Three Freedoms Under the Magnifying Glass
Violations of Basic Human Rights in Serbia
December 27 - January 16, 2024

Freedom of Expression

Threats and pressures on students, high school students, professors

Representatives of the regime and pro-government tabloids have launched a smear campaign in recent weeks, aiming to unjustly discredit students, and their intention is to cause division within the unified student movement. This was preceded by calls to students to the Security Information Agency, as well as the sending of disturbing messages and calls from unknown phone numbers. In the pro-regime newspaper “Novosti”, the Croatian passports of two students from Serbia, who hold dual citizenship, were published. A key question arises: how did the media obtain these personal documents, as such information could only come from official institutions? This indicates a serious abuse of institutions for the benefit of the ruling regime. Attorney Rodoljub Šabić, a former Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, stated that "publishing personal documents with photos and framing them within the context of some fabricated subversive activity supported from abroad is not only a gross violation of basic journalistic standards, a breach of the Personal Data Protection Law, and most likely a criminal offense, but also a deliberate and direct threat to the safety of these young men." This case marks only the beginning of the use of a new tactic of intimidation through the publication of personal information of students involved in protests. In Novi Sad, "wanted posters" containing the personal information of 23 students from the Faculty of Technical Sciences emerged. The targeting of students and high school students was not limited to anonymous individuals, but also involved officials from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. The Mayor of Leskovac, Goran Cvetanović, publicly commented on the grades of students from the local high school. The citizens' association "Tim 42" from Leskovac filed a complaint with the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection against those responsible at the Leskovac Gymnasium for violating the Personal Data Protection Law. Mayor of Kraljevo, Predrag Terzić, posted photos of certain students on social media, in which Nazi and fascist symbols were added using Photoshop.

In addition to the publication of personal information, students were also legitimized for displaying banners in Belgrade, and students in Niš were also identified by police in front of their faculty. An unknown man in a car threatened a student from the Faculty of Agriculture in Novi Sad, warning her not to participate in further blockades. Authorities have extended their threats not only to students and high schoolers but also to their parents and professors. Agents from the Security Information Agency visited the workplace of the mother of one of the students, demanding to discuss her son's activities during the university blockades. Prime Minister Vučević threatened that teachers who do not resume lectures in the second semester would be fired. All this indicates that the only response that government representatives have to the current situation is violence.

Threats to journalists

The authors of the show "Dobar, Ioš, zao", Nenad Kulačin and Marko Vidojković, were threatened with death by unknown persons in the YouTube comments of the show. Two years ago, the International PEN Center provided support to Vidojković, who was relocated from the country due to threats. However, the situation has not changed since then, and the two journalists continue to receive terrifying threats. In addition to them, Zoran Kesić, the author and presenter of the satirical show "24 minutes with Zoran Kesić", also came under fire. All over Belgrade, at least 200 graffiti appeared targeting this presenter because of part of the sentence he said at his performance in Sarajevo, which happened on the same day when the canopy of the reconstructed railway station fell in Novi Sad. The part written on the graffiti was taken out of context, and the large number of graffiti written throughout the city indicates the organization and protection of those who carried out this action. With the coming to power of the Serbian Progressive Party, there is also an increase in the tolerance of authorities for hate graffiti and murals of war criminals, while those who dare to paint over these graffiti face lawsuits and misdemeanor charges. The threats to which journalists in Serbia are exposed are an indication of the government's increasingly open efforts to limit freedom of expression and other related freedoms and rights of citizens.

