

# PREUGOVOR ALARM

## REPORT ON THE PROGRESS OF SERBIA IN CLUSTER 1

Jelena Pejić Nikić, ed.

Belgrade, May 2025

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PREUGOVOR



Ministero degli Affari Esteri  
e della Cooperazione Internazionale



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# About prEUgovor

The prEUgovor coalition (Eng. prEUUnup) is the first coalition of civil society organisations formed to monitor the implementation of policies relating to the accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU, with an emphasis on Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) of the acquis. It is comprised of seven civil society organisations with expertise in the thematic areas covered by the “Fundamentals” Cluster. The coalition was formed in 2013, with the mission of proposing measures to foster improvement in the fields relevant for the negotiation process. In doing so, the coalition aims to use the EU integration process to help accomplish substantial progress in the further democratisation of the Serbian society.



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The member organisations of prEUgovor are:

**Anti-trafficking Action (ASTRA)**

[www.astra.rs](http://www.astra.rs)

**Autonomous Women’s Centre (AWC)**

[www.womenngo.org.rs](http://www.womenngo.org.rs)

**Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP)**

[www.bezbednost.org](http://www.bezbednost.org)

**Centre for Applied European Studies (Sr. CPES)**

[www.cpes.org.rs](http://www.cpes.org.rs)

**Centre for Investigative Journalism (Sr. CINS)**

[www.cins.rs](http://www.cins.rs)

**Group 484**

[www.grupa484.org.rs](http://www.grupa484.org.rs)

**Transparency Serbia (TS)**

[www.transparentnost.org.rs](http://www.transparentnost.org.rs)

# On prEUgovor Alarm Report

The *prEUgovor Alarm Report on the Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1* is a regular, semi-annual shadow report jointly produced and published by the seven civil society organisations comprising the prEUgovor coalition. The Alarm reports have been the corner-stone of prEUgovor monitoring efforts ever since its inception, focusing on tracking the progress and performance of the Serbian Government on delivering rule of law related reforms. The prEUgovor Alarm reports focus primarily on the selected policy areas from the Political Criteria, Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Liberty, Security) of the accession process of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union, i.e. from Cluster 1 in the new enlargement methodology.

Alarm Reports monitor the extent to which the responsible authorities fulfil their obligations envisaged by the Action Plans for Chapters 23 and 24, as well as other complementary initiatives relevant for the rule of law (e.g. reporting to the UN and Council of Europe on specific conventions). In Alarms, prEUgovor members assess the extent of fulfilment of relevant recommendations, activities, and adherence to the timeframe, provide qualitative analysis of the legislative and policy initiatives and assess to what extent these provisions are aligned with the EU regulatory framework. The Alarm Reports neither cover all policy areas from the Political Criteria and Chapters 23 and 24 nor intend to serve as a comprehensive assessment of the Government's reform agenda. The Alarm Reports rather focus on key policies from the above-mentioned areas, those that correspond to the field of expertise of each member organisation and in which they possess relevant knowledge and experience. Moreover, the Alarm Reports tend to focus on the most salient policy issues at any given time, which is why their content and length may vary based on the reform priorities.

When writing Alarm Reports, prEUgovor coalition relies exclusively on publically available data relevant to the ongoing reform processes. This includes relevant legislation, bylaws, strategic documents, analyses and reports produced by state authorities and international organisations, media reports, official statements, etc. In addition, prEUgovor relies on findings of other civil society organisations, investigative journalists, testimonies and interviews of relevant stakeholders. Finally, prEUgovor members draw a significant amount of data from their everyday work and research they conduct, which is incorporated into the Alarm Reports and serves the purpose of enriching the findings and informing the debate. Each Alarm Report is drafted by several authors from each of the seven prEUgovor member organisations in a collaborative effort. Depending on the topicality and importance of other topics within cluster 1, the coalition seeks to engage external authors from other civil society organizations that have expertise in these topics.<sup>1</sup> Best practices are put in place regarding quality control, fact-checking, revising and editing the findings. However, if there are errors and omissions to be found, these are not due to the malintent of the authors but rather due to challenges in undertaking the work of this scope.

