



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

February 14 - March 6, 2025

Freedom of Expression

Lawsuit against Pištaljka

The former director of the Anti-Corruption Agency, Zorana Marković, sued the editor-in-chief of Pištaljka, Vladimir Radomirović, and the Eutopia Association, the publisher of Pištaljka, a portal that investigates corruption and abuses in government, private and public companies. Marković sued Pištaljka because they published that an international warrant had been issued for her. The information published by Pištaljka is supported by official documents obtained from state authorities under the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance. The lawsuit against Pištaljka is another in a series filed by officials, which has the characteristics of a SLAPP lawsuit, a lawsuit that aims to prevent journalists from reporting on topics of public importance.

Verdict against KRIK

The Court of Appeal in Belgrade issued a final verdict against journalist Milica Vojinović and KRIK editor Stevan Dojčinović because they published news from the trial of Zoran Jotić Jotka's criminal group, in which they quoted the wiretapped conversation of the members of this criminal group about the then director of the BIA, Bratislav Gašić. The judges claim that journalists should have been more tolerant towards Gašić precisely because he is an official, as well as that journalists are only allowed to convey information, but not to explain to readers what is happening. This explanation of the judicial panel is in complete contradiction to what journalism is, as well as the basic principle that officials are subject to a greater degree of criticism. KRIK will have to pay Gašić a little more than 140,000 dinars, and this is only one of 19 court proceedings against KRIK.

Attacks and targeting of journalists

Insulting journalists by the highest government officials in Serbia is unfortunately not a rarity. However, these officials rarely, if ever, face consequences for their words, which further fuel the violence that journalists are exposed to. The constant deterioration of freedoms in Serbia has been noted by the international organization Freedom House, and in its latest report, Serbia ranked seventh among countries with the largest decline in freedom of expression over the last ten years. The mayor of Indija insulted journalist Verica Marinić from In Media. This media outlet has been under pressure from local authorities for years. Due to SLAPP lawsuits, the survival of this media is threatened, and journalist Marinić has previously even been physically thrown out of the local assembly. Just ten days after the mayor insulted her, Verica Marinić and her colleague Miodrag Blečić were attacked by an older man while covering a protest march by high school students and university students in Indija. The man knocked the mobile phone out of the journalist's hand and then called her and her colleague "Ustashe." After a Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) gathering in Sremska Mitrovica, dozens of threats were sent via social media to Novi Sad journalist and professor Dinko Gruhonjić. At the gathering in Sremska Mitrovica, President Aleksandar Vučić once again publicly targeted him as someone who is destroying the country and organizing protests, as well as someone allegedly working on the secession of Vojvodina. It is worth reminding that this journalist has been subject to chauvinistic targeting by representatives of the current government for years, which has led to a physical attack on Gruhonjić, as well as the writing of offensive graffiti by unknown individuals at the entrance of the building where he lives with his family. A week after the president publicly targeted Gruhonjić at the SNS rally, three unknown individuals broke into the offices of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV), where Gruhonjić is the program director. In addition to Gruhonjić, death threats were also sent to NDNV president Ana Lalić. One of the threats read, "You will never have Vojvodina, we will burn you at the stake like a witch." This threat echoes the president's false accusations. Meanwhile, at the aforementioned ruling party rally, an unknown man made death threats to the N1 team reporting from the field. In addition to journalists from Novi Sad, the president also insulted RTS journalists who reported on the large student protest on March 1. The president called the journalists "imbeciles", for which he later apologized, but added that he thinks "just as bad about the professionalism and objectivity of RTS journalists and I think they are a shame for their profession, ie. I think they are not journalists, but political activists", dissatisfied that RTS did a feature for the newspaper about one of the biggest protests in Nis ever. Journalists were locked in a room during the reporting from a city council meeting in Novi Sad, where a new mayor was being elected. The session was turbulent, opposition representatives were prevented from entering the hall, and security locked the journalists in a room where a press conference was being held. A video appeared on social media showing many public figures, including journalists, being portrayed as political opponents supporting the independence of Kosovo. All this points to the worrisome circumstances in which journalists in Serbia work.

