

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

April 19 - May 2, 2024

Freedom of Expression**Threats to the editorial staff of the N1 portal**

In comments on the news about President Vučić's stay in America and the topics of Kosovo and the Resolution on Srebrenica at the UN, threats were written to members of the editorial staff. In the comments, it was written that the journalists of N1: "soon will be liquidated, neutralized and nothing will be left of them". The threat comes in a week when the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists announced that threats to journalists in Serbia have increased in 2024 compared to the previous year. In the cases opened by the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, as many as 70% of the cases were threats sent via the Internet. The lack of effective protection of journalists is of particular concern. In our country, threats spread over the Internet are dealt with quickly in the case of politicians, while in the case of threats directed at media workers, the protection mechanism is much slower, and often the response is non-existent at all.

Judgments in favor of journalists

In the previous period, two important judgments were passed in favor of independent journalists who were exposed to various pressures in their work. The Appeal Court in Belgrade sentenced the former president of the municipality of Grocka, Dragoljub Simonović, to four years in prison for inciting others to set fire to the house of Žig info portal journalist Milan Jovanović in 2018. The investigative portal KRIK won a court case against the Kurir tabloid. Kurir filed a lawsuit against several media outlets for publishing the results of an analysis on the number of fake news published by this tabloid on its front pages during the year. With these lawsuits, Kurir is trying to deal with the free and independent media on behalf of the authorities and to prevent objective and truthful reporting. Despite these two important verdicts, the violation of freedom of expression in Serbia is a pronounced problem. Amnesty International's report states that European media organizations that visited Serbia in April 2023 expressed concern about the openly hostile attitude of politicians towards critical media, which is further increased by tabloid media. All this leads to the normalization of attacks and threats against independent journalists.

Fredoom of Association

Threats to students

The students of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Mila Pajić and Doroteja Antić, received several death threats after the Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Serbia published a video in which the students participated, and in which, from the perspective of young people, the importance of the Resolution in Srebrenica is discussed and why it should be adopted. The right-wingers shared the phone number of one of the students, which was followed by harassment with constant calls and messages. The threats point to the still strongly present nationalist element and to the unwillingness of a part of society, encouraged by the ruling regime, to participate in building peace and trust in the territory of the former Yugoslavia by confronting the past. The threats were reported to the Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime.

Pressures on workers due to union membership

The branch union of metal workers "Nezavisnost" announced that the workers in "Krušik" from Valjevo are being pressured because of joining the union. In addition to the increased administrative control of the union itself, the employer also formed a commission that began examining the workers who joined the union. This reaction of the company "Krušik" is a violation of all domestic and international standards in the field of labor rights, specifically freedom of association and collective bargaining. Workers are intimidated with the aim of discouraging them from connecting with each other and becoming active in the fight to improve working conditions. The trade union advises that the workers report this behavior to the Labor Inspectorate, which should react and protect them from this illegal practice by the management of "Krušik".

Threats to activist

Activist from Novi Sad Brajan Brković was subjected to numerous threats and insults after the publication of an edited video in which the activist was labeled as a "thug who hates Serbia". The Coalition of Non-Governmental Organizations Civic Vojvodina announced that former State Secretary in the Ministry of Internal Affairs Dijana Hrkaločić, who is known for targeting journalists and filing SLAPP lawsuits against investigative media reporting on corruption scandals in which she is involved, joined the threats. In the previous period, the publication of the edited video was also the reason for the attack on Dinko Gruhonjić, when the authorities and pro-government media started hunting this journalist. The trend of spreading lies and misuse of technology that leads to attacks on activists and journalists is worrying, a trend promoted by the highest officials of the government, which shows how the government deals with critics. Events in Novi Sad in recent years point to the strengthening of neo-Nazi groups in this city that attack activists, associations and journalists, while there is no reaction from the authorities to this trend of extreme right-wing activity. And with that, consent is tacitly given for the continuation of violence.

Misdemeanor charges against activists

Twenty activists who removed war-mongering graffiti in Mitićeva rupa received misdemeanor charges for the action they carried out last year in February. The activist's lawyer stated that "the authorities obviously did not mind the hate message, but rather its deletion". Activists are thus victims of SLAPP lawsuits that stifle civil liberties and activism, all because of an action that aimed to point out the hate speech that is spreading in Serbia's public spaces. Two days later, at the entrance to the premises of Krokodil, one of the associations whose activists received misdemeanor charges, graffiti targeting this organization appeared. Whether the "artists" of this graffiti will be punished like the activists remains up to the authorities, who so far have not sanctioned those who write hate graffiti and paint murals of convicted war criminals. SLAPP lawsuits are also mentioned in Amnesty International's report for Serbia for 2023, and it is stated that "investigative journalists, human rights defenders and activists have been the target of strategic SLAPP lawsuits aimed at excluding public participation."

Open calls still without results

The Ministry of Culture has not yet announced the results of the open calls for supporting projects and programs in the field of culture, and the City of Belgrade has not even announced tenders in this area for 2024, a group of organizations announced. In the announcement, they warn about the already alarming state of culture and the poor conditions for the work and creativity of artists. This practice leaves too little time for planning, organization and implementation of projects and programs in the current year and directly threatens the work and survival of cultural associations and artists who are financially dependent on funds awarded through public tenders. Since the beginning of the year, The Association Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia has repeatedly published appeals addressed to the Ministry of Culture and the City of Belgrade, pointing out the harmful consequences of delays in publishing results and announcing competitions. The appeals were also supported by the Open Calls Coalition (OKO). The consequences of the irresponsible approach of the Ministry of Culture and the City of Belgrade threaten the sustainability of associations in culture, which are already struggling to survive in conditions where culture is not on the priority list of public authorities.