EuroPride march itself, the announced counter-protest organized by right-wing extremists was also banned, which was actually the only threat to security, public order, and peace. The Platform's statement highlighted that the mentioned security risks, which exclusively come from the organizers of the counter-protest, cannot justify the ban on a peaceful gathering like EuroPride. The main spokesperson for foreign affairs and security policy of the EU, Peter Stano, also issued a statement expressing [the EU's disappointment with the ban](#) imposed by the Ministry of Interior. The decision to ban was reversed a few hours before the march, when the march was allowed but in an altered, shorter route. Parallel to EuroPride, a gathering of right-wing individuals was held, which was not subsequently allowed, and whose participants wore religious symbols, trampled the rainbow flag, insulted and attacked EuroPride participants and present journalists. About 64 people were arrested in connection with these attacks. The Association "Da se zna" ("Let It Be Known"), which provides legal and psychological assistance to LGBTQ+ individuals, [recorded 14 attacks](#), including 8 physical ones, during the march. Activists from Germany and Albania were attacked on their way to the hotel, and they also stated that the police failed to intervene adequately. Two activists were injured in the incident. The Ministry of Interior [banned the entry](#) of 8 foreign nationals who participated in the march. The institutions have failed in providing protection to EuroPride participants, and by institutional pressure, they have openly sided with the perpetrators and those who actually endanger the lives and safety of LGBTQ+ citizens. In addition to constant attacks on environmental activists, the ban on EuroPride was the reason for Serbia being placed on the CIVICUS watchlist. The CIVICUS statement stated that: "Attempts by the authorities to ban the protest march within EuroPride come in an atmosphere where LGBTQI+ rights are already noticeably under attack".

Forcing attendance at rallies of the ruling party

While on one hand, certain citizens are prevented from enjoying the right to freedom of assembly, others are subjected to pressure to participate in rallies of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. Employees in state institutions are particularly exposed to coercion, and in case of refusal to attend these rallies, they are at risk of being fired or facing other repercussions in the workplace, which is not in line with the legal regulations in this area.

Pressure on employees has particularly intensified during the pre-election campaign of 2022. The deputy president of the opposition Democratic Party, Dragana Rakić, stated that educators and auxiliary workers of a [preschool institution in Vršac](#) were forced to attend the opening of a road, where the President of the Republic, Vučić, was a guest. According to her, this road had already been opened to traffic before the mentioned event, but it was ceremoniously reopened in the presence of the President of Serbia. Rakić received this information directly from the employees of this institution, who stated that they refused to attend this gathering. On that occasion, Rakić also mentioned that "all public enterprises will be closed at 12 o'clock, so that employees can go to the gathering in Opovo, where the President of the Serbian Progressive Party and Serbia will speak," and that "anyone who refuses to get on the bus can expect to be fired from their job."

During the pre-election campaign, employees in public institutions in the city of Kraljevo received [calls from their superiors to attend a gathering](#) of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party in the city on 24 March 2022, to mark the anniversary of the beginning of the NATO bombing. A source from the Nova.rs portal stated that they were called "guaranteed attendees of the gathering" and that they were called multiple times a day, every day. This portal, among other things, published an official notice from the General Hospital in Kraljevo dated March 22, 2022, signed by the acting director of the institution, Zoran Mrvić, inviting interested healthcare workers to gather at 7 pm on that day to "organize themselves and go to the square to greet the President of the Republic, Aleksandar Vučić," with a note that "the gathering is not of partisan nature."

For decades, Serbia has been in a constant state of election campaign, which has been particularly pronounced since the Serbian Progressive Party came to power, and pressures on employees to attend various gatherings regularly occur, even outside the election period. One such gathering was held on 26 May 2023, in Belgrade, as a response from the government to the mass protests "Serbia against Violence" that were taking place across Serbia after two mass murders. The media reported testimonies from employees of public enterprises about the pressures they face regarding [attending the rally in Belgrade](#). Six days before the rally, the public could witness how representatives of the government behave towards citizens they bring to their gatherings, during the rally in Pančevo held on 20 May 2023, when a camera captured non-uniformed individuals [preventing citizens from leaving the gathering](#). People in white vests and jackets, with the name Aleksandar Vučić written on them, formed a cordon and prevented people from moving, so they wouldn't leave the designated area for the gathering. In one of the videos posted on her Twitter profile by Member of Parliament Marinika Tepić, it can be seen that this cordon was led by Novak Nedić, the General Secretary of the Government of Serbia.

## Protests "Serbia against Violence"

In May 2023, Serbia was shaken by two mass murders in which 18 people lost their lives, mostly children and young people. On 3 May 2023, a boy killed 9 children and a school guard at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Primary School in Belgrade. The next day, in the villages of Dubona and Malo Orašje, near Mladenovac, a 21-year-old killed 8 young people. These two tragedies deeply disturbed the public and sparked a debate about the roots of this violence and the necessary systemic social response to prevent similar tragedies in the future. As a spontaneous reaction, protests called "Serbia against Violence" began, through which the citizens of Serbia initially wanted to express their solidarity with the families of the victims. The protests became increasingly massive week after week, and the gathered citizens began to unravel the web of violence that had engulfed the country. Non-partisan speakers at the protests

bravely spoke about the various forms of violence they were exposed to, which the state not only fails to punish but often promotes. Over time, it became clear that the problem of violence is deeply rooted in our society, and the protests that pointed this out began to bother the government representatives, which led to numerous pressures, verbal and physical attacks on those who attend the protests and support them.