Lawsuit against the comedian for a joke

Due to a joke about the death of the controversial politician Dragan Marković Palma, the comedian Jagoda Jovanović was targeted by the pro-regime media, and immediately after the broadcast she was sued for the alleged infliction of mental pain by the son of the deceased politician, who is seeking compensation of one million dinars. After the shows in which she was targeted, the comedian started receiving death threats and insults. Jagoda also spoke publicly about the accusations against Dragan Marković Palma, which refer to the pimping of young women and girls. Those claims reached the general public in 2021, when a large number of opposition politicians spoke about this. However, the investigation into this matter was never completed, and the case of gender-based violence against a large number of women and girls remained hidden under the veil of secrecy. Today, Jagoda Jovanović is a victim of continuous pressure and attempts to cover up allegations about parties where underage girls were pimped, as well as any attempt to speak publicly on this topic and to raise issues to determine responsibility.

The lawsuit against the journalist was dismissed

The Appellate Court in Belgrade dismissed the lawsuit filed by the owner of SCOM company Vladimir Vrbaški against Radio-television Vojvodina (RTV), the then editor-in-chief Marijana Jović Lainović and journalist Predrag Ćurčija. Vrbaški filed a lawsuit for alleged violation of honor and reputation and demanded compensation of 10 million dinars. The decision of the Appellate Court changed the first-instance verdict, which demanded that the defendant jointly pay 30,000 dinars with statutory default interest to pay the plaintiff. High claims and lengthy court processes exhaust journalists and hinder their independent and professional work.

Freedom of Assembly

Incidents at blockades and attacks on students

Fifteen-minute traffic blockades in memory of the 15 victims in Novi Sad and with the request to assume responsibility for this crime, took place during the holidays and will continue in the new year 2025. At the same time, the government, through pro-regime media, conducts a negative campaign against students, professors and all citizens who demand accountability. As a result, thugs appear on the streets and attack the crowd. Several cars passing through the crowd were recorded. At the blockade in front of the Faculty of Economics on December 27, a woman carried a student on top of her car. Student was later transported to the Emergency Center and the woman driving the car fled the scene. At the roadblock near Kalemegdan, a man drove his car into a group of gathered students of the Faculty of Fine Arts and the Faculty of Applied Arts in Belgrade. A similar incident happened at the roadblock near the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Medicine and Dentistry in Belgrade. The cameras also recorded a disturbing moment when the driver hit the young woman hard before the start of the roadblock in Rooseveltova Street. The woman suffered serious injuries on that occasion. The police announced that the driver was arrested. Violent behavior towards the crowd also happened on January 4 in Novi Sad when a man got out of the vehicle and attacked the crowd. He entered into an agreement to plead guilty to violent behavior at a sporting event or public gathering. By the way, during the attack by the violent man, one of the participants of the gathering sprayed him with pepper spray and was detained for that, while the man who attacked the crowd was detained only afterwards. This shows the discriminatory attitude of the police. The hostile atmosphere and the targeting and insulting of students by the highest representatives of the government culminated in a physical attack on the students of the Faculty of Law. Namely, a group of people broke into the faculty in the night between January 13 and 14 and physically attacked students shouting slogans of support for the President of Serbia. On that occasion, seven students were slightly injured, and the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office announced that 4 people were detained because of the attack, although the students stated that there were 6 attackers. The regime in Serbia, with its rhetoric and intolerance of different opinions, has led to serious polarization in society, which often leads to escalation and violence directed at all those who are critical of the regime. The impunity of such actions in the previous period and the protection of abusers by the institutions is exactly what students and citizens are fighting against, and what the government is increasingly violently trying to prevent them from doing.

Freedom of Association

Indictment against the activist

An indictment was brought against the activist of the Bravo movement, Brajan Brković, due to a performance in 2023. He is accused of endangering the safety of Novi Sad Police Chief Goran Radonjić, Vice President of the Provincial Government Vladimir Galić and Novi Sad Mayor Milan Đurić, all because of an environmental protest performance. Namely, in March 2023, activists brought tree stumps with traces of red paint and photos of relevant officials in front of several institutions. The action was interpreted as a call for violence against the people in the photos, although the performance clearly indicated the cutting of forests in Šodros, against which the citizens had been protesting for months. The lawsuit against the activist is an attempt to stop further protest actions by citizens and prevent critical speech in public spaces.