

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

November 22 - December 12, 2024

Freedom of Expression**Threats and attacks on journalists**

In the previous period, several threats and physical attacks on journalists were recorded. Since protests have been taking place throughout Serbia due to the fall of the canopy in Novi Sad, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of attacks on journalistic teams reporting from the field, as well as on journalists who write about these and related events. The death threat was sent to the president of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV), Ana Lalić Hegediš, and a few days later to Dinko Gruhonjić. We remind you that in the previous period, both of them were exposed to a dangerous smear campaign by state officials and pro-regime media. Two weeks later, the same person again threatened the NDNV. Death threats were also sent to the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation. Vojin Radovanović, a journalist from Danas, who was covering the assembly session of the city of Belgrade, was attacked by a member of the city council from the Socialist Party of Serbia, Slobodan Šolević. With their violent behavior, the representatives of the ruling coalition encourage their sympathizers to attack journalistic teams of critical media at public gatherings. The Nova S journalist was attacked near the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, when a group of supposedly random passers-by, who later turned out to be officials of the Serbian Progressive Party, attacked the gathered students and other citizens. One of the drivers who attacked the crowd hit a journalist from Nova, knocking the phone out of her hand. The reporter of N1, Jelena Mirković, was attacked while reporting from the blockade in Belgrade on the water. Citizens have been blocking the streets for weeks to prevent the demolition of the Old Sava Bridge. Provocateurs always appeared at these gatherings, and some of them turned out to be members of the ruling party. After the attack by an unknown man, journalist Jelena Mirković was diagnosed with injuries - a neck collar was put on her and she was prescribed medication. The attacker has not yet been arrested. Such attacks were not clearly and unequivocally condemned by the authorities. Team N1 was also attacked while reporting from the blockade at the Faculty of Technical Sciences (FTN) in Novi Sad. Unknown men were filming the N1 team and when the journalist asked who they were, one of the young men stole the journalist's phone, and then the three men surrounded the N1 television team. It is a matter of continued pressure on all those who report from the protests, and the impunity of violence against journalists shows that the government takes the side of the bullies and that the ultimate goal is complete media darkness and single-mindedness directed by the ruling party. A large number of attacks are directed at female journalists, who are doubly targeted, both because of their profession and their gender. Physical attacks that go unpunished indicate the unsafe working conditions of journalists in Serbia.

SNS officials sued Ozonpress

The mayor of Čačak, Milun Todorović, and two of the mayor's assistants, Miloš Stevanić and Marjana Petronijević, filed criminal charges against the Ozonpress portal. The complaints were filed because of comments that unknown persons posted on the text of Ozonpress. The sexist comments concerned the city official Marjana Petronijević. However, three city officials decided to sue the portal. As many as four lawsuits arrived at Ozonpress's address in just a few days. Incidentally, the CASE coalition published its report on SLAPP lawsuits across Europe on December 9. The report pointed out that Serbia is one of the countries with the highest number of SLAPP lawsuits.

Criminal charges due to a comment on Facebook

The Public Health Institute of Šabac filed a criminal complaint against Kristina Vasić due to a comment on Facebook in which she pointed out the air pollution in the city. This year, citizens have been detained for posts on social media, and now state institutions are also filing criminal charges against citizens in an attempt to silence them. Freedom of speech on the internet in Serbia is increasingly under question.

Freedom of Association

Draft Law on Foreign Agents

Ten days after President Vučić once again accused non-governmental organizations of working to overthrow the state, the Socialist Movement, led by Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin, submitted to the National Assembly of Serbia a draft law on a special register of foreign influence agents. This law, also known as the "Russian law" or "Foreign Agents Law," is used in countries with autocratic and dictatorial regimes as a means of suppressing critical voices. Its adoption would benefit the ruling party, which has captured most of the media and all institutions in the country, while non-governmental organizations have remained independent and, as such, are the only remaining threat to a regime that is dismantling democracy and the rule of law.

Freedom of Assembly

Attacks on protesting citizens

After the tragedy in Novi Sad, in which 15 people lost their lives due to the collapse of a reconstructed canopy, citizens across the country have been staging blockades, demanding accountability and the release of all documents regarding the reconstruction. Numerous incidents have occurred during the 15-minute blockades. Specifically, citizens peacefully protesting were attacked by allegedly random passersby dissatisfied with the blockade. Later, it turned out that many of the so-called “random passersby” were members and officials of the Serbian Progressive Party. During a protest on November 22 in front of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU), members of the Serbian Progressive Party: Milija Koldžić, a member of the Novi Beograd city council, Ivan Stanišić, Aleksandar Jokić, Dušan Kostić, and Milena Aleksić attacked students. None of the identified individuals were detained, and Milija Koldžić was not dismissed from his position in the city assembly. After the attack on students in front of the FDU, faculty blockades started across the country. During the blockade in front of RTS, there was a scuffle with a group of men. Media reports revealed that some of the men who attacked the protesters are municipal officials from the ruling party. One person punched a protester in Loznica. Members of the Kikinda city council verbally attacked the gathered crowd. In Novi Sad, a taxi driver drove into the crowd, and the taxi association announced that he would be sanctioned. Attacks on protesters continued at subsequent gatherings. During a blockade in Sremski Karlovci, which involved high school students, a group of men insulted the gathered students. In the days that followed, a tabloid and political campaign was launched against the students of the Karlovac Gymnasium who participated in the blockade. The campaign was started by Serbia’s Prime Minister Miloš Vučević, belittling free-thinking young people in Serbia and questioning their ability to think critically. At the November 29 protest in front of the RTS building, a man tried to drive through the crowd. A similar incident occurred in Valjevo, when an unknown driver also attempted to drive through the crowd at an intersection. A more extreme example of violence was seen in Požarevac, when a driver carried an older protest participant on the hood of his car. A video surfaced showing a Novi Sad city councilor from the ruling party instructing members of the SNS on how to provoke citizens who are paying respects to the victims of the Novi Sad tragedy. SNS members were also seen among the provocateurs at a gathering in Novi Sad. One of the provocateurs at the gathering in Sombor was also noticed among the provocateurs at Belgrade Waterfront, when citizens opposing the demolition of the Old Sava Bridge were attacked (he is also a member of the SNS). In Loznica, on November 29, a man attacked one of the protest participants with a baton. City councilors of the SNS verbally attacked citizens in Zrenjanin. Municipal officials of the SNS obstructed citizens in Kula. Two members of the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra were injured when a man drove through an intersection that had been blocked by citizens. He injured two more people and was later arrested. Members of the ruling party are now organizing and openly attacking citizens who are exercising their right to protest. The increasingly violent behavior of the regime, which goes unpunished, is an indication of the entry into a new phase of suppressing citizens’ basic rights and a new phase of autocracy, where the fist and the law of the stronger prevail.