Several individuals were attacked at these protests by those who were not participating in the protests. At one of the protests on 19 May, [the director of the "Kreni-Promeni" movement](#) Sava Manojlović, was attacked. The movement released a video showing unknown individuals attacking Manojlović and physically assaulting him. It was later determined that they were members of extremist People's Patrols. At the same protest [two women were also attacked](#), by Ilija Vuksanović, who has a history of attacking journalists. He first tried to take a flag from a woman that said "Stop femicide," and then got into an argument and directed curses at her. He also attempted to attack her, but the protesters prevented him. The attack on the two women carrying a feminist banner is an indicator of the social climate and intolerance directed towards those who fight for gender equality in our society and who point out the prevalence of violence against women in Serbia. Members of the "People's Patrols" were involved [in another incident at a protest](#). On 27 May 2023, they attacked a man at the protest and also harassed a reporter from N1 who was reporting from the scene. In the incident, Miodrag Gavrilović, a member of the Democratic Party (DS), was injured and had a bruise under his eye. These patrol members have attacked people at protests in previous years and prevented them from exercising their right to freedom of assembly. One of the most extreme examples of violence at protests occurred on 25 August, just before the start of a protest against violence in Gornji Milanovac, when [a man drove his car into gathered citizens/](#) injuring a six-year-old child. Fortunately, the child suffered minor injuries and is in stable condition. The suspect was arrested and remanded in custody for 30 days. By sheer luck, the incident did not end tragically. Disturbed by the incident, the citizens protested in front of the police station in Gornji Milanovac, dissatisfied with the police's failure to secure the gathering. The competent authorities are obliged to guarantee the safety of the

citizens who protest and thus prevent such and similar examples of direct endangerment of citizens' lives.

Those who spoke at the protests were attacked by high-ranking state officials, who used various means to intimidate all those who dared to speak about the violence and stand up against it. Due to the fact that he spoke at the "Serbia against Violence" protest and read the proclamation of more than 1,000 intellectuals who supported the citizens, [the target of the attack was Professor of the Faculty of Law](#), Miodrag Jovanović. On 15 June 2023, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić made several insults about him in the "Cirilica" show on Happy TV, as well as information about his alleged monthly income. Because of the speech at the protest [the family of student Pavle Cicvarić was exposed to verbal attacks](#). The family of Pavle Cicvarić, a student of the Faculty of Political Sciences, who spoke at one of the "Serbia against Violence" rallies, was targeted on 29 June 2023, at the session of the Serbian Parliament by the Minister of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, Aleksandar Marinović. He publicly disclosed personal information about this student's family, showing a photo of his father, evaluating their financial situation and intentions to speak at the protest, which misused the Serbian Parliament for confrontation with a young activist, and also took away time from what should have been the topic of this session.

Government representatives regularly used the opportunity to attack those who support protests against violence in the Parliament and on their social networks. Actors were particularly exposed to the targeting campaign. After one such targeting by SNS officials in the Serbian Parliament, actor [Marko Janketić was verbally attacked on the street](#) on 1 June 2023. Previously, SNS member of parliament Nebojša Bakareč was bothered by the fact that some actors go to protests, so he presented in the Serbian Parliament the alleged fees that some of the actors receive for films and series in which Telekom (a state-owned company) is a sponsor. On 10 June 2023, MP and official of the Serbian Progressive Party, Sandra Božić, who is also the vice-president of the Serbian Parliament, [insulted the actor Milan Marić](#) on Twitter for his

speech at the sixth "Serbia against Violence" protest in Belgrade, saying with insulting words that he was working to the detriment of Serbia and people of this country. The dangerous labeling of the actors as "enemies of the state", which came from officials of the ruling party, found an echo among anonymous Internet users who then insulted and threatened the actors. [The actress Tamara Dragičević](#) received threatening messages on 10 June 2023, via social networks for participating in the "Serbia against Violence" protest, in which her children were also mentioned, stating the location where one of her children was at that time. During the month of June, several videos were published in which [actors are accused of subverting the state](#).

In addition to the actors, the media that professionally reported on these protests were also exposed to targeting. The Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, Goran Vesić, went so far as to accuse the media operating within the United Media company of "[waging a propaganda war against their country](#)", and inciting violence and conflicts. Vesić also attempted to undermine and belittle the demands of the "Serbia against violence" protest, stating that they were actually the demands of Dragan Šolak, co-owner of United Media company. The narrative of alleged promotion of civil war, hatred, and violence was also spread by MPs [Nebojša Bakarec](#) and [Milenko Jovanov](#).

