

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

April 4 - April 17, 2025

Freedom of Expression**Arrests, detentions, expulsions from the country**

The number of arrested and detained citizens protesting and supporting students' demands has been increasing week by week. Foreign nationals who have expressed support for the protests in Serbia have also been targeted. Aleksandar Kavčić, professor and founder of the "Aleks Kavčić" Foundation, was first detained at the "Nikola Tesla" Airport upon entering the country. He was detained for two hours in a small room at the airport without any explanation. This foundation had recently been raising funds for professors whose salaries were significantly reduced in February. In previous months, representatives of civil society organizations were subjected to similar detentions at border crossings. A few days later, Italian pianist David Martello, who played on bridges in Niš during a five-hour student blockade, was deported from Serbia. In the decision revoking his short-term stay, the police stated that Martello had entered Serbia on April 4th as a tourist, but there was reasonable suspicion that he would not use his stay for the stated purposes. After 12 years of living in Serbia, a Croatian national was handed a Ministry of Interior decision giving her seven days to leave the country. The decision also stated that she would be banned from entering Serbia for the next year, even though her husband and child live here. The reasoning briefly stated that "the authority responsible for protecting the security of the Republic of Serbia provided an assessment that the stay of Croatian citizen Ivković Stojanović Arien represents an unacceptable security risk." Arien believes she was deported because she publicly supported the students on social media and, as a doctor, criticized the president's entry into the intensive care unit where severely wounded patients from North Macedonia were being treated. The Croatian ambassador to Serbia stated that 15 Croatian citizens have been deported in the past three months from Serbia. The European Union also responded regarding the deportations of EU citizens. Journalists have also been targeted in recent times. Pešćanik columnist Dejan Ilić was first invited for questioning by the police, then detained, but later released the same evening. He was arrested on suspicion of committing the criminal offense of "causing panic and disorder" due to a statement he made on Nova TV. After his release, the Ministry of Interior announced that a criminal complaint would be filed against him. Independent journalists have also faced threats of arrest from the president himself.

“I will personally file a criminal complaint against the prosecutor who refused to arrest journalists from the blockade-supporting media,” Vučić stated, and he also threatened legal action against university rectors and deans. In the previous period, the rector of the University of Kragujevac was questioned by the police in an informational interview, due to a criminal complaint filed against him in connection with the blockades. In the late evening hours of April 15, engineer Zoran Gajić was arrested. Following the tragedy in Novi Sad, Gajić revealed that reconstruction work had been carried out on the railway station canopy, despite President Vučić claiming that no such work had taken place. The prosecution ordered a 48-hour detention on suspicion that Gajić had committed the criminal offense of endangering the security of the president of the state, under Article 138, Paragraph 3, because of a post on social media. A few days prior to the arrest, Gajić was sued by the former site manager of a railway station in Novi Sad. He was released the day after his arrest to await trial in liberty.

Attacks on journalists

Independent media journalists who attempted to report from rallies organized by the ruling party in the recent period were subjected to verbal and physical attacks. The police initially prevented the N1 crew from following a group of people walking from Novi Sad to a rally of the ruling party in Belgrade on April 12. This directly obstructed the journalists from performing their work. Before that, members of the group insulted an N1 reporter, shouting slurs such as “Ustaše” and “traitors.” The N1 team was also insulted by the president of the Stara Pazova municipality. On the day of the rally in Belgrade, April 12—when the Movement for the People and the State led by President Aleksandar Vučić was formed—several journalist teams were attacked. A group of rally participants physically assaulted the KTV crew and journalist Nemanja Šarović. Among the attackers were public officials, including the director of the public utility company “Gradska čistoća,” Marko Popadić, and the director of the Pension and Disability Insurance Fund, Relja Ognjenović. Šarović stated that the KTV technician had three teeth knocked out, while he and other crew members sustained swelling and bruises. Their equipment was also damaged during the attack. The police failed to act while the KTV crew was being verbally assaulted and only intervened after SNS supporters physically attacked them. The impunity of government representatives and their supporters is further highlighted by the fact that the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade stated that no criminal offense under their jurisdiction had been committed in the attack on the KTV television crew from Zrenjanin. At the same rally, SNS rally participants repeatedly verbally attacked the N1 team. The police also banned the Al Jazeera crew from filming from the rooftop of a private building. On the same day in Novi Sad, supporters of the ruling party physically attacked Zoran Strika, deputy editor of the 021.rs news portal. The journalist was recording SNS supporters beating a citizen when he too became a target. The attackers took his phone, which he used for filming, and threw it into the river. In Belgrade, a journalist from the portal Istinomera was physically attacked while filming SNS supporters in front of the Serbian Parliament. After the April 12 rally, several tents were set up in front of the Parliament building, occupied by unidentified individuals. It was unclear why yet another SNS camp had been formed until a few days later, during the election of the new government, when it became evident that these individuals had been brought in to applaud newly elected ministers and chant slogans while insulting the opposition. In addition to physical attacks, journalists are also subjected to institutional pressure. Several RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) employees who supported student demands addressed to the public broadcaster were summoned for informational interviews. Pressure on freedom of expression in Serbia shows no signs of relenting, and journalists remain frequent targets of such attacks.

