



THREE FREEDOMS UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS: SPECIAL EDITION

The day before the protest

In the lead-up to the major student and civic protest in Belgrade, tensions and pressures rose, predominantly affecting journalists and students. First, several journalistic teams from Croatia were denied entry into Serbia. All teams were informed that they posed a security risk, and their entry was consequently blocked. The SafeJournalists network condemned this decision, reminding that any attack on journalists is an attack on the public interest, democracy, and the rights of all citizens. The work of journalists from Serbia was also obstructed. Journalists and employees of Radio Belgrade were told to leave the building by 5:00 p.m. on Friday, March 14, and would not be allowed to return to their workplaces until Monday, directly depriving them of their right to work and denying citizens their right to be informed. A group of about a hundred men, among whom officials of the SNS of the city of Novi Sad were noticed, blocked the N1 building. On Friday, journalist Nemanja Šarović from KTV was detained for the second time, and later released. Šarović was arrested for asking police officers, guarding SNS supporters at Pionirski Park, whether they would take action regarding improperly parked tractors around the park, located in the city center.



All of this represents serious attempts at media censorship to prevent coverage of the student protests and blockades. The Ministry of the Interior of Serbia announced the arrest of two individuals on Friday for allegedly disturbing public order and peace, in connection with broken windows and punctured tires on tractors improperly parked around Pionirski Park, where purported students—who were in fact numerous officials and supporters of the ruling party—were camping. On Friday, March 14, in Obrenovac, a female student who was walking from Loznica to Belgrade was attacked by an older man who attempted to strangle her. The Ministry of the Interior stated that a misdemeanor charge would be filed against the man. After midnight on Friday, an attack occurred on the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, where a student and a professor were injured. In addition to students, activists and opposition party members supporting the protests were also subjected to pressure. In Novi Sad, six people were arrested after illegal wiretapping of conversations between activists from the STAV group and members of the Movement of Free Citizens. According to information from the CSOs, the wiretapped recording was made by the Security Information Agency, with a warrant signed by the president of the Higher Court in Belgrade. The arrested activists are charged with the serious offense of "preparing an act against the constitutional order." Before the arrests, a recording was aired on national television, where STAV activists and members of the opposition discussed how to impose the idea of a transitional government at the Saturday protest in Belgrade and incite violence. The arrested individuals, who had previously been targeted by pro-government tabloids and officials, were placed under a 30-day detention, and a group of non-governmental organizations pointed out the political motivation behind this arrest.



Before reaching judicial authorities, the recording was broadcast by the media, which immediately "convicted" the activists of terrorism and attempting to overthrow the state—a narrative later echoed by the highest officials of the Republic of Serbia, including the president. During the pre-investigation, the group is charged with attempting to overthrow the constitutional order. This qualification is unacceptable as the group took no actions to carry out any of the controversial statements made in the conversation. A few days after the arrest, the apartments of the activists of the informal youth group Stav were searched. The search also included the apartments of the activists who were not arrested. All these incidents represent a serious violation of fundamental rights and an abuse of institutions for political purposes, aimed at discouraging citizens from participating in the peaceful gathering scheduled for March 15.

Protest in Belgrade

The student and civil protest "15 for 15" was held in Belgrade on Saturday, March 15, and gathered a large number of people from across the country. Many consider it the largest gathering in Serbia in recent decades. The protest lasted from the morning hours and proceeded mostly peacefully until 7:11 PM. At that time, a 15-minute silence in which people pay tribute to the victims of the roof collapse in Novi Sad was being held. At 7:11, the silence was abruptly broken, and a large number of citizens, as seen in footage, began fleeing and separating into two sides. According to reports, attendees felt a strong sound shock, followed by a wave of heat or wind, after which the crowd began to scatter. Some recordings captured this unusual loud noise that disrupted the silence. At that moment, a stampede ensued.