The government not only resorted to insults but also used institutional pressures to intimidate protest participants. Members of the Civic Movement "Bravo" from Novi Sad stated on 10 July that their members were being called in [for informational interviews](#) by police officers after participating in the protest "Novi Sad against violence - EVERYTHING MUST STOP". Activists were summoned for a conversation regarding the performance they organized, specifically the use of smoke flares. They claim to have used only harmless cartridges that release colored smoke - without detonations or open flames. Activists dutifully respond to the calls for informational interviews, even though they are mostly unfounded. This is just one form of intimidation, persecution, and institutional violence that the government applies to protest participants.

Some protest participants have also faced problems at work. Zoran Gajic, a postal worker from Sremska Mitrovica, received a message from his superiors informing him that [he would be demoted to a lower position or, if he refuses, he will be fired.](#) The reason for such treatment was not stated, but he was told that he "knows well why it is so". Gajić believes that the real reason for the sudden change in his work engagement is his active participation in protests against violence. Gajić, who is also a single father, has health problems that prevent him from performing the job that his superiors, in a questionable manner, assigned to him, so he will seek a legal assessment of the new employment contract in court. Pressures and blackmail are another way in which holders of power in the state and society try to deter citizens from actively participating in protests and engaging in political life, which is a right that belongs to everyone without exception.

## AREA 2: CSO FINANCIAL VIABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY NETWORK

*The practice of non-transparent implementation of calls for co-financing projects of civil society organizations and projects of public interest carried out by media associations continued over the past two years. Money in these calls is awarded to GONGO organizations that are not recognized in the fields they allegedly operate in. This disposal of funds intended for the most vulnerable groups is far from serving the public interest and represents a continuation of the practice of financing GONGO organizations through public calls. This jeopardizes the sustainability of civil society organizations that provide real services to beneficiaries, and the already insufficient funds for socially vulnerable citizens do not reach those for whom they are intended. Local calls are extremely susceptible to such practices, and people who point this out are exposed to attacks and pressures. In November 2023, the results of research conducted by Civic Initiatives and the Balkan*

*Investigative Reporting Network Serbia (BIRN) were published, showing that at least 5 million euros were withdrawn from the calls of the Ministry of Family Care and Demography in 2021. Instead of directing that money towards projects supporting women, youth, and families, implemented by credible CSOs, the money ended up in the accounts of "phantom" organizations and related agencies that were created for the purpose of abusing the Ministry's calls.*

*The misuse of public funds has not stopped in the previous two years. Through public calls, the state distributed 6.8 billion dinars, or almost 58 million euros, in 2022 - this money was often spent improperly, regularly financing GONGO organizations and tabloids, as shown in the report "Publicly on Public Calls: Overview of Project Financing in the Fields of Media, Civil Society, Culture, and Youth in 2022" by BIRN and Civil Initiatives. The majority of the funds are allocated to civil society (over 3 billion in 2022, or 44 per cent of the total allocated funds). About one-third of the money goes to the media and culture sectors (1.8 billion dinars for each sector), while the youth sector remains underfunded. Individual media projects are the most generously funded - the average value of these projects is twice as high as in other sectors. The distribution of funds does not align with priorities in public policies, as shown in the report. There have been several cases of non-transparent competitions, such as those conducted by the Ministry of Family Care and Demography, which, despite non-governmental organizations pointing out suspicious projects supported by calls, continued the practice of allocating public funds to organizations connected to several individuals, and organizations that often emerged just before the announcement of the competition, whose formal representatives often do not even know the names of the organizations they supposedly lead. The Ministry of Family Care and Demography allocated around 360 million dinars, or about three million euros, for the financing of non-governmental organizations in 2022. The majority of the funds allocated by the Ministry of Family Care and Demography in competitions, even 308 million (2.6 million euros), went to organizations that do not have offices or phone numbers, references in the fields they applied for, nor are the results of their projects publicly visible, according to the research by BIRN and Civil Initiatives.*

Civil Initiatives (CI) and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Serbia (BIRN) published [research](#) in November 2023 on the funds allocated in public calls by the Ministry of Family Care and Demography in 2021. This research is part of the regular process of monitoring the spending of state funds in public calls conducted by various ministries in the fields of media and public information, civil society, culture, and youth, which CI and BIRN, together with other NGOs gathered in [the OKO coalition](#) have been investigating for four years. What stood out in the calls of the Ministry of Family Care in 2021 were a series of irregularities identified in the selection of organizations supported, based on which a network of connected organizations, as many as 24, received huge sums of money for projects that were never implemented. The research showed that during 2021, at least 5 million euros were withdrawn from the Ministry of Family Care and Demography, then led by Radomir Dmitrović, through this network of "phantom" organizations.

