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# THREE FREEDOMS UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS



Civic  
Initiatives

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freedom of expression

freedom of assembly

freedom of association

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

July 12 - August 1, 2024

### Freedom of Expression

#### Activist Zlatko Kokanović Summoned by Security Information Agency

Environmental activist Zlatko Kokanović was summoned for questioning by the Security Information Agency (BIA) on July 18, 2024. Four hours after attending the meeting, Kokanović did not respond to calls, prompting a statement from Nebojša Petković of the "Ne damo Jadar" Association on N1 TV. Petković suggested that Kokanović's summons was related to his planned attendance at a meeting with Serbian Prime Minister and the Speaker of the National Assembly, as well as a comment Kokanović made on Facebook regarding the incident.

#### Activist Summoned Over a Tweet

Police inspectors, accompanied by members of a special unit, arrived at the home of activist Nikola Ristić. The reason for the visit was a tweet concerning the Constitutional Court's decision to annul the 2022 ban on lithium mining. Ristić was required to make an official statement to the police under the instruction of the High-Tech Crime Prosecutor's Office, which considered his statement as inciting violent acts. Recently, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office also launched an investigation into a journalist for a statement allegedly threatening the safety of the President and his family. Both cases have raised concerns about intimidation and misuse of legal authorities to target political dissenters. The troubling trend is the criminalization of free speech, leading to the institutionalization of censorship and increasing self-censorship among citizens to avoid repercussions for public statements.

## Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) Targets Independent Media

After an attempted assassination of former U.S. President Donald Trump, officials of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) began accusing media and political opponents in Serbia of creating an environment in which President Vučić is at security risk. Initially, National Assembly President Ana Brnabić warned independent media about the "real consequences of the hatred and lies they daily promote and spin." Pro-government media quickly circulated a video specifically targeting N1, Nova, and other independent media outlets. This dangerous campaign of misinformation and exploitation of international political events for SNS propaganda purposes places independent media in Serbia in a difficult position. This targeting of independent media occurred in the same week that a UN Special Rapporteur's report highlighted that political opponents, civil sector representatives, human rights defenders, environmental activists, and journalists in Serbia are among those most frequently demeaned, publicly humiliated, and discredited, including in parliament and populist media, in what appears to be a well-orchestrated and coordinated campaign.

## New Threats to N1 Staff

New threats to N1 staff have appeared on social media platform X. The day before, three national television channels aired a manipulative video by an unknown author accusing independent critical media, especially N1, of dehumanizing President Aleksandar Vučić. The video, which starts with clips from the documentary film "Vladalac" previously aired on N1, includes various online content: anonymous threatening posts on social media and protest footage. Some content from critical media was taken out of context and presented as threats to President Vučić.

## Ratko Romić Sues the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation

The last person acquitted of charges in the murder of journalist Slavko Ćuruvija, Ratko Romić, has filed a lawsuit against the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation over a text expressing disagreement with the verdict. Milan Radonjić and Miroslav Kurak have previously sued the foundation. The foundation stated it will continue to fight for the free operation of media workers and the end of impunity for threats and violence against them, despite pressure and lawsuits.

## **Tamara Skrozza Targeted by Tabloid Attacks; FoNet Strongly Condemns Attacks**

Tamara Skrozza, deputy editor of FoNet, is targeted by a coordinated campaign of spin in private televisions and tabloids. FoNet's editorial board strongly condemned the attacks and called for a response from international organizations, the Ministry of Information, journalistic and media associations, the Permanent Working Group for Journalist Safety, the EU Delegation, and the OSCE Mission in Serbia. Skrozza was accused of threatening the president with death following a statement made in the television show "If I Were Somebody" about events on the night of October 5-6, 2000. Although Skrozza did not mention any names or positions, pro-government media initiated a targeting campaign. The situation is exacerbated by the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications' statement, which, instead of defending or condemning the increasing attacks on journalists, accused Skrozza of hate speech and inciting violence and even murder against dissenters.

## **Aleksandar Senić Authorized by Topola Court to Sue Pištaljka, Despite Court's Lack of Jurisdiction Over Media Cases**

The trial against Pištaljka journalist Snežana Đurić, filed by high SNS official Aleksandar Senić, will proceed before the Basic Court in Arandelovac - Topola Court Unit, even though it is not authorized for media cases. The Topola Court Unit made this decision at a preparatory hearing scheduled before the decision on jurisdiction and despite the law stipulating that media disputes of this nature fall under the jurisdiction of the Higher Court in Belgrade. This is the fourth time Senić has sued Pištaljka, this time over a guest appearance by a journalist on the show "Dan uživo" on N1, discussing an investigation into millions of transactions involving companies owned by Senić's two minor sons aged six and nine. Senić is seeking 500,000 dinars in non-material damages for defamation and damage to reputation.