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<sup>1</sup> PrEUgovor is thankful to external experts for the following contributions in this Alarm Report: Sofija Mandić (Judiciary), Rade Đurić (Freedom of Expression and Media), Goran Sandić (Freedom of Assembly) and Vladica Ilić (Prevention of Torture).

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# List of Abbreviations

ADA	Austrian Development Agency
ANEM	Association of Independent Electronic Media
AP	Action Plan
AP 23	Action Plan for Chapter 23
AP 24	Action Plan for Chapter 24
APC	Asylum Protection Centre
ASM	Association of Serb Majority Municipalities
BIA	Security Information Agency of Serbia (srb. Bezbednosno-informativna agencija)
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
BPPO	Basic Public Prosecutor's Office
BVMN	Border Violence Monitoring Network
CC	Criminal Code
CEDAW	UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Area
CPC	Criminal Procedure Code
CPL	Civil Procedure Law
CPoTV	Centre for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking
CPWG	Child Protection Working Group
CPT	European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
CRM	Common Regional Market
CSO	civil society organisation
DRI	State Audit Institution (srb. Državna revizorska institucija)
EC	European Commission
EP	European Parliament
EPPO	European Public Prosecutor's Office
EULEX	European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FLA	free legal aid
FBI	US Federal Bureau of Investigation
FSB	Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation
GIZ	German Organisation for International Cooperation
GONGO	government-organised non-governmental organisation
GRECO	Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption
GRETA	Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking
GREVIO	Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence

HJC	High Judicial Council
HPC	High Prosecutorial Council
HPPO	Higher Public Prosecutor's Office
IBM	Integrated Border Management
ICD	implantable cardioverter defibrillator
ICS	Italian Consortium of Solidarity
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IPA	EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
IRMCT	International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals
KOMS	National Youth Council of Serbia
LAS	Law on Amendments and Supplements
LGBTIQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and other
LRAD	Long-Range Acoustic Device
LSG	local self-government
MCTI	Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure
MEP	member of the European Parliament
MoI	Ministry of Interior
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
MONEYVAL	Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (in the framework of the Council of Europe)
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCEU	National Convention on the European Union
NDNV	Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NIM	National Institutional Mechanism for Combating Human Trafficking
NPAA	National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis
NPM	National Preventive Mechanism (against torture)
NUNS	Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia
OB	Open Balkans
OBGYN	obstetrician and gynecologist
OCG	organised crime group
ODIHR	OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
OWCP	Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor
PA	police administration
PND	Movement for the People and the State (srb. Pokret za narod i državu)
PPO	Public Procurement Office
REM	Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media

RSF	Reporters without Borders (fr. Reporters sans frontières)
RTS	Public Broadcasting Service of Serbia
SCRM	Commissariat for Refugees and Migration
SEDM	South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministers
SLAPP	strategic lawsuits against public participation
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
SOP	standard operative procedure
TIP	Trafficking in Persons (State Department's Report)
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNS	Association of Journalists of Serbia
US	United States (of America)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VBA	Military Security Agency of Serbia (srb. Vojnobebednosna agencija)
WG	working group
YIHR	Youth Initiative for Human Rights

# Introduction with Summary

In the past six months (November 2024 – April 2025), much has changed and stirred in Serbia—but not the reforms tied to its EU integration. The collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy on 1 November 2024 revealed that the consequences of corruption, politicised institutions, and dysfunctional oversight can be fatal and anyone can fall victim. Citizens began to gather spontaneously to pay tribute to the victims and demand accountability. The authorities responded with the usual mechanisms of a captured state—denial of responsibility, distortion and concealment of facts, control over the media, blatant concentration of power and institutional abuse, both covert and overt pressure on the judiciary, a pompous and selective fight against corruption, escalating repression against protestors and all government critics, and the creation of parallel support structures to replace every social group that expressed dissent. Each of these actions only intensified public outrage, and the protests grew increasingly massive, spreading like wildfire across Serbia.