What did all of this look like in practice? A whole range of "phantom" organizations applied to the Ministry for Family Care and Demographics calls, receiving large sums of money for the implementation of programs of public interest. The competitions saw a large number of approved projects supposedly dedicated to the prevention of peer violence and domestic violence. The amounts received exceeded the usual funds allocated in public calls, with some associations receiving several million dinars, multiple times throughout the year, by applying to multiple different competitions announced by the Ministry. The selection of supported programs indicates that the Commission did not conduct a prior analysis of the references and experiences of the associations that applied, and approved funds for those who actually do not have them - there is no information available about the work and results of these associations (they do not have their own websites, social media pages, no media reports mentioning them, etc). Therefore, it is evident that acting in the public interest was not the decisive criterion for program selection and fund allocation. Subsequently, the received money was transferred either to the accounts of private agencies owned by family members, friends, or neighbors of the association's representatives, or the

money was allegedly transferred to the accounts of other associations that never received that money, nor were they informed about the projects. Millions of euros were thus diverted to the accounts of family members, neighbors, friends, and acquaintances of people in this network, through agencies established for this purpose, instead of being used to support youth, women, and prevent violence. In the end, "phantom" associations submitted incomplete reports, and as later determined, false reports on implemented projects that were never actually carried out. Out of a total of 59 projects for which Civil Initiatives received documentation, reports indicate that 42 projects supposedly dealt with training on peer violence and reproductive health in nearly 70 schools across Serbia. In as many as 23 schools, out of a total of 43 that responded to BIRN's questions, no training sessions were held during 2021, while in schools where training was conducted, the lectures were given by either teachers or lecturers from local youth offices who were not paid for conducting these trainings. The money was embezzled even for assistance to social work centers. Around 410,000 euros were supposed to be directed towards assisting social work centers in Vranje, Leskovac, and Kikinda. Organizations received money for projects training gerontological caregivers. However, as with the school trainings, the investigation shows that the projects were not implemented in reality as presented in the reports submitted to the Ministry.

The misuse of public tenders directly harms all citizens of this country, especially members of marginalized groups who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the services for which funds are allocated. Associations that have been dedicatedly and seriously addressing complex social issues and providing community services for years are also affected. They have suffered material damage as the money has gone into the accounts of those who abuse public tenders for personal gain. This money is crucial for the majority of civil society organizations, as their existence and the continuation of their programs depend directly on state support. In addition to material damage, non-material harm has been inflicted on civil society, primarily due to the tarnishing of the reputation of the entire sector and the creation of a negative image in the public eye regarding the intentions and actions of associations. What has been observed

through the investigation is the connection of "phantom" organizations with several individuals, one of whom is Aleksandra Čamagić. This network of connected suspicious organizations first received funding in 2016 and 2017 through the competitions of the municipality of Novi Beograd, in which Čamagić was directly involved in the allocation of public funds. She then moved to the Ministry for Family Care and Demography in 2021, where she served as a member of the competition commissions, and the same organizations appeared as recipients of funds. At the end of 2022, Čamagić moved to the administration of the City of Belgrade, and a few months later, this network received funding from the Secretariat for Economy and the Secretariat for Social Protection, both of which she was leading at the time. Aleksandra Čamagić is a close associate of the current President of the Temporary Authority of the City of Belgrade and former President of the municipality of Novi Beograd, Aleksandar Šapić.

Due to all the shortcomings that occurred in the call organized by the Ministry for Family Care and Demography, Civil Initiatives, in collaboration with and with the support of the Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights (YUCOM), filed a criminal complaint with the Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime for the criminal offense of abuse of official position against former Minister Radomir Dmitrović and against unidentified persons in the Ministry who were members of the commissions that decided on the allocation of funds (information about the composition of the commissions was not publicly available). The complaint was also filed against representatives of 24 associations for unjustified obtaining and use of loans and other benefits, and against two individuals identified as persons who connected the network of "phantom" organizations for unauthorized trading in influence. The Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime has officially started proceedings based on the criminal complaint, and it is crucial that the competent authorities establish and sanction those who have most severely damaged the budget of the Republic of Serbia and embezzled funds intended for the most vulnerable population groups.

Unfortunately, during 2022 and 2023, the practice of non-transparent procedures, arbitrary decision-making in the allocation of public funds, and absolute disregard for the public interest and the real needs of media and CSOs that applied for institutional support continued. Considering that competitive co-financing is one of the key sources that guarantees the existence of numerous organizations, and that alternative funding methods are underdeveloped, the shortcomings in the implementation of the competitions have far-reaching negative consequences. As in previous years, GONGO organizations often appeared as winners, while numerous CSOs that have proven their competence in various fields were left without support. BIRN Serbia, in partnership with Civil Initiatives and a team of researchers from 17 local CSOs, is implementing a project that includes an open online database of public competitions, containing data on a total of 2395 competitions implemented from 2019 to 2022. The analysis covers calls announced by local self-government units, the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, and relevant ministries. In 2022, over 6.8 billion dinars were spent through project financing, i.e., calls for the implementation of projects in the public interest, in the sectors of media and public information, civil society, culture, and youth. Through public calls, the state should support and assist sectors that deal with the protection of the public interest. For many organizations and media outlets operating in limited markets and small local communities, this type of financial assistance is one of the most important potential sources of funding. That is why it is crucial that this money is spent in a transparent and accountable manner. However, our research and the data we have collected show that the reality is quite the opposite - procedural and administrative errors, abuses, and misappropriation of funds have been recorded this year, as well as in previous years. The reform of public calls is lacking, even though some sectors have initiated amendments to the laws regulating this area. The elections in April 2022, followed by delays in the formation of the government, effectively stalled all the initiatives that had been started.