Detentions of citizens

This year, the most commonly used mechanism of pressure by the authorities on citizens is arrest and detention for questioning due to participation in protests or publicly expressing criticism of the government. During the protests related to the tragedy in Novi Sad, 38 people have been arrested or detained so far. Plainclothes police officers and members of the Security Information Agency (BIA) often detain citizens without showing identification or clear official insignia. They are most often members of security services with hoods and masks covering their faces, making them appear more like aggressors than those who should ensure the safety of citizens. However, when protesters are the target of attacks, the efficiency of the police and BIA officers disappears. The clear intention is to intimidate citizens and discourage them from participating in protests. Activist Nikola Ristić was detained for questioning by BIA members just before the protest in Novi Sad. There was no information for several hours about which police station Ristić was being held in. During the protest in Sombor, director Gorčin Stojanović was detained without clear reason and was released after being questioned. Activist Varvara Lukač from the Bravo movement was detained at a police station in Futog for paying respects to the deceased. During the protest in front of the city assembly in Novi Sad, five young men were detained. One of them was beaten by private security at the assembly after citizens attempted to enter the building, demanding the mayor's resignation. A 74-year-old man, arrested at one of the previous protests, underwent surgery and had part of his body amputated due to police torture he suffered at the police station. The police officers who beat the elderly man from Novi Sad have not been prosecuted.

Attacks on students during the blockades

Students from more than 30 faculties in Serbia began blockades demanding the publication of contracts for the reconstruction of the railway station in Novi Sad and calling for the punishment of all those who attacked students during protests. According to data from the Archive of Public Gatherings, young people accounted for more than 60% of the participants in the blockades during the last mass mobilization on December 6. The fact that young people are not staying silent in the face of injustice and the suppression of freedoms, and that they are actively advocating for a different country, sparks hope for the possibility of change of the current state of fear and repression. However, many do not like the activism of the youth, primarily the authorities, and so the highest state officials and media close to the government have openly begun attacks on students, professors, and deans of faculties who supported their students. At the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad, the president of the student parliament hit a student participant in the blockade. A young man filmed students who were blocking the faculty and also violently took the phone of a journalist from N1. Both men were seen at an SNS gathering before, as well as at the blockade at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad a few months ago, when they called for the dismissal of Professor Dinko Gruhonjić after a smear campaign against him. During the blockade at Vuk's Monument in Belgrade, an aggressive man attacked students. It was later reported that the man was arrested. Tabloid media also published videos and launched another smear campaign against student Pavle Cicvarić, who had previously been targeted by MPs from the ruling party.

On the website of the phantom movement “Kopaćemo,” which became known after publishing a list of “ecological terrorists” targeting activists opposing lithium mining, a list of students has now been posted, labeling them as foreign mercenaries. This is an extremely dangerous targeting of opponents of the SNS regime and puts those on these lists in serious physical danger. It is officially unknown who created these lists, although it is indicative that they include those who publicly oppose the autocratic regime of Aleksandar Vučić. The youth have shown determination in defending basic human rights and the values of democracy and the rule of law, and every attack on them is a sign of the authorities’ intention to suppress the critical voices of the youth, who have always been the driving force behind social change.

Attacks and pressure on citizens who oppose the demolition of the Old Sava Bridge

Organized attacks were also recorded against citizens who oppose the intention of the city authorities to demolish the Old Sava Bridge. At the blockade on the water in Belgrade, held on November 23, there was a verbal conflict with drivers who shouted slogans in support of Aleksandar Vučić. Two days later, about 200 members of the police dispersed the activists from the Old Sava Bridge and ran over the tent they had set up. A large number of incidents, including physical clashes and an attack on journalist N1, were recorded at the blockade on November 27. However, at that time there were not 200 policemen who would have prevented an organized attack on protesting citizens. One of the men who attacked the crowd also had a knife with him. Several officials of several Belgrade municipalities were noticed among the attackers. The Mayor of Belgrade, Aleksandar Šapić, stated that there is nothing objectionable in SNS municipal presidents participating in such gatherings. With this statement, Šapić practically admitted that SNS members come to protests in an organized manner in order to physically attack and insult people and prevent them from being heard in the public space. As the media in Serbia is completely captured, the street remains the only place where citizens can speak freely. The abolition of critical speech and the ability of citizens to use public space as a zone of free expression of opinion and will is now one of the priority goals of the SNS regime. The day after the protest, United Initiatives and Movements announced that police officers and activists from the protest were attacked at their homes and in the neighborhood. Repeated attacks took place at a rally on December 4. This time, some of the attackers were masked, and the police did not take them into custody.