Citizens have seen through the mechanisms of state capture – which we have documented in previous Alarm reports – and have clearly risen in opposition. The protests have been led by university students in Serbia, who have been blocking their faculties since late 2024, demanding that institutions fulfill their duties.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent actions by officials and institutions only expanded the list of demands—none of which have been fully met. It took the prosecutor's office twenty days to make the first arrests related to the canopy collapse. Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned at the end of January, but the National Assembly took fifty days to acknowledge his resignation and only elected a new government in mid-April. The continuity of this new cabinet is evident in the fact that parts of the previous Prime Minister's exposé were repeated verbatim.

Nothing has changed in the government's approach to the reforms it committed to under the EU accession negotiations and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. Both the previous and the new government continue to promise full fulfilment of all benchmarks by the end of 2026, yet none of their actions justify such optimism—quite the opposite.

Although the European Commission and the Serbian government focused on implementing the priority measures from the Reform Agenda adopted in October 2024,<sup>2</sup> even this process faced significant delays. By the end of April, very little had been done in the "Fundamentals" cluster—and what was done was largely inadequate.<sup>3</sup> Civil society expressed dissatisfaction with the action plans on anti-corruption and gender-based violence. Disappointed, representatives of the opposition and relevant organisations withdrew from the Working Group on Electoral Reform.

While most measures in the Reform Agenda require civil society participation, many associations have suspended cooperation with authorities since February. The selection process for members of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) Council revealed the futility of a simulated process, prompting independent nominees to withdraw. Under pressure from students who physically blocked the building of Radio Television of Serbia in April, the relevant parliamentary committee eventually annulled the process and re-launched the call. Of all the measures with deadlines set for the end of 2024, only the introduction of visas for four countries was actually implemented.<sup>4</sup>

Pro-European citizens in Serbia were frustrated by the delayed and mild response of European Union representatives to developments in the country.<sup>5</sup> During visits to Belgrade in April and May 2025, EU officials began to more clearly align the demands of Serbian students and citizens with the core values of the EU—namely, respect for the rule of law, democracy, separation of powers, fundamental rights and freedoms, and the fight against corruption. The European Parliament's report presented the country's

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1 Their demands include the publication of all documentation related to the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station, the prosecution of those who attacked students and teachers during the protests, the dismissal of criminal charges against students arrested at demonstrations, and an increase in the budget for higher education.

2 Coalition prEUgovor, "Insufficient Measures and Postponed Deadlines for Selected Burning Issues", 14/10/2024.

3 Coalition prEUgovor, "Implementing Serbia's Reform Agenda in 3D: Delayed, Deficient and Disputable", 07/02/2025.

4 Coalition prEUgovor, "Serbia's Alignment with the EU Visa Policy" (infographic), 04/03/2025.

5 Jelena Pejić Nikić, "Pismo Marte Kos neblagovremeno i blago", 05/02/2025.

critical situation skillfully, concisely, and comprehensively.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, students brought their demands to Strasbourg and Brussels. The coalition calls on EU institutions and officials to improve communication with Serbian citizens, deliver consistent messages, and respond more decisively to alarming developments and the lack of reforms in the country.

## POLITICAL CRITERIA

Amid ongoing mass protests demanding accountable governance, Serbia's ruling party has proposed national elections without addressing longstanding electoral irregularities that favour their continued dominance. Efforts to improve **electoral conditions** through a multi-stakeholder process under ODIHR's guidance were undermined by the ruling majority's resistance to meaningful reform. The Working Group on electoral reform failed to reach consensus, especially on the composition of the Voter Registry Commission, prompting the opposition and civil society to withdraw. Despite two competing proposals, the ruling party pushed its version through limited public consultations. In parallel, President Vučić launched the Movement for the People and the State, further conflating state and party roles. While the opposition proposed a transitional government to oversee elections, and the EU demanded reform, local elections were called in Zaječar and Kosjerić, with some opposition parties choosing to participate despite the lack of progress.