The Coalition "Openly about Open Calls- OKO" has alerted the public that, according to the [preliminary list](#) of winners published on February 10, 2022, on the public competition conducted by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological

Development for funding projects significant for pre-university education, a large portion of the funds has once again been earmarked for organizations that have received funding in previous years through illegal and controversial calls. Additionally, the list does not include the number of points awarded to individual projects, the total number of applications received, or the formal or other criteria that organizations whose projects were not proposed for funding did not meet. In addition to the association "Panacea Solutions," four other associations are expected to receive funding through this call, whose projects were also supported in the annulled call in 2014, as well as in the [controversial calls of the Ministry for Family Care and Demography](#), which BIRN wrote about in late 2021. These five associations, whose work and results are unknown to the public and whose staff members are interconnected, were awarded just under 130 million dinars in those calls. The final list of winners did not differ from the preliminary one, and the allocation of budget funds in this way represents a continuation of the practice of abusing public finances, whereby money intended for supporting civil society is repeatedly distributed among a small circle of the same and connected organizations, whose work leaves no trace in the public domain.

The Ministry for Family Care and Demography has been conducting non-transparent calls for years, through which suspicious organizations, whose work is not known to the general public, receive funding. BIRN and Civil Initiatives have been reporting on [the non-transparent allocation of public funds](#) through calls organized by the Ministry for Family and Demography since 2021. However, this has not prevented the Ministry from doing the same in 2022. The Ministry for Family Care and Demography has allocated [3 million euros](#) through three calls in 2022, of which the majority (around 2.6 million euros) has once again been awarded to phantom associations. Research conducted by BIRN and Civil Initiatives has shown that these associations do not have offices or phone numbers, references in the areas for which they applied, nor are the results of their projects publicly visible. The [research](#) has also revealed that half of the allocated funds went to associations connected to Bojan Lešović (Coordinator of the Civil Society Cooperation Team of the Voždovac

Municipality and representative of several citizen associations) and Tatjana Borojević (legal representative of the Panacea association). The two of them are directly or indirectly connected to as many as 21 associations that received funding in the 2021 call. Lešović and Borojević were also participants in the controversial competition organized by the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs in 2014 and were at the center of the scandal, which led the then Minister Aleksandar Vulin to redirect the funds for humanitarian purposes. The prosecution dismissed the criminal complaint regarding this case in 2017. After the unsuccessful competition in 2014, 18 associations, which were supposed to receive funding at that time, received over 3.7 million euros on another controversial competition organized by the Ministry for Family Care and Demography in 2021, with changed legal representatives and association headquarters just a few days before the competition was announced. The research findings confirm the existence of an organized network of associations, individuals, and state officials who, for years, have been diverting public funds for their own interests through non-existent projects. The Ministry for Family Care and Demography has never acted upon the requests for access to information of public importance or the decisions of the Commissioner in complaint procedures. The problems with the calls organized by this Ministry have continued in 2023 as well. The Ministry for Family Care and Demography announced four calls on 27 April 2023. A preliminary analysis of the competition results, published on June 22, shows that even a third of the organizations that received funding this year are not visible to the public in any way. They do not have websites or social media accounts, making it impossible to determine any trace of their previous work and results. What is particularly concerning is the justified suspicion of the connection between these organizations and state officials. For example, the former legal representative of the National Foundation for Family Issues and Demography, which is expected to receive one of the largest amounts in this competition - as much as 10 million dinars, is the current State Secretary in the Ministry for Family Care and Demography, Radoš Pejović. According to publicly available data from the Business Registers Agency, the decision to change the legal representative was made on 23 May of this year - immediately after the call was announced.

Despite the proclaimed fight for natality and women's rights, research on public competitions shows that some of the most significant misuses of funds have occurred in this area. In the call for financing or co-financing of association programs/projects in the field of social protection in 2023, announced by the City of Leskovac, Department of Social Affairs and Local Development, a total of 5,100,000.00 dinars was allocated to associations that, according to the statements of organizations and media from Leskovac, have been receiving funds from this competition for several years without meeting the competition requirements, there is no information about the results of their work, or they are led by individuals connected to the city administration and commission members. One of the two organizations that received the highest amount of funds is "Grad Jelica," an association that, [according to media reports](#), has been receiving significant sums of money from the City for years to implement a project with the same name. Neither this association nor their project "From Us to You," which received 2,500,000.00 dinars in this year's call, are visible to the public in any way. Like in previous years, two associations - Single Parents Association "Tate i Mame" (UTIM) and Pensioners' Union Association Leskovac - were supported in this year's call with a total of 1,800,000.00 dinars for six projects. These two associations were founded by the same person - Miodrag Stanković. The UTIM Association provides a helpline service for victims of violence, even though Stanković himself [has been convicted of domestic violence twice](#), as previously reported by local and national media. Organizations that have been fighting against gender-based violence and supporting victims for decades are thus left without the necessary funds for their survival and unhindered work in this extremely important field, in a country where a double-digit number of femicides is recorded annually. When they publicly disclosed information about the allocation of funds in Leskovac, [activists from the "Women for Peace" association](#) were subjected to a campaign of intimidation, targeting, and insults. This indicates the systemic violence that women are exposed to and that they face both in their homes and within institutions. In addition to women who are direct victims of domestic violence, women who are activist in dealing with this complex socio-political problem are also faced with sexist

