



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

March 21 - April 3, 2025

Freedom of Expression

Attacks and pressures on journalists

In recent months, independent journalists who report on anti-corruption protests and freely ask questions to officials have been regularly subjected to attacks and faced pressures in their work. BIRN journalist Saša Dragojlo was attacked by an SNS activist, and the police present at the scene refused to identify the attacker. BIRN revealed that the attacker, had a role in organizing the transportation of people to Pionirski Park, where alleged students who want to learn were staying. While filming a protest in support of teachers who were blocking a school in Novi Sad, an N1 journalist was attacked by individuals who participated in a counter-protest. The woman who attacked the journalist first shouted insults at N1 television, which are often heard from the highest-ranking government officials, and then struck the journalist with an umbrella and attempted to knock the phone out of his hand. The absence of an adequate reaction by the authorities prevents better protection of journalists in Serbia. The First Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, during a pre-investigation procedure regarding the attack on journalist Vuk Cvijić by the editor-in-chief of the pro-government tabloid "Srpski Telegraf," Milan Lađević, determined that Lađević did indeed hit Cvijić, but that the violent act did not constitute a criminal offense. Authorities not only fail to protect journalists but directly endanger and even spy on them. Two BIRN journalists were targeted in an unsuccessful attempt to spy on them using the Israeli spyware Pegasus, confirmed by a forensic analysis conducted by Amnesty International. In December 2024, this international organization proved that the Security Information Agency (BIA) had installed spyware on the phones of detained and arrested activists and journalists. Just a few days before the attempt to hack the BIRN journalists' phones became public, the media reported that Serbian authorities had not resolved the case of the illegal surveillance of a journalist Slaviša Milanov from Dimitrovgrad, even after a year, although the prosecutor's office had requested an investigation from the police. Journalist portal Ozonpress from Čačak was the target of hacker attacks, as well as verbal threats and attacks. All of this points to the extremely difficult position of journalists in Serbia, who face numerous risks due to their professional and independent work.

Preventing journalists from reporting

Journalists from Nova, N1, Insider, Podrinjske, and French media were not allowed to enter the Bogatić Municipal Assembly building. This trend has been repeated for months in different places throughout Serbia. The state authorities thereby most directly prevent the public from receiving information on important topics and directly threaten the freedom of the media and violate the provisions of the law that guarantee it.

Pressures on professors and those who support student demands

After the teachers of primary and secondary schools in the blockades did not receive their February salaries, the pressure was also directed at university professors. First of all, an extraordinary inspection of higher education institutions was announced. In the Ministry of Education's letter to the faculties, an answer was also requested to the question of whether the faculties initiated disciplinary proceedings against the students and employees who are in the blockade. After that, the Government in technical mandate also adopted amendments to the Regulation on norms and standards of university working conditions, on the basis of which faculty professors will have their salaries reduced and as a result will receive only 12% of their salary. In addition to the fact that the amendment was not adopted in accordance with the procedure defined by law, these amendments will directly threaten the position of the University on the Shanghai List. Individual professors are also exposed to pressure. High-ranking government officials and their media daily target the rector of Belgrade University and call for his arrest. Žaklina Stojanović, dean of the Faculty of Economics in Belgrade, received a call to report to the police, under the threat of arrest if she does not appear, and the reason is a criminal report for the alleged crime of violation of equality under Article 128 of the Criminal Code. The penalty for this criminal offense is 3 years in prison, and for officials up to 5 years. Those who provide support to students and professors are also exposed to threats. Namely, the names and phone numbers of lawyers and civil society organizations that provide free legal assistance were published on Instagram with offensive descriptions. By publishing personal data of lawyers, their safety is directly threatened. Parents of students participating in blockades are also exposed to attacks. Radical and Hague convict, Vojislav Šešelj, in a TV appearance, stated that the police force is being purged of "unfit" policemen and that a colonel was prematurely retired because his son is a participant in the blockade. This statement was confirmed by the President of the National Assembly, who was also a guest on the show. Šešelj also mentioned a police chief whose daughter is a participant in the blockade. He said that this police officer "cannot remain in the police force. He did not commit any crime, his daughter is of legal age, she is criminally responsible herself, but he is not fit to be one of the police chiefs." The government has stepped up pressure to quell student-led anti-corruption protests that have been going on for four months. Dismissals at workplaces have become an everyday phenomenon that is now also publicly admitted, and suitability to ruling party is becoming the only criterion for retaining a workplace.

Freedom of Assembly

Attacked Zlatko Kokanović and citizens in Loznica

At the citizen's protest in Loznica, which was organized due to the suspicion that the Draft Spatial Plan, which should include an area for lithium and boron research, will be discussed at the town meeting, the present citizens, including students and high school students, were attacked. The head of the Mačva district, Željko Marjanović, drove his car fast in the direction of students, and among the students were also the daughters of environmental activist Zlatko Kokanović. Fortunately, no one was injured. Kokanović himself was attacked. He was attacked by two convicted persons close to the authorities. Kokanović has been the target of repression for a long time because of his active involvement in the fight against the opening of a lithium mine in the Jadar valley.