Over the past six months, Serbia's **Parliament** has become a hollow institution, serving primarily as an administrative tool for the ruling coalition. Despite appearing active, its work lacks substance and credibility. Following the fatal collapse of a train station canopy in November 2024, which sparked nationwide protests, the Parliament convened only twice—failing to address the crisis. Instead, it conducted debates on dozens of unrelated items, further misusing procedures. It took over a month to acknowledge the Prime Minister's resignation, and opposition efforts to prompt action led to chaos, including a violent brawl. Nonetheless, the ruling majority used these sessions to pass the 2025 budget. The Parliament failed to conduct effective oversight of the security sector and to complete the process of electing new members of the REM Council. A new government was elected during a session boycotted by parts of the opposition, continuing the trend of formal compliance masking procedural manipulation and democratic erosion.

Threats and pressures against civil society in Serbia significantly increased during the reporting period. Although Serbian students emerged as the leading collective force in this latest wave of civic unrest, civil society organisations were also actively involved in protesting corruption and criticising the Serbian authorities' malpractice. In response, the government intensified its crackdown on **civil society** through physical attacks on protesters and independent journalists, arrests and criminal charges against activists, cyber-attacks, intrusive financial inspections and smear campaigns.

During the reporting period, there was both stagnation and deterioration of Serbia's **regional relations**. A part of this trend is attributable to the official responses to ongoing student and civic protests, including denial of entry into the country and expulsion of foreign nationals due to alleged "unacceptable security risk". There has been no tangible progress in the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Priština, due to which the Serbian community in Kosovo suffers the most, although its representatives have participated in parliamentary elections. Serbia remains an important factor in the liberalisation of economic relations in the region, with ongoing emphasis on the development of the Common Regional Market.

## CHAPTER 23

The collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy on 1 November 2024 triggered mass student and citizen protests, exposing deep flaws in Serbia's justice system—particularly political interference and selective law enforcement. Protesters demanded that the prosecutor's office act lawfully in both the canopy case and attacks on demonstrators. The protests persist due to ongoing judicial inaction and increased state repression. Public prosecutors and judges repeatedly reacted to frequent and open

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6 European Parliament, [REPORT on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Serbia \(2025/2022\(INI\)\)](#), 15/04/2025.

pressure of public officials on the **judiciary**, most of all that of the President of the Republic. Meanwhile, judicial councils have failed to meet transparency standards despite constitutional reforms. Although further public debates on criminal legislation and the Judicial Academy were promised for 2025, no progress had been made by the end of April.

Serbia's **anti-corruption** efforts remain largely superficial, hindered by weak political will, institutional passivity, and selective law enforcement. While a new Anti-Corruption Strategy and Action Plan were adopted, their limited scope, lack of promotion, and exclusion of civil society suggest a performative approach. Corruption has become citizens' top concern, yet high-level promises remain unfulfilled, and key GRECO recommendations on accountability remain largely ignored. The attempt to amend the Law on Access to Information has raised concerns. Although some improvements in public procurement are noted, major issues persist—especially in infrastructure projects, where legal loopholes and non-transparent practices continue. The fatal collapse of the Novi Sad station canopy highlighted these failures, yet the government has not taken steps to improve transparency or competitiveness in future projects.