and misogynistic pressures and violence from a patriarchal society that deeply permeates all aspects of our society. Weeks-long verbal attacks on the street that activists from the "Women for Peace" association were subjected to have also led to a reaction from the international organization Front Line Defenders. In their statement, they stated that they are "deeply concerned about the threats and cyber attacks on the organization Civic Association Women for Peace and its members. Front Line Defenders believe that they are solely targeted as a result of their legitimate work in defending women victims of violence. Front Line Defenders condemns the intimidation and targeting of human rights organizations, which can have a chilling effect on civil society and does not contribute to creating a safe and enabling environment in which human rights defenders can carry out their work in Serbia." Due to the exposure of activists from this association to harassment, death threats, and false criminal reports about their alleged involvement in organized crime, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders also reacted.

About one-third of the allocated funds from public competitions go to the media and culture sectors (1.8 billion dinars for each sector). However, individual projects in the media sector are the most generously funded - the average value of these projects is twice as high as in other sectors. Media freedoms in Serbia declined last year, and public calls are part of mechanisms for inappropriate influence and maintaining a clientelistic relationship between the media and holders of power. In 2022, 149 public calls were announced for the production of media content of public interest or for the improvement of professional standards in journalism. The winners of the most expensive projects in 2022 are media outlets that are close to the current government in terms of their editorial policy, and this is a trend that has been repeating for years. Four regional TV stations (Novi Pazar, Belle Amie from Niš, VTV from Subotica, and Novosadska TV) each generated revenues between 30 and 40 million dinars.

The Association of Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia has published an [Analysis of the results of competitions for financing and co-financing projects in the field of contemporary cultural creation \(2023\)](#), which has shown a wide range of

irregularities, arbitrariness, ignorance, and incompetence in the process of distributing funds, affecting a large number of organizations and artistic programs. By researching the competitions of the Ministry of Culture, as well as in the case of the Ministry for Family Care and Demography, the allocation of funds to a whole range of suspicious organizations has been recorded. Thus, in the competition for artistic dance, funds were allocated to suspicious projects of organizations that either do not engage in dance or were registered shortly before the Ministry of Culture call. Only organizations that have been involved in contemporary dance for years did not receive funding. Similar abuses of public funds in the field of culture have been observed in calls of the Provincial Secretariat for Culture of Vojvodina and the Secretariat for Culture of the City of Belgrade. In the calls of the Provincial Secretariat, the practice of allocating money to organizations that are not from Vojvodina has also been noticed. The Analysis also presents data that a "record-breaking" 54 suspicious projects were supported with 39,630,000 dinars in the calls of the Secretariat for Culture of Belgrade. Suspicions of misuse of public funds also arise within the calls of the Secretariat for Culture of Novi Sad, where a total of 28 suspicious projects were supported with as much as 27,700,000 dinars. The huge sums of money that are allocated non-transparently in public calls are particularly problematic in the field of culture, where already a small amount of funds is allocated for the work of civil society organizations in culture, and for which public competitions represent the only source of financial resources without which their survival would not be possible.

### AREA 3: GOVERNMENT - CSO RELATIONS

*Despite the adoption of the Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022-2030, which is supposed to facilitate greater participation of CSOs in the reform process, the practical cooperation between the Government and CSOs is characterized by an*

*unequal relationship. The Strategy serves only as an attempt by the Government to improve its own reputation in the international community, rather than making substantial improvements to the conditions for civil society. However, criticisms of the relationship between the two sides also come from the international community. In the 2022 Serbia Progress Report, the European Commission concluded that "further efforts are needed to ensure systematic cooperation between the government and civil society. An enabling environment for the development and financing of civil society organizations still needs to be created on the ground, as verbal attacks and smear campaigns against such organizations continue." These campaigns, which reinforce the negative image of the civil sector that has been created over decades, are most often led by high-ranking government officials and media outlets sympathetic to them. The aim of these campaigns is to undermine the reputation of CSOs and create distrust among citizens towards them by spreading false information about their activities. The absence of a reaction and the practice of ignoring dangerous campaigns against activists and civil society organizations by the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue is problematic. The government's attitude towards the need to involve CSOs in the processes of lawmaking and public policy through enabling a broad degree of political participation is vividly illustrated by the procedure for adopting media laws, which has attracted significant public attention due to its lack of transparency, particularly in the lead-up to the official adoption of these laws in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. In 2022 and 2023, the practice of funding GONGO organizations also continued. The Coalition "Openly about Open Calls - OKO" once again pointed out that organizations that are little known to the public have repeatedly won controversial and illegal state competitions. In this way, funds are denied to organizations that have been dealing with various social issues for years and have been recognized for their work among service users.*

As parliamentary elections were held in early April 2022, and the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia was dissolved from February to October, there was very little legislative activity during this year. Based on the data available on the

"eConsultations" portal, a total of 10 calls for public consultations regarding the adoption of new laws, strategies, and action plans were published. The practice indicates that CSOs still do not receive timely and detailed information regarding the content of draft documents, which prevents organizations from adequately responding to the calls within the specified deadline.