A significant number of citizens experienced similar symptoms and began seeking medical attention. A group of NGOs called on citizens to report their experiences and fill out a questionnaire about what they had witnessed. Over 3,000 testimonies have been submitted so far, with people describing hearing a sound similar to that of a plane landing or a car approaching at high speed. In the following days, many reported symptoms including nausea, headaches, rapid heartbeat, hearing loss, anxiety, panic, tremors, disorientation, and a sense of losing control. A significant number of people were injured in the stampede. These symptoms are often associated with exposure to certain sound devices that are typically available only to police or other security services. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP) of Serbia and government officials immediately denied the use of sound weapons, accusing citizens of lying despite the available footage and medical evidence from health check-ups. The media published photographs and a video of a device mounted on a gendarmerie vehicle parked near the Serbian Assembly. Although the government representatives initially denied that Serbia possessed such a device, on the same day when pictures and videos of a certain device were released to the public, the Minister of the Interior showed journalists an LRAD device in the possession of the police, and stated that the device was not used as a sound cannon at the protest. The First Basic Public Prosecutor's Office stated that no "sound cannon" was used during the protest, and that they would continue investigating the reasons behind the behavior of the citizens at that critical moment. Additionally, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade instructed the First Basic Public Prosecutor's Office to open an investigation and identify individuals allegedly spreading panic about the use of sound weapons.



At the same time, Miloš Vučević, a former prime minister, stated that he had signed official documents requesting that the FBI and FSB come to Serbia and conduct an independent investigation into whether sound weapons were used during the March 15 protest. The widespread distrust in institutions, which is one of the driving forces behind the protests, raises doubts about whether the Serbian prosecution will objectively determine what happened and whether the current authorities in the country used weapons against citizens. Almost simultaneously with the incident, stones and bottles were thrown at gathered students and citizens from Pionirski Park near the Serbian Assembly, where loyalists of the Serbian Progressive Party had gathered. On March 15, other minor incidents were recorded, less intense and dangerous compared to the potential use of sound devices to break up the peaceful gathering. Police searched the vehicle of Novica Antić, a former president of the Military Union, who was on his way to the protest in Belgrade, and detained one of his companions. Novica Antić had previously been imprisoned and persecuted for highlighting problems within the Serbian Armed Forces. Aleksandar Vučić stated that a total of 22 people were detained at the day of the protest. An attorney representing two young men arrested during the protest was verbally and physically attacked by police officers inside the Police Station. The officers initially denied her access to the detainees, directly violating their right to defense. When the attorney continued to insist on her legal right, one of the police officers verbally attacked her, and then another officer, without identification, forcibly removed her from the station, claiming he had the right to expel her because "it was his house." During this incident, the attorney sustained an arm injury. In one Belgrade neighborhood, a man drove through a crowd, injuring three people.



During the protest itself, the president of the Krokodil Association, Vladimir Arsenijević, was verbally attacked for carrying Ukrainian and Palestinian flags. With all the government's attempts to thwart the arrival of a large number of citizens from all over the country to Belgrade, and all the counter-gatherings that the government organized to cause incidents, this gathering will be remembered as one of the largest gatherings of citizens in Serbia in history. Also, the potential use of certain technology against those gathered remains to be investigated and determined in the following period.

Days after the protest

Even in the days following the protest, pressures have not subsided. On March 18, an incident occurred in Novi Sad in front of the City Assembly. Students attempted to block the City Assembly building during the night, but they were stopped by the Intervention Police, who attacked the students and the gathered citizens, detaining several participants of the protest in the process. Tensions around Pionirski Park remain high, as immediately after the large student and civil protest in Belgrade, loyalists of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) began retreating. This is yet another indication that the camp in this park was organized not by students opposing the blockades to express their demands, but rather to incite unrest during the protest. Masked men still present in the park prevented a reporter from N1 from covering the situation. Nemanja Šarović was again attacked in the park while filming the people who had come for the tractors parked around the area.



Screenwriter and dramaturge Maja Pelević was also attacked while filming the state of Pionirski Park after those who had been camping there withdrew. The chief and responsible editor of Ozon Media from Sremska Mitrovica was verbally attacked while reporting on the blockade of the Medical School in that city. A BMW driver deliberately drove into a group of students and teachers in front of the Electrical Engineering School in Novi Sad. In addition to teachers in primary and secondary schools, pressure is now being applied to university professors. President Vučić announced that professors involved in the blockades would not receive their salaries. Furthermore, in a neighborhood where only university professors, scientists, and research institute employees live, the tires of their vehicles were slashed. The Dean of the Faculty of Computer Science in Belgrade called 12 students to disciplinary hearings regarding their participation in the blockades. The President of the High Judicial Council has requested that court presidents compile lists of strikers and reduce their salaries, as shared by Judge Miodrag Majić on the social media platform X. There is no doubt that the pressure will continue to mount in the coming period, as government representatives are determined to end the anti-corruption protests at all costs. However, the students have stated that they will not give up until their demands are met.