Pressures, dismissals, threats due to support of student demands

As the violence against protest participants did not discourage citizens from mass participation in them, the state began to resort to direct pressure on the livelihoods of those who support the students. Several dismissals were recorded in public enterprises, which employees believe occurred due to their support for student demands. An employee at the Novi Sad heating public facility claims she was fired for supporting the students. Two other people from this public enterprise are believed to have been dismissed precisely because of their political stance. In the Public Utility Company "Water and Sewerage" in Novi Sad, a man lost his job after supporting students on his private social media accounts. A worker from Kolubara and a member of the initiative committee of the Union of Unified EPS, Goran Perišić, was also fired shortly after giving a speech at a protest of power utility workers. Another employee in EPS received a warning prior to dismissal. The Center for Emancipation Policies (CPE) also reported the dismissal of an employee in the Ministry of Agriculture and an employee at the National Theater in Leskovac. Employees at the Postal Public Enterprise in Novi Sad received a notice from management that the company's Business Ethics Code had been changed, which includes, among other things, a ban on calling for work stoppages via social media and phone calls. State institutions are thus being abused as a battleground for dealing with those who publicly express views contrary to the ruling party. In addition to state-owned companies, a chef was fired from a private television station. Specifically, because he prepared food for students and citizens during multi-hour blockades, chef Branko Kisić was fired from the "MasterChef" show. Employees in education, as well as students and high school students, are still under the greatest pressure. The February salaries for teachers who were involved in the blockade were officially reduced. In addition to this, education workers are facing other forms of intimidation. The bolts were removed from the car of a teacher from Zrenjanin, who had spoken at student protests multiple times. Pro-regime tabloids openly call for the arrest of teachers, and many of them are subjected to harsh defamation campaigns in these media. Local authorities in Prijepolje have threatened teachers involved in the blockade. Unknown individuals broke into the high school in Lebane, but teachers stopped them from causing further disorder. A teacher in Leskovac, who opposes the blockades, threatened students at the high school. In Novi Sad, the police interrogated certain students. The police also conducted an informational interview with workers in culture who had blocked the Belgrade Cultural Center. The FON student, whose passport was published by the tabloids, claims that the police in Montenegro stopped him on the road and deliberately detained him "on orders from the top".

The police hacked the student's phone

BIRN reported that police hacked a student's phone without his knowledge after he was detained. We remind you that in December 2024, research by BIRN and Amnesty International showed that the BIA had installed spy software to monitor the phones of activists and journalists detained during and after the protests. The same thing happened to a student who was detained on December 25 in the Sava Center, where the SNS rally was held. Plainclothes men detained the student, without a clear explanation, and took him to the police station. On that occasion, they confiscated his phone and using the Israeli Cellebrite equipment for digital forensics downloaded all the data for his device. Following the December report, Cellebrite conducted an internal investigation and decided to suspend the use of its products by certain users in Serbia. Hacking the devices and spying on citizens and activists is a serious violation of the basic freedoms and privacy of the citizens and it is a serious abuse of the security services for the political purposes of the ruling party.

Freedom of Assembly

Incidents at roadblocks, attacks on students

In addition to institutional pressures and other forms of intimidation against students and those supporting them, cases of physical attacks on participants in blockades continue to be reported. A team from the pro-regime TV station Informer attempted to forcibly enter the Faculty of Economics. During this incident, a woman who was with the Informer TV crew tore up banners and attacked students, injuring two of them lightly. There have also been multiple verbal and physical attacks on participants in the 15-minute traffic blockades. In Novi Pazar, a student was slightly injured when a driver, attempting to break the blockade, hit him with a car. A man pulled out a knife on demonstrators in Indija on March 2nd, but fortunately, no one was injured. At a blockade in Zemun, a man made serious threats towards the participants of the gathering. On the day of the SNS rally in Sremska Mitrovica, activists who were putting up posters reading "Your hands are bloody" were attacked by a man holding a stone. On the same day, February 15th, an activist from the Local Front in Kraljevo was attacked while filming SNS supporters who were gathering in front of buses before heading to the rally. An unknown man broke the glass at the entrance of the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade, which the students had officially occupied, and threw pieces of glass at the students. One female student was hit but was not seriously injured. To remind, the student blockades started after the attack on the students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts who were paying respects to the victims in Novi Sad. One of the students' demands is to find and punish those responsible for attacking students and citizens who are protesting. However, one of the attackers identified by the students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Aleksandar Jokić, was seen behind President Vučić at one of the SNS rallies. This behavior suggests that the authorities have no genuine intention to punish the perpetrators of violence but, on the contrary, are protecting them. For the thugs who broke into the faculty and injured seven students of the Faculty of Law, on the night between January 13 and 14, the prosecution proposed suspended sentences. The criminal complaint against Damir Zobenica, an SNS official who became known to the general public after a video of him giving instructions to SNS members on how to provoke blockade participants, was also dismissed. It seems that the institutions are not taking adequate steps in order to prevent further violence against those who protest, thus moving even further away from the fulfillment of the demands.