In February 2022, the Government adopted the Strategy for the Creation of an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022-2030. The strategy provides the legal and institutional framework necessary for civil society organizations, so that they can act independently and unhindered and be encouraged for greater participation in reform processes. The document itself was adopted in a controversial and problematic process, and partly fails to adequately address the problems faced by CSOs in Serbia. One of the main objections to the procedure for the adoption of the Strategy, which lasted during 2021, is that the Ministry did not conduct an adequate public hearing before the adoption of this document, even though the Decree on the methodology of public policy management, regulatory and public policy impact assessment, and the content of individual public policy documents, stipulates that the public hearing is conducted immediately before the adoption of the public policy/regulation document. The purpose of the public hearing is to familiarize the entire public, especially those to whom the document refers, with the finished text of the draft, in order to receive comments and suggestions for final interventions in the text. The fact that the process of adoption was [boycotted](#) by a significant part of civil society, due to the [shortcomings in resolving the "List" affair](#), indicates a deterioration in cross-sector cooperation. In the part that states the main challenges that the civil sector faces, it is stated that the public and citizens have an "unnecessarily very negative" perception of the work of civil society due to citizens' lack of information about their activities, as well as due to negative campaigns conducted by "interest groups". The strategy does not mention at any time the role of the government in creating a negative perception of the civil sector and creating a hostile environment for the activities of CSOs. CSOs are regularly targeted by the highest state officials, and in these

appearances, CSOs are labeled as foreign factors working to destabilize society. Member of the SNS, deputy and chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for Justice, State Administration and Local Self-Government, Vladimir Đukanović, called on [the state to prevent the financing of NGOs](#) from abroad. Such appeals are reminiscent of the ominous Russian Law on Foreign Agents, which destroys all organizations unfit for Putin's regime. In imitation of the Russian law, [in the entity of BIH, Republika Srpska](#), a draft of the Law on the Special Register and Publicity of the Work of Non-Profit Organizations was adopted, which speaks of the danger of such rhetoric that one day may spill over into the legislative framework, which would completely stifle freedom of expression and association. and with us. Furthermore, the Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy for the period 2022-2023 was adopted only in September 2022, which is not in accordance with the Planning System Law, based on which the Action Plan was supposed to be adopted on 4 May 2022.

There have been some advancements in the development of institutional mechanisms for cooperation with the civil sector during 2022 and 2023. The Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue initiated a consultative process with CSOs in June 2022 with the aim of establishing a Council for creating an enabling environment for the development of civil society. Two meetings were held in 2022 with civil society organizations regarding the establishment of the Council. During the consultative process with organizations, positions were agreed upon regarding the mandate, structure of members, and the method of selecting Council members, as well as the understanding that the Council's mandate will encompass the most important areas and sectors relevant to creating an enabling environment for the development of civil society. In July 2023, the Commission of the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, formed to select civil society organizations for membership in the Council, conducted a [candidate selection process](#) and proposed to the Government of Serbia 11 members and their deputies for this body, who received the highest number of votes. On 29 September 2023, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the [Decision on the establishment of](#)

[the Council](#) for creating an enabling environment for the development of civil society. The areas that the Council will address are as follows: freedom of association and freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, citizen involvement in decision-making processes, transparency and access to information, legal framework for the functioning of civil society organizations, funding of organizations from public funds, philanthropy, service provision, volunteering, informal education, and civic activism. The formal start of the work of this new institution is expected, and whether the Council will be able to adequately tackle the problems that have been affecting the civil sector in Serbia for years, and how successful it will be in achieving its main goals for which it was formed, remains to be seen in the coming period.

Although the standards regarding the participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the decision-making process and the creation of public policies are clearly defined through multiple laws and regulations, there have been several cases where the civil sector has been excluded from the process of adopting relevant legislation. In December 2022, the Ministry of Internal Affairs unexpectedly published a set of 6 draft laws, for which a public hearing process was supposed to take place during the winter holidays. The hearing was supposed to end by 31 December, after which the drafts would not be open for further comments. This left interested parties with little time to review, let alone provide meaningful comments on hundreds of pages of legislation, which could have a serious negative impact on the civic space and human rights in Serbia. Specifically, three proposed laws (Draft Law on Internal Affairs, Draft Law on Data Processing and Records in the Field of Internal Affairs, and Proposal for Amendments to the Law on the National DNA Register) contain provisions that pose a significant threat to the civic space under the guise of counterterrorism efforts. The Draft Law on Internal Affairs was almost identical to the one proposed in 2021, which was withdrawn from the procedure due to public pressure. Despite all the comments provided by CSOs on the initial withdrawn draft to improve it, the Ministry ignored all those comments and failed to inform the CSOs involved in the consultative process that a new draft was ready and would be open for public consultation. The Draft Law on Internal Affairs included controversial