Pressures on faculties and employees

The authorities' determination to use repressive methods to avoid fulfilling student demands has entered a new phase in which political abuse of institutions occurs. In addition to filing criminal charges against the dean of the blockaded faculty, this week the police raided two faculties in Niš. Police officers raided the Faculty of Medicine in Niš and handed over a hundred summonses to students for informative interviews. The police came after a call from the dean of this faculty, who is close to the ruling coalition. Two inspectors also came to the Faculty of Philosophy in Nis following the invitation of a professor, a sympathizer of the ruling party. The entry of the police into the faculties is a gross violation of the university's autonomy. Because they refused to force their colleagues to go to the meeting of the ruling party and because they publicly supported the students, two employees of the company "Prim Kostolac" were demoted to a lower job position. Attacking people's basic existence has become a method of punishing those who exercise their constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of expression.

Freedom of Assembly

Incidents, attacks and arrests of students

Several incidents have been recorded during recent protests, some involving the police. In Novi Pazar, during a large student and civic protest on April 12, the police forcibly removed students who were blocking buses transporting people to the ruling party's rally in Belgrade. Police officers were seen violently dragging students, stepping on them, and according to student reports, one minor was injured in the process. There was also a pushing with the police in front of the RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) building, which has been blocked by students and citizens since April 14. The demonstrators are demanding that the public broadcaster report truthfully on current events and have stated they will lift the blockade if new elections are announced for members of the REM (Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media). During the blockade, a man attacked steward, and the man was later arrested. The police broke up a blockade of the RTV (Radio Television of Vojvodina) building in Novi Sad and announced criminal and misdemeanor charges against participants. Other incidents have occurred throughout Serbia. In Leskovac, a man drove his car into a group of students and citizens. A similar incident happened in Belgrade near the Faculty of Pharmacy during a 16-minute commemorative silence. A police inspector was lightly injured when a man drove into a group of citizens from Belgrade municipalities who had gathered to support the students. In Požeška Street, a woman threatened participants of the blockade with a knife. The head of security at the Faculty of Contemporary Arts also threatened and insulted students. Several students were summoned for police questioning. A student from the Faculty of Transport was detained after Informer TV published a video from a student assembly. For hours, no one knew where he was detained. He was released later that evening, but his phone and laptop were confiscated. Students from the Medical and Transport faculties had organized a "fake" plenary session during which they discussed a fabricated plan to block the "Nikola Tesla" Airport. The aim was to identify who was leaking information to pro-government media. A young man who recorded the session immediately forwarded the footage to a pro-government television station, which then falsely reported that the students were planning a terrorist attack.

This narrative was later spread by top government officials, including the Speaker of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić. After the video was aired on Informer, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade ordered the identification of the participants and the undertaking of other measures to determine whether the criminal offense of Endangering the Safety of Air Traffic (Article 291 of the Criminal Code), Calling for a Violent Change of the Constitutional Order (Article 309), or another offense prosecutable ex officio had been committed. A law student in Novi Sad was summoned for an interview at the Varvarin Police Department, due to a banner he carried at a civic gathering. The banner featured images of local officials who had attended the ruling party's rally in Belgrade. The students involved in the protests also reported the arrest of a former student from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering. The growing number of arrests suggests increasing pressure from the authorities on those who protest.

Freedom of Association

Detention was ordered for activists from Novi Sad

The High Court in Novi Sad ordered a one-month detention for six students who are currently not in the country, and who are suspected of the criminal offense of attacking the constitutional order of Serbia. A warrant has also been issued for them. As a reminder, five members of the Movement of Free Citizens and one activist of the Stav group were arrested on March 14, after their illegally wiretapped conversation was published in a pro-regime media. They are still in custody, and are suspected of a crime punishable by up to 5 years in prison. They are political prisoners and dealing with them is a dangerous step towards the collapse of the basic freedoms of citizens, but also towards the collapse of the basic principles of the judicial process. The defense attorneys' request to dismiss the illegal evidence against the tapped activists was also rejected. Their arrest and eventual verdict will be an indicator of the direction in which the authorities will treat political opponents in the future.

Arrest in New Belgrade

During a citizens' protest against the construction of a hotel next to residential buildings, a young man was detained. The police placed him in a patrol vehicle, but he exited through the other door shortly afterward. It remains unclear why the police were detaining peacefully gathered citizens in the first place.

Detained for chanting, but not those for beating

Members of the MUP detained two people for insulting the participants of the camp of supporters of the ruling party. However, the police did not arrest the men who walked from Kosovo to the rally in Belgrade and who beat the young man who was chanting at them. Sympathizers of the ruling party attacked both father and son who were shouting slogans in support of the students. The attackers returned to the bus that was going to the rally in Belgrade and the thugs were not arrested.