## **Freedom of Assembly**

### **Neo-Nazis Attack Citizens**

A group of neo-Nazis from the organization Serbian Eagle gathered in Novi Sad on the anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, at an event they called the “Srebrenica Liberation Commemoration.” Despite the law prohibiting gatherings aimed at inciting armed conflict or violence, or promoting racial, national, religious, or other forms of inequality, hatred, and intolerance, the police allowed the event. Participants shouted the name of war criminal Ratko Mladić and saluted with Nazi greetings. Members of Serbian Eagle engaged in verbal and then physical altercations with citizens opposing their gathering. The police protected the far-right extremists throughout, continuing to support the glorification of war crimes. Allowing such a gathering, which spreads national and religious hatred, violates the Constitution and laws of Serbia. The police failed to ensure a peaceful event and protect spontaneously gathered anti-fascists.

## **Freedom of Association**

### **Police Officer Abuses Authority**

During the Critical Raw Materials Summit at the Palace of Serbia, in the presence of Serbian, German, and EU officials, an incident occurred near the building. A member of the Ministry of Internal Affairs intervened with a citizen who had attempted multiple times to bypass the Palace and cross the street to get to work. After following instructions from other officers, the woman was thrown to the ground, and her personal belongings and phone were confiscated. She was then arrested and taken away in a police vehicle. The incident raised concerns among those present, and the reasons for the intervention are not yet fully clear. Information about what happened after her arrest remains unknown to the public.

### **Entry Ban for Bosnian Activist**

Nedim Musić, an activist from the Bosnian group “Karton Revolucija,” was banned from entering Serbia, with the reason given as a “negative security risk assessment.” Karton Revolucija, founded by young people fighting nationalism and corruption, promotes values of coexistence and peace. One group member, Adi Selman, spoke at a protest against lithium mining in Loznica, as the organization also deals with environmental issues. Recently, Bosnian actor, writer, and activist Feđa Štukan was also banned from entering Serbia. Serbian authorities have decided to crack down on regional activists who connect people from the former Yugoslavia in a common fight against injustice, nationalism, crime, and corruption.

## **Police Harassment of Activist**

Desko Stojanov, an environmental activist from Rakita, reported that three police officers approached him while he was sitting in his parked car, handcuffed him without any reason, and took him to the police station. Stojanov claims the officers were unpleasant and rough. The local station did not explain the reason for his detention or respond to allegations of police misconduct. Excessive use of force by the police and impunity in Serbia have been recognized as issues in a recent Amnesty International report. Stojanov, who fights against the construction of small hydropower plants on crucial local streams, has received over 60 criminal complaints. His detention occurred shortly after the arrest of environmental activists from Loznica, who had blocked a railway to protest lithium mining by Rio Tinto in the Jadar Valley.

## **Monitoring**

### **Only One of Six Media Sub-Laws Adopted**

The Law on Public Information and Media mandates the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications to adopt six subsidiary regulations within six months of the law's enactment. These regulations are intended to outline procedures related to project co-financing, media registration, correspondence, financing of minority media, and other areas. The six-month deadline passed on May 4 of this year, yet the Ministry has only adopted the Rulebook on Project Co-Financing for Public Interest in the Field of Public Information.

The Journalists' Association of Serbia has submitted an inquiry to the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications asking for the reasons behind the delay in adopting the subsidiary regulations.

### **Millions from the Serbian Budget Allocated to Individuals Close to Authorities in Media Competition**

The Ministry of Information and Telecommunications allocated tens of millions of dinars to companies competing for content production for internet media, including some well-known names. The ministry's financial support was given to numerous media outlets owned by Radoica Milosavljević, known as a major donor to the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Funding was also allocated to the family business of Defense Minister Bratislav Gašić. Additionally, among those receiving funds from the Ministry are 15 companies and media outlets whose ultimate owner is Slavko Stijaković, a witness for the defense of the "Vukovar Trio" at The Hague.

## **Police Major Katarina Petrović Acquitted of Disclosure of Confidential Data**

In a retrial, Police Major Katarina Petrović was acquitted on July 24, 2024, of charges related to Article 98, Paragraph 1 of the Law on Classified Information. The accusation was that she had unlawfully disclosed information about a traffic accident caused by Nikola Petrović, who was under the influence of drugs and alcohol and is the godfather of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.

Police Major Petrović claims that this acquittal confirms she did not commit the crime she was accused of, but she also states that her fight is not over. She is still facing a disciplinary proceeding which has led to her suspension, and she has not yet been reinstated.

The accusation alleged that Katarina Petrović had revealed details about the accident to the media or the public, which could have jeopardized the investigation and the safety of those involved. The charges attracted significant attention due to the high profile of the person involved in the accident and his close ties to senior officials.

## **The European Commission's report on the rule of law expresses concerns about the safety of journalists in Serbia and doubts about the independence of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) and public broadcasters.**

Despite changes of media laws in 2023, the latest report from the European Commission calls for further reforms to ensure full compliance with EU legal standards and European norms. The report highlights that REM is not fully meeting its mandate to protect media pluralism and professional standards and raises serious concerns about the independence of this body.

The report also notes that the Press Council, as a self-regulatory body, should monitor adherence to the Journalists' Code of Conduct in Serbian print media. Measures related to transparency in media ownership and state advertising, proposed in the Media Strategy, still need to be fully implemented.

Additionally, the report points out that journalists in Serbia continue to face frequent refusals from institutions and officials to disclose information of public interest or receive responses at all. The safety of journalists remains a significant concern due to increasing pressures from the misuse of lawsuits.