provisions related to widespread biometric surveillance, as well as the collection and permanent storage of sensitive personal data in the context of counterterrorism and organized crime. The [Belgrade Centre for Security Policy](#) also warned about provisions in the draft that removed the existing principle of police transparency and the obligation to publish quarterly reports on the work of the Ministry of Interior. The Government of Serbia decided on 26 December to [withdraw this contentious draft proposal from the procedure](#) and to work on the next draft through broad consultations. In February 2023, Minister of Interior Bratislav Gašić stated that work was underway on [a new Draft Law on Internal Affairs](#). Almost simultaneously with the sudden opening of the public consultation in December 2022 regarding the Law on Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Justice also opened a public consultation on 5 laws that would implement a comprehensive judicial reform in Serbia, which CSOs also criticized. The decision of government representatives to schedule discussions on 11 important draft laws suddenly and immediately before the winter break, a period when CSOs have increased workload, indicates the (un)sincerity of the government's intention to include CSOs as equal partners in the law-making processes.

In accordance with the Action Plan for the implementation of the Media Strategy, [the adoption of the most important media law](#), the Law on Public Information and Media, was supposed to be completed by the end of 2021. As this did not happen within the expected timeframe, the Working Group continued its work on drafting the law at the beginning of 2022. However, the call for elections in February, followed by the wait for the formation of a new government, delayed the entire process of adopting the law. In addition to the Law on Public Information and Media, [the adoption of the Law on Electronic Media](#) also exceeded its anticipated deadline, which was June 2022. The deadlines for the adoption of media laws have been postponed several times, and the entire process of adopting these laws has been marked by numerous problems regarding the level of transparency in the drafting of the law proposals, the involvement of media and journalist associations in the entire process, and the content of the proposals themselves. The new media laws are of great importance for the

process of democratizing society and creating a favorable environment for the independent and unhindered work of journalists, media pluralism, and freedom of expression. However, throughout the process, it has been clear that the intentions of the authorities are contrary to the envisaged European standards in this field. [Media associations have often emphasized that this is a "process simulation"](#) and there is no genuine will of the authorities to regulate this area. With the formation of the new Government in late October 2022, the responsibility for enacting media laws was given to the newly formed Ministry of Information and Telecommunications. Although the draft Law on Public Information and Media was adopted in April 2023, its content was not known for the next three months. The Ministry presented the proposed Law on Electronic Media in April 2023, while the proposals from media associations were sent to the ministry, i.e. the member of the Working Group representing the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, on 12 May 2023. We had to wait for feedback for almost three months. Activities on the development of these proposals were thus halted indefinitely, and the first information about the resumption of work appeared in July, when Prime Minister Ana Brnabić announced the start of public debate on media laws for the following month. However, the official start of the debate did not happen until September 2023. The public debate was marked by the criticism of journalists' associations pointing out numerous shortcomings in the draft laws, which would set back the media scene in Serbia. [The Coalition for Media Freedom](#) regularly pointed out the deficiencies in the proposals of the two laws, their inconsistency with the Media Strategy, as well as European regulations in this field. One of the criticisms concerned provisions that would allow further financing of media outlets that regularly violate the Code of Journalists of Serbia. The decision to abandon the election of a new composition of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media, whose existing members do not meet the membership requirements according to the new draft Law, also came under criticism for endangering the independence of the regulatory body. The Government of Serbia subsequently accepted that the Press Council should be a self-regulatory body responsible for all media outlets. The fact that the consultation process with the media was merely a simulation of dialogue between the authorities and relevant

media representatives and that the lack of transparency deeply reflected the entire process, [is evidenced by the fact that several controversial provisions were inserted into the drafts overnight just before their adoption](#). The announced elections for December 2023 probably influenced the Government's determination to accelerate the adoption process of these laws, after two years of delay, before the dissolution of the Parliament and the Government. The amendments to Articles 112 and 122 in the Law on Electronic Media particularly alarmed the public. One amendment concerned the possibility that operators would have to pay channels at a price determined by the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), and that they would not be allowed to remove them, while the other controversial provision related to the decision that the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media would determine the order of channels on the list, with priority given to public service and commercial channels with national frequency. Media experts see the proposals of the media laws as an attempt by the authorities to finally deal with independent media, which would be marginalized by the new provisions. Strong pressure from the professional public, media and journalists' associations, and CSOs led to the withdrawal of the controversial provision regarding the determination of the price that operators would pay to television channels with national frequency, while in the other case, it was decided that the two public services must be first on the channel list, while the operator decides on the rest of the schedule. However, not all public criticisms were taken into account. Thus, on 20 October 2023, [the Government adopted the drafts of the two key media laws](#), and the Draft Law on Public Information and Media still contains controversial provisions that would allow Telekom Serbia to legally become a media owner. The danger of the state returning to media ownership, which was prohibited under the previous Law was also highlighted by [the European Federation of Journalists](#). This practically legalizes the return of the state to media ownership, and freedom of expression enters a new phase of vulnerability. This would legalize Telekom's ownership in the media, and the state, which is a partial owner of Telekom, would indirectly regain ownership of the media. According to the previous law, the state could not be a publisher of media, either directly or indirectly. Finally, these

two controversial laws [were adopted in the Serbian Parliament](#), at the first session of the autumn session, on 26 October.