



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

December 13 - December 26, 2024

Freedom of Expression

Verdict against the “Vreme” weekly

The appellate court passed a verdict against the weekly “Vreme” and journalist Nemanja Rujević, according to which they must pay compensation in the amount of RSD 80,000 to Jelena Trivan. Trivan, who is currently the director of Telekom Republika Srpska, sued “Vreme” 5 years ago for the text “Anatomy of a Dissertation” in which it is stated that she copied at least 15 percent of her doctoral thesis without citing the source. Trivan sued the journalist and the weekly newspaper for defamation. In the verdict, the court did not dispute the statements from the text, but stated that only experts can determine whether a work is plagiarized or not and that journalists are not experts. Such a verdict has a negative impact on public information and leads to the denial of journalistic freedom.

Preventing journalists from doing their job

Journalists were kicked out of the Assembly Hall in Novi Sad, where the budget was being adopted, and cameramen's access was limited to 15 minutes. The crew of the Nova S program was not allowed to enter the Požega municipality building, where the Assembly adopted the local budget. Preventing journalists from reporting on sessions of local assemblies is illegal and thus grossly violates the right of the public to have complete and accurate information, and at the same time reduces the transparency of the work of public authorities. On the same day, in front of the Assembly of Novi Sad, an elderly man, who later turned out to be from the ranks of the Serbian Radical Party, hit the microphone of a journalist from the N1 television twice.

Freedom of Assembly

Attacks on citizens at blockades

Attacks on citizens, who paid their respects to the victims in Novi Sad, at blockades lasting 15 minutes continued in the previous period as well. Four men hit several participants of the blockade in Novi Sad with their cars on December 13, and then got out of their cars and started beating the citizens. The men were later taken into custody. One of the arrested is a police officer, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that he was suspended after this event. The fact that a police officer beat citizens is deeply worrying and calls into question the already shaken trust in the institutions of the system, which should protect and serve the citizens, not the ruling party. Cars passing through the participants of the blockade were also recorded at the blockade in front of the Faculty of Pharmacy and on that occasion a woman was hit, as well as in front of the Faculty of Agriculture when several citizens were hit. After a large protest at Slavija in Belgrade, a taxi driver hit a young man and ran away, but he was later detained for 48 hours. Right before the start of this rally organized by the students, the police detained Zlatko Kokanović from the Association "Ne damo Jadar" and confiscated the tractor he used to come to Belgrade to support the students' protest. Nebojša Petković was also detained, and later both farmers, known to the public for their activism against lithium mining, were released. The gathering at Slavija was one of the largest gatherings in Serbia, and according to the Archives of Public Gatherings, there were slightly more than 100,000 people.

Pressures on citizens

In addition to direct threats to the physical safety of citizens participating in protests, there are other mechanisms that the government uses in an attempt to intimidate and deter citizens from activism and civic participation. Members of the Serbian Progressive Party filed as many as 41 lawsuits against lawyer Branko Ivković from the Valjevo resistance movement because of the protest held in front of the premises of the ruling party in this city. This is not the first time that lawsuits have been filed against Ivković due to civic activism. He was the target of organized reporting this summer, when 7 people submitted identical reports due to the lawyer's posts on social networks regarding environmental protests. The artist Andrej Josifovski, better known as the Pianist, was detained in Belgrade on December 12 while installing an art installation on a traffic sign. In the Novi Sad branch of the Institute for Health Protection of Workers of "Serbian Railways", five workers were suspended for participating in the commemorative action for the victims of the fall of the canopy at the railway station. The Security Information Agency (BIA) reacted to the farmers' announcement that they would join the announced student protest with a threat. The BIA, according to the Initiative for the Survival of Serbian Farmers, threatened to confiscate the tractors of farmers who plan to join the protest. Arrests, lawsuits, smear campaigns and threats are the only response of the authorities to the determination of citizens to no longer stay silent on injustice, corruption, non-transparency and all illegal actions of the highest state officials.