Freedom of Association

Police raid on NGO

In Belgrade, on February 25, members of the Criminal Police Directorate, on the order of the Special Department for Suppression of Corruption of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, raided the premises of five non-governmental organizations: Civic Initiatives, CRTA, Trag Foundation, Center for Practical Politics, and the National Youth Council of Serbia. The reason for the intrusion is to check the allegedly inappropriate spending of funds by USAID, the American agency for international development that was shut down by Donald Trump and whose projects around the world are currently halted. The Chief Public Prosecutor of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, Nenad Stefanović, stated that "The Special Department for Suppression of Corruption of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office formed a case and turned to the U.S. Department of Justice to provide the necessary information regarding the suspicions raised against USAID by the highest state officials of the USA in connection with the misuse of funds about possible money laundering and the unintended spending of American taxpayers' funds in Serbia." Therefore, the prosecution in Serbia formed a case based on the statements of the U.S. President Donald Trump, the head of the U.S. Government Efficiency Department Elon Musk, the Secretary of State Mark Rubio, the spokeswoman of the White House Karoline Leavitt and the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Kash Patel. The armed police raided the organization's premises, initially without showing a warrant, which is not in accordance with the law, and they remained in CRTA until the next day, February 26. This action by the prosecutor's office and the police comes at a time when the president of the country announces the fight against the "colored revolution" by which he tries to discredit the student protests and all those who support the student demands. The raid was made on organizations that have been dealing with issues of democratization for years, pointing out corruption, misuse of public funds and violation of basic rights. It is a continuation of the months-long campaign that government representatives and pro-regime tabloids are leading against the civil sector. The day before, President Aleksandar Vučić announced that such an action would be carried out in a guest appearance on a pro-regime television station. "We will help the FBI, there is no doubt. We will cooperate very closely with the FBI on this matter", said Vučić. "You see how many organizations there are, each one is paid from the outside," said the president and added that: "they get 3, 4 million each and go and launder the money. It will certainly be investigated and investigated and it was already announced by Trump and announced by the FBI". So far, the prosecution has not announced that it will investigate how USAID money was spent by the state, which is the largest recipient of funds (more than 937 million dollars has been invested by USAID in the state of Serbia since 2001). We see this raid as gross abuse of state institutions to deal with dissidents and the continued suppression of free and democratic action in Serbia, as well as an attempt to intimidate the non-governmental sector.

The Prosecution is asking for prison for activist Zlatko Kokanović

The Public Prosecution in Loznica filed an indictment against the activist of the association "Nedamo Jadar" Zlatko Kokanović from Gornje Nedeljice, in connection with the blockade of the railroad crossing in Loznica on July 7, 2024, and requested a prison sentence of 14 months. Indictments were filed against six more activists of this association. As a reminder, activists blocked the Loznica-Zvornik railway as a way of protest against lithium mining in the Jadar valley. On that occasion, there was a scuffle with the police, and the activists were detained and soon released. The police filed criminal charges for "obstructing the work of police officers" and "attacking police officers". A prison sentence for an activist would be a precedent in limiting citizens' protest rights and the right to civil disobedience, which is the only remaining way for citizens to fight in the absence of independent and free institutions, as well as in the absence of decision-making and creation of public policies in the public interest.

Targeted local foundation

The tabloid portal "NS Live" published a text targeting members of the "Tate Novosađani" foundation. In the text, they published false information that one of the members of the Management Board was arrested for unauthorized production and distribution of narcotic drugs. They also targeted them, linking them to USAID, which they state is "known for funding the NGO sector around the world with the goal of overthrowing the current and legally elected political systems." The local tabloid could hear this kind of rhetoric in the speeches of public officials in recent months. This humanitarian foundation stated that they will take measures against the "NS Live" portal.

Hooligans attacked activists of the informal group "The bridge remains"

Masked hooligans broke into the tent of the "The bridge Remains" initiative late in the evening and threatened the activists there. We remind you that the activists of the initiative have made an improvised camp near the Old Sava Bridge, where they have been on duty for four months and are trying to prevent the demolition of this historically important bridge, whose demolition was announced by the city government, which met with great dissatisfaction among the citizens. The organization warned that "on the Old Sava bridge, public property is stolen every day and illegally, under the cover of the police and phantoms, solely because of the expansion of Belgrade on the water."

The taxi driver forced the activist to get out of the vehicle

The Novi Sad taxi driver forced the activist of the "Stav" group Mila Pajić to get out of the vehicle. On that occasion, he said that he belongs to the "People's Patrol" group, which is an extreme right-wing group that once attacked migrants on the streets of Belgrade. Mila Pajić is regularly the target of attacks by the highest government officials, and recently President Vučić also spoke about her in a guest appearance on TV Insider. On that occasion, he stated that Dinko Gruhonjić and Mila Pajić "implement the anti-Serb agenda" and that "it is his job to oppose it". Mila is exposed to various pressures because of her activism, and in front of one of the protests in Novi Sad, a group of unknown men who did not introduce themselves pushed her into a vehicle and took her for questioning. The highest government officials, starting with the president, directly threaten the safety of this young activist with their rhetoric.

Cancellation of stands

In the past period, two forums of non-governmental organizations were cancelled. The ProGlas initiative announced that holding their tribune in Sombor was prohibited in one building, which is why they held the tribune on the square. The Feminist Anti-Fascist Network (FAMA) announced on February 27th that the Museum of Vojvodina canceled their space for the announced forum dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Anti-Fascist Women's Front (AFŽ) of Vojvodina at the last minute. The Museum announced that there was a "misunderstanding in communication", but it is indicative that the cancellations of the tribunes occur at the moment of greatest pressure on the civil sector.