
THREE FREEDOMS UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS



Civic
Initiatives

freedom of expression

freedom of assembly

freedom of association

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

June 28 - July 11, 2024

Freedom of Expression

Kurak sued NIN

Miroslav Kurak, acquitted of the murder of the journalist Slavko Ćuruvija, sued the weekly NIN for the text in which the information from the trial was conveyed. Kurak previously sued the Slavko Ćuruvija foundation because of the published text in which they disagree with the verdict. Due to this text, the foundation was also sued by another exonerated Milan Radonjić. The pressures to which the media and journalistic associations dealing with this case are exposed, show that the case of the murder of Slavko Ćuruvija is still a forbidden topic, and that anyone who dares to ask the question will bear the consequences.

A man who threatened journalists escaped from custody

The person accused of endangering the safety of journalist Ana Lalić Hegediš escaped from house arrest on June 1, but the journalist learned this information at the same time as the general public did - in July. The suspect threatened the journalist and her family with death, and he also threatened journalist Dinko Gruhonjić. Those threats came after an organized nationalist smear campaign by the authorities and pro-government tabloids against two journalists. Ana Lalić was relocated from the country due to the seriousness of the threats she received. She points out that she is quite upset considering that she was not informed about the escape of the suspect, and at that moment she returned to the country with her family.

An investigation was launched against the journalist for the statement

The higher public prosecutor's office in Belgrade launched an investigation against journalist Srđan Škoro because of the statement he made for the Zrenjanin TV station KTV. The Prosecutor's Office ordered an investigation into whether the journalist's statement contained elements of the criminal offense of endangering the safety of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and his family. The targeting campaign against the journalist and local television included all the Serbian Progressive Party officials who rushed to condemn the alleged death threats said by the journalist, although anyone who heard the statement could conclude that it was a criticism of the regime and that the "death threats" were fabricated. The Minister of Information and the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) have launched a procedure to determine the possible existence of liability for the editor-in-chief of KTV and other persons for broadcasting media content. The mere initiation of proceedings by the prosecutor's office due to a statement or freedom of speech is an alert for all of us if we do not want to live in censorship and in a situation where our basic freedoms have become a criminal offense.

Threats to journalist Nenad Kulačin

After writing a column about the smear campaign against journalist Srđan Škoro, journalist Nenad Kulačin received threats from a man who had threatened him before, but the prosecution did not resolve the case then. The actions of the prosecution point to double standards. If threats, based in reality or not, are addressed to the holders of power, the prosecutor's office reacts promptly, but when threats are addressed to journalists or activists, there is silence and the absence of any reaction.

Fredoom of Assembly.

Banned literary festival in Kikinda

The city authorities in Kikinda have banned the holding of the 18th "Kikinda short" literary festival. The festival was supposed to be held in the city library, however, on the day of the event, they were not allowed to enter the library due to the decision of the city authorities, which stated that the festival is "anti-Serbian" and that the participants "spit on the state of Serbia and President Vučić". The event was then moved to a private space, and it was supposed to be held in Dorćol Platz in Belgrade on the second day, however, due to the previous ban on Mirëdita in this space, it was impossible to hold any events at that place. The authorities in Serbia are apparently slowly moving from targeting to outright banning and censorship of any critical speech, and cultural events and manifestations were the first to come under attack. The ruling Serbian Progressive Party skillfully works to identify the president of the state with the state itself, and any criticism of his leadership is labeled as hostile action against Serbia. The question arises in which direction the Serbian Progressive Party's aspiration to put every free-thinking person under control will go and how far the bans they impose will reach.

Forbidden Mirëdita

The festival "Mirëdita, dobar dan" was banned on the day of the official start of the festival, June 27. The ban was announced by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Ivica Dačić. He stated that the ministry issued "an order to stop the public gathering "Mirëdita, dobar dan", due to the danger of endangering the safety of people and property, as well as the danger of disrupting public order and peace on a larger scale." On that occasion, all other events in the Dorćol Platz area, where the festival was supposed to take place, were prohibited. Such a decision represents a gross violation of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and the Law on Public Assembly. Some of the festival participants were turned away from the Bujanj Potok toll booth and were not allowed to enter Belgrade. The festival, which aims to bring two communities together, respect diversity and reconciliation, and achieves this through cultural exchange, was exposed to a campaign of targeting and misinformation for days. The attacks were initiated by ministers of the Government of Serbia, including Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, who organized protests against the festival in previous years. On the very day of the festival, a group of men, members of ultra-right and hooligan groups, gathered and blocked the entrances to the festival venue and shouted nationalist slogans, including slogans glorifying war criminals. However, the authorities made a decision to ban the cultural manifestation that connects two communities, instead of banning the gathering of hooligan and neo-Nazi groups that actually call for violence and threaten public order and peace. "By banning the festival, the Ministry of Interior and the Government of Serbia have shown once again that freedom of assembly only applies to hooligan groups, but not to the participants and guests of the festival," announced the organizers of the festival: Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Integra and Civic Initiatives. After the ban on EuroPride 2022, this is one of the most prominent examples of censorship and suppression of freedom of assembly in our country. In addition to the ban, more incidents directly caused by the targeting campaign were recorded. After the official ban, a package with a severed pig's head and a threatening letter signed by the "People's Patrols" known for spreading anti-immigrant, extreme right-wing views arrived at the address of the Youth Initiative. During the ultra-rightist protest, access to the location was difficult for journalists, and during the reporting of the N1 television program, two men obstructed the reporting with motorcycles. By censoring Mirëdita, freedom of expression and assembly was censored, peace and tolerance were prohibited, and violence and the spread of religious and national hatred and chauvinism were once again supported by the authorities.