Attacks on students

Since the beginning of December, young people have been blocking colleges across Serbia and are persistent in their intention to fight for a country where there is responsibility, transparency and a country where laws apply equally to everyone. However, many try to stifle their spirit and break them with fear and violence and thwart their resistance and struggle. The gathered students of technical faculties, as well as the journalist N1, were insulted by the director of Sarajevo Gas, otherwise a close associate of Milorad Dodik. After the address of the president of the state, the police brigade pushed the gathered students in front of the presidency. A vehicle ran into student blockades in front of the Faculty of Security in Belgrade, as well as in front of the Faculty of Sports and Physical Education, when one young man was injured. For now, those who drove their cars into the crowd have been detained, however, the persons who attacked the students in front of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, which is why the blockades initially started, although they have been identified, have not yet been prosecuted. Identified persons, members of the ruling party, have for now only been invited to a hearing, and bearing responsibility is one of the main demands of the student blockades. A government that hits and beats the youth, leads to a country without a future.

Attacks on high school students

Across the country, in addition to students, high school students also started organizing blockades. The regime's repression of teachers and high school students goes so far that Vladimir Đukanović, a prominent member of the SNS, declared that "children up to the age of 18 are owned by the state." The complete disregard for the identity, intelligence and awareness of young people, as well as the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees the rights of children to freely express their opinions as well as the right to freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly, indicates the regime's tendency to eradicate critical thinking at the earliest age. However, in addition to offensive language, high school students also faced threats to their physical safety. Several masked men threw firecrackers (a type of cannon fire) at the students of the Karlovac High School while they were at the peaceful protest. The professors of the Gymnasium emphasized in the announcement that: "Students were in a state of shock and fear, while they hugged each other and tried to calm down. Fortunately, there were no injuries, but the fear they endured has serious consequences." During the protest held on December 23 in Šabac, a taxi driver ran into the students and on that occasion hit a student and a teacher, who fortunately escaped unhurt. Teachers and students are also the target of tabloid smear campaign every day. The activist of the group "Mladi borba" Nikolina Sindelić and her family members were targeted by the local Obrenovac newspaper after Nikolina participated in a protest blockade in this municipality. From the Forum of Belgrade High Schools, they informed the public that the Ministry of Education sent a letter to school principals requesting a list of all teachers who support their students. Although the government refuses to accept this and continues to target the youngest generations without thinking about the harmful mental and physical consequences, high school students have every right to speak freely and decide about their future.

Freedom of Association

BIA spies on activists and journalists

Research by BIRN and Amnesty International showed that the BIA installed spy software to monitor the phones of detained and arrested activists and journalists. This year, Civic Initiatives collected data on those arrested and detained at environmental protests - 49 people, and at protests held after the fall of the canopy at the Railway Station in Novi Sad - 41 people. It turned out that during the detention of certain activists and journalists, the BIA used Israeli technology to install domestic spy software on the mobile phones of those detained, which enables the collection of personal data, including: contacts, messages, photos and location history. The research showed that on several devices the attempt to install this software was unsuccessful. The list of those targeted included activists Ivan Bjelić, Nikola Ristić, Nenad Kovačević, an activist of the Crocodile Association, as well as the editor of the Slavija info portal Ljubomir Stefanović. What they all have in common is that at some point they were taken into custody or called for an interview at the Security Information Agency (BIA) and that on that occasion their phones were confiscated, but they were not told about the software that would be installed on the devices. This year, the numerous detentions of activists by the BIA speaks of the state of captivity of the state, which instead of openness and dialogue, fosters repression and intimidation against those who use their guaranteed rights to expression and assembly. The investigation by BIRN and Amnesty International is just another proof of the regime's serious attempts to stifle any form of criticism and civic participation. Spying on journalists and activists without any warrant is illegal and constitutes a serious violation of the right to privacy, and calls into question all civil liberties and rights.