Severe threats to **freedom of expression and media** in Serbia intensified in parallel to mass protests triggered by the fatal collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy. Students, supported by citizens and independent journalists, exposed government manipulation and media cover-ups through public protests and blockades. In response, authorities escalated their attacks on journalists and students, labelling them as traitors. Media organisations rallied in support of the protests and suspended cooperation with the state due to its refusal to meet student demands and growing repression. In 2024, there was a record number of media lawsuits containing elements of SLAPP. The regime has been caught cheating the procedure for the election of new members of the REM Council. The implementation of the new media laws, rather than strengthening independent public interest media, disrupted co-financing mechanisms and effectively compelled national, provincial, and local authorities to find alternative ways to continue funding pro-government outlets at previous levels.

Between November 2024 and April 2025, Serbia saw an unprecedented wave of peaceful student-led protests sparked by the Novi Sad station tragedy, evolving into a mass civic movement against systemic corruption and democratic decline, culminating in a 300,000-strong rally in Belgrade. Serbian authorities resorted to ambivalent and often antagonistic responses, marked by stigmatisation of demonstrators as foreign-backed actors and inadequate protection of peaceful assemblies. Documented cases of violent third-party attacks, state harassment, and allegations of excessive force – including the suspected deployment of sonic weapons – highlighted significant shortcomings in Serbia's adherence to international and domestic obligations to safeguard the **right to peaceful assembly**.

As in previous periods, this reporting cycle was marked by numerous serious cases of police **torture and ill-treatment**, with continued impunity for perpetrators and no progress in legal or practical safeguards. While harmful changes to the Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code were ultimately avoided, investigations into reported abuses remain slow, superficial, opaque, and unlikely to result in accountability.

The principle of **non-discrimination** cannot be upheld amid ongoing selective repression targeting all critics of the government, from students and activists to journalists and minorities. Official reports for 2024 focus on planned activities rather than real outcomes. Ambitious deadlines in Serbia's Reform Agenda proved unrealistic, with no major systemic progress on **gender equality**. The Law on Gender Equality remains suspended, and the 2025 Action Plan for the Gender Equality Strategy was only adopted in February. Despite promotional efforts, the minister responsible for gender issues shows no measurable impact. The new Prime Minister omitted gender equality in his exposé, framing women's rights in patriarchal terms, and ignored harassment allegations against the Education Minister. The state's inadequate response to **gender-based violence**—marked by reduced reporting, ineffective protection, lack of institutional trust, and underfunded women's services—raises serious concerns, especially as key policies lack transparency and participation.

Overall progress is limited in regard to the **rights of the child**. Reforms are heavily reliant on foreign funding and lacking visible impact, and even normative measures remain unfulfilled. The authorities had to be reminded of children's rights to free expression and peaceful assembly, and the state's duty

to ensure a safe environment. Peer violence in schools persists. There is also no adequate support for child witnesses and victims of domestic violence.

The Action Plan for implementing the **Personal Data Protection** Strategy was adopted in March, and efforts to improve the law began. During 2024, the practice of the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection intensified, and its capacities were enhanced, although the issue of excessive acting positions persists. The Commissioner did not respond decisively to the intensified smear campaigns misusing personal data of activists and protestors, nor to the reports of unlawful surveillance by Serbia's security agencies.

## CHAPTER 24

In regard to **police reform**, the status of the third draft of the Law on Internal Affairs remains unclear, while just before the 15 March protest, the government amended regulations on specialised police units. Dragan Vasiljević was appointed Police Director through a non-transparent process. During recent protests, police showed a lack of autonomy, with incidents of brutality—particularly in Novi Sad—and the alleged use of illegal weapons in Belgrade. Misconduct by officers was widespread, and police professionals who supported protesters faced persecution. International reports also highlighted police involvement in spyware use against activists, further undermining public trust.

During the reporting period, migrant arrivals in Serbia declined, yet smuggling networks grew more violent, with reports of abductions, extortion, and large-scale smuggling. Pushbacks at northern borders, often violent, remain a major concern, as most migrants avoid the **asylum** system. Civil society calls for independent border monitoring and early identification mechanisms to protect vulnerable groups. Labour **migration** is rising, but legal protections for foreign workers—particularly those employed by international companies—remain weak, highlighting the need for a more coordinated, rights-based approach to migration governance.