Arrests and information interviews

In previous period, there has been an increase in the number of students and citizens being detained for protesting at the local level. Six people, including students, were detained in Niš following a protest against local authorities. The detainees are suspected of "violent behavior at a sports event or public gathering" for throwing water at local officials. In Leskovac, a professor was detained after attempting to enter the theater where the president was addressing the public. Voices from the highest ranks of the SNS calling for the arrest of the rector of Belgrade University are being heard more and more often. During a protest in Belgrade, when citizens surrounded the Serbian Progressive Party's promotional booths, a woman was detained after responding to party activists and throwing eggs back at them. The citizens surrounded the police vehicle in which the woman was taken. An informational interview was held in the car, and the woman was immediately released. In Kragujevac, three students were detained, and later released, after the police found a large amount of shields and pepper spray in their car, according to the Ministry of the Interior. After a protest in Čačak, four citizens were arrested, one of whom was detained for 48 hours. In addition to detentions, citizens have been summoned for informational interviews. In Niš, an first informational interview was conducted with a citizen regarding posts on social media related to the potential use of sound weapons against peaceful protestors in Belgrade on March 15. The president of the Independent Professional Football Players Union was also summoned for a "friendly" interview at the Security Information Agency due to a post about Aleksandar Vučić. Criminal charges were filed against students involved in the blockade in Subotica. On the other hand, no trial has yet started for Serbian Progressive Party officials who attacked students and professors from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, which led to the blockades, as some of the suspects are negotiating a plea deal. One of the suspects has already signed a plea agreement, while others involved in the attack have not yet been identified. We remind you that six opposition politicians and one student are still in custody in Novi Sad, arrested after a conversation that was illegally wiretapped. They are suspected of the serious crime of "preparing an act against the constitutional order and security of Serbia, in connection with the criminal act of calling for a violent change of the constitutional order," which carries a prison sentence of up to five years. Numerous irregularities surround this case, one of which is the prosecution's refusal to grant the defense access to the case files. The total number of those arrested and detained at protests since the collapse of the canopy has surpassed 100.

Attacks on students and citizens

Serious threats that undermine the safety and security of students and citizens are being received daily under the influence of the brutal smear campaign led by high-ranking officials against them. First, a threat was directed at the mother of a young man who died in the collapse of a canopy. She received a photo with a photoshopped image of her younger son, which is a clear threat to this woman who publicly supported the students. Offensive, threatening graffiti was written on the house of a female student who participated in the walking march from Šabac to Belgrade. In Čačak, a group of about 20 people attacked students, and the police have so far identified only six individuals. The attacked students also reported that the police refused to intervene when they called them. The police initially refused to intervene at the call of four students from Novi Sad who were attacked by a group of 10 men. Students claim that they were attacked because they were chanting a slogan, that can be heard at protests, in the bar. After they left the bar, they were attacked by a group of men with belts in their hands. Two students ended up in the emergency center, and one had jaw surgery. Government representatives tried to accuse the students of the incident, and the former prime minister announced that he would file criminal charges against the attacked students for allegedly misleading the public. A councilor and vice president of the City Committee of the SNS in Zaječar physically attacked demonstrators during a protest drive. A journalist was also attacked during this incident. In Novi Sad, a music school teacher was attacked after a 16-minute silence to honor the victims. In Novi Sad, a group of masked men threw fireworks at citizens on the terraces of buildings who were participating in the "Noise Against Dictatorship" action. One woman was injured when masked men hit her in the arm with a firework. An activist from the informal group "Youth from the South" was also physically attacked while pasting promotional material calling citizens to a gathering. During the 16 minutes of silence for the victims, a man hit one of the blockade participants in Belgrade with his car. A man tried to break through the blockade at the Faculty of Organisational Sciences with his car. There are regular pressures on high school students who participate in blockades. Heating is turned off in schools, and some principals lock the schools, preventing students from accessing classrooms. A graduate of the Šabac Gymnasium had the bolts on their car wheels unscrewed. The campaign of targeting in tabloid media is daily, and the tabloid "Kurir" even published an open threat that those who protest "will end up in the river." Just three days after Vučić called Natalija Jovanović, the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy from Niš, a "criminal" on national TV RTS, she was attacked with a knife. The dean openly stood by the students at the beginning of the student blockades and has been suffering the consequences ever since. There have been continuous attacks on her led by SNS members and pro-government tabloids. After the attack, many of them, including the president, relativized the attack on the dean. Vučić stated that she was attacked with a "little knife" and that the wound was "like when you cut a cucumber or an onion". Instead of a clear condemnation of violence, the representatives of the government actually initiate violence with their statements, which led an elderly woman to attack the dean with a knife. For a clear condemnation of violence and a minimum of human empathy, is it necessary that the resulting wound damages the victim's vital organs and endangers her life, or is only party loyalty necessary?