Arrested environmental activists

Seven activists of the "Ne damo Jadar" association were detained during the blockade of the Loznica-Zvornik railway. Activists are accused of obstructing officials in their work, and of assaulting an official, although the videos show a large number of policemen surrounding and arresting activists. Environmental activists announced at the protest rally, held on June 28 in Loznica, that they will radicalize the protests against the intention of the company "Rio Tinto" to mine lithium in the Jadar area. After the election, the company's pro-lithium campaign was once again supported by representatives of the Serbian Progressive Party, who persistently talk about the potential economic benefits of this plan, refusing to talk about the harmful consequences for the life and health of people and the environment, as indicated by numerous experts from universities across Serbia. Arrested activists were released after a hearing and criminal charges were filed against them. The arrest of the activists comes in a week when Amnesty International published a report on the right to protest around the world, which also mentions cases of excessive use of force at protests in Serbia and the impunity of the police in our country.

Freedom of Association

Threats to environmental activists

Activists of the association "Ne damo Jadar" Zlatko Kokanović and Nebojša Petković have been receiving threats for days. The threats are the result of a smear campaign against activists and citizens who oppose the mining of jadarite, which contains lithium, and which the company "Rio Tinto" intends to implement. By the way, this project was allegedly "put an end" immediately before the 2022 elections, and after mass demonstrations against this project. Citizens point to permanent, harmful consequences for nature and the health of people who will be affected by mining, not only in the Jadar valley but throughout the country due to the pollution of the river basin and fertile soil. The debate about "Rio Tinto" was returned to the public after the last elections held on June 2, 2024, with the statement of President Vučić that the mine "could be opened by 2028". The president himself got involved in targeting of the activists, labeling them as "mercenaries who work against the interests of Serbia". Serbia's interests include clean rivers, forests, mountains, clean air and soil as well, and it is precisely these interests that are being defended by citizens who have been protesting against the plans of the "Rio Tinto" company. Company's reputation is infamous around the world due to the consequences they have left on nature and health of the community and due to violation of labor rights.

Students of the “STAV” informal group were attacked

Students of the group “STAV” (Students Against Authoritarian Government) were attacked on the evening of Thursday, July 4, when an unknown man approached them and started threatening them. The police arrested a man who was under the influence of narcotics. Students of the STAV group have been blocking the Rector's office for several days due to dissatisfaction with the entire election process for the student parliament of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. The elections were blocked on several occasions and took place with physical confrontations, after which the Rectorate made a decision to organize the elections in the Rectorate building. STAV opposes elections in which only one student organization participates, while other organizations are prevented from participating in the elections. The students blocking the work of the rector's office were legitimized by the police who came on the call of security because the students did not want to take down the banner against the Rector of the University of Novi Sad. Despite all the pressure, this organization does not give up the fight for equal and fair elections for the student parliament.

Activist acquitted by verdict

The activist of the Krokodil Association, Milan Adnađ, was acquitted of having committed a misdemeanor by crossing over the nationalist and war-mongering graffiti in Mitićeva rupa (in Belgrade). As a reminder, misdemeanor proceedings were initiated against several activists of this association (20 of them) due to the act of removing graffiti with the inscription "When the army returns to Kosovo..." in February of last year.

Death threats to the “Eko-straža” association

The Association of Eko-straža announced that they received death threats on the X platform after they verbally clashed with former MUP State Secretary Dijana Hrkaločić, who is on trial for influence peddling. This is the first time that the association has received death threats, which also mention the use of weapons to deal with members of the association. The circumstances in which the civil sector operates in Serbia are worrisome, where death threats have become a regular occurrence.

Threats to women's organizations from the south of Serbia

Women's organizations from the south of Serbia that deal with the issue of gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence are exposed to continuous threats and pressures in their work, the "Women Against Violence" announced in an open letter to the Minister for Human and Minority Rights. Representatives of organizations are faced with threats to their lives and safety, but they are also targeted through various unjustified criminal charges, which also affects them financially. "There is no effective legal protection for these organizations and their members from exposure to arrogant local power holders, leaders of parties and fictitious organizations, who enjoy full financial support from local self-governments, without any visible activities and effects," the announcement states. Civil society organizations that deal with the rights of marginalized social groups are particularly affected by the harmful narrative that is spreading in society about the civil sector.