In the observed period, first-instance verdicts were issued in two major organised crime cases, with Sky ECC encrypted messages emerging as key evidence in several trials. However, Serbian courts lack a consistent stance on the admissibility of such evidence. The reliance on externally provided evidence raises concerns about the independence and capacity of domestic investigators. Consequently, the fight against organised crime appears superficial and unstrategic, as reflected in the handling of high-profile cases like the "Balkan Cartel," "Darko Šarić," "Belivuk clan," and "Jovanjica."

The Law on the Suppression and Prevention of Human Trafficking and Victims Protection has been drafted with civil society's participation. While the draft represents a key opportunity to enhance victim protection, it is still pending extensive consultations, with its eventual impact uncertain due to weak coordination, limited resources, and institutional shortcomings. Despite a rise in identified victims—71 cases in 2024, the highest in six years—the Mol's performance is stagnating, with fewer filed criminal charges and fewer identified perpetrators. Broader systemic issues persist, including rising victim numbers, institutional incapacity, and insufficient prevention and support measures.

In the reporting period, it has become clear that far-right extremists serve as a significant militant core of the ruling party in Serbia. A new far-right party has united known extremists and criminals to oppose the massive student protests sparked by a deadly incident in Novi Sad. Another group, the "loyalists," stands as a secret, paramilitary-like pro-Russian faction that is loyal to the President and continues to operate unchecked. Despite the presence of armed hooligans and criminals camped outside the Presidency, no decisive action has been taken against them by either police or prosecution. Meanwhile, the government's long-overdue Strategy for Preventing and Combating Terrorism remains hidden from public view, preventing both experts and the wider community from providing any meaningful input.



# 1. DEMOCRACY

## 1.1. Elections

*As mass protests reflecting public demand for accountable governance and functional institutions are under way, the political establishment has floated the idea of holding national elections. However, these elections would take place under the same deeply flawed conditions that have long secured the ruling party's disproportionate advantage, effectively insulating them from genuine electoral competition. Opportunity to improve electoral conditions in a consultative multi-stakeholder process under the scrutiny and guidance of ODIHR was hampered by the ruling majority's approach to "bargaining" on legislative reforms, while not taking practical steps that would help to recover seriously undermined trust of the opposition and the civil society.*

*Over the past six months, the Working Group for improvement of the electoral process convened only to discuss proposed amendments to the Law on the Unified Electoral Roll, as the opposition required progress in that area as a precondition for future work. However, it was not possible to reach a consensus, in particular when it comes to the composition of the Voter Registry Commission and its mandate, which was followed by the withdrawal of opposition deputies from the Working Group. Despite receiving two alternative draft proposals, each supported by approximately half of the members in December 2024, the authorised parliamentary Committee chose to promote the new proposal submitted by the deputy of the ruling majority. This version was then presented in a series of public debates that were hastily scheduled and inadequately publicised, effectively preventing meaningful participation of relevant stakeholders. These developments prompted the withdrawal of all three civil society representatives, including the chairman from Transparency Serbia, at the beginning of February 2025.*

*Amid the stalled process of electoral reform, President Vučić took steps towards the establishment of the Movement for the People and the State – two years after first announcing it – and launched a three-day promotional event in Belgrade, further deepening the blurring of lines between the state and party politics. Opposition formally proposed to entrust a "transitional government" with the task of dealing with electoral conditions, while EU authorities requested progress in that area from Serbian authorities. In early April, Speaker of the National Assembly called for local elections in cities of Zaječar and Kosjerić, where some opposition parties announced their participation even if there was to be no progress in electoral conditions.*

### 1.1.1. Wasted Momentum: How Political Opportunism Sabotaged Serbia's Electoral Reform

The Working Group for improvement of the electoral process was established in April 2024, in response to recurring criticisms from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) election observation missions regarding the integrity of Serbia's electoral process. However, the actual process revealed some systemic flaws: lack of procedural guarantees, absence of political will, and a superficial commitment to democratic standards. The Working Group's primary activity in November and December 2024 was the discussion of the draft amendments to the Law on Unified Electoral Roll, as this is considered as one of the lengthiest reform processes to be implemented under election reform. The discussion revolved around two competing legislative proposals, which were improved over time. One was presented by CSO CRTA and its representative Pavle Dimitrijević (proposed originally in May 2024), and the other by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its deputy Uglješa Mrdić. The latter was actually a mostly modified and weakened CRTA's proposal. While both purported to fulfil ODIHR recommendations, their fundamental differences revealed competing visions of electoral governance.

Key contentious issues included the following:

- **Mandate of the Electoral Roll Revision Commission:** CRTA advocated for a permanent body with robust oversight powers, whereas SNS proposed a more limited and potentially time-bound structure – raising fears of insufficient continuity, i.e. being dissolved before the audit is successfully completed.
- **Commission Composition and Appointment Mechanisms:** CRTA's model aimed for a fully balanced composition between majority, opposition and civil society nominees. SNS's version tilted representation heavily toward the parliamentary majority.
- **Decision-making Procedures:** CRTA's draft called for a qualified two-thirds majority for Commission decisions, reflecting the need for a broad consensus. In contrast, SNS's proposal relied on simple majorities, effectively allowing the dominant bloc to overrule minority voices.

Despite extensive discussions and multiple revisions in the attempt to harmonise these two drafts and address most of ODIHR comments, neither proposal secured the two-thirds vote required for adoption by the Working Group. Both were submitted to the authorised parliamentary committee – Committee on Constitutional and Legislative Affairs, which was supposed to organise further public consultations on both proposals received from the Working Group.<sup>7</sup> Most serious obstacle for the effectiveness of the Working group was the fact that the ruling party representative was not authorised to modify the proposal he had officially put into procedure on the spot. Rather, several attempts to harmonise proposals were organised outside the WG sessions.

Although not formally dissolved, the Working Group has not been operating since February and has not convened in 2025. Withdrawal of five opposition representatives<sup>8</sup> came as a consequence of failure to promote the Law on Unified Electoral Roll based on CRTA proposal, required by them as a minimum for further work. Soon after, CRTA withdrew as part of a broader CSO response to the actions of the Government. Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition), whose representative Nemanja Nenadić also chaired the Working Group, withdrew due to violation of the procedure by the parliamentary committee. A few days later, the remaining CSO, CESID, did the same. In a formal letter to the Working Group, the opposition expressed dissatisfaction with the Group's work, stating that after ten months, no progress has been made and not a single proposal to improve electoral conditions has been agreed upon. The document further notes that the SNS has not accepted even the minimal conditions for regulating the voter registry and continues to abuse procedures, attempting to hastily organise a public hearing on the Voter Registry Law at a time when citizens are protesting *en masse* throughout Serbia. In a detailed letter dated 3 February 2025, TS catalogued a series of procedural violations committed by the National Assembly's Committee on Constitutional and Legislative Issues.

Transparency Serbia cited several alarming breaches of the procedure established by the very same Committee in May 2024:

- **Lack of a public call for written comments prior to the scheduled public debates** – undermining inclusive consultation.
- **Misrepresentation of documents:** One legislative draft, not vetted by the Working Group, was included in the debate and falsely presented as a Working Group product.
- **Failure to ensure procedural transparency:** Despite multiple warnings from the Chair of the Working Group, the Committee ignored the internal rules it had established itself, compromising the integrity of the reform process.

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<sup>7</sup> [Decision on amendments and supplements to the decision on the establishment of a working group for the improvement of the electoral process](#), National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, 21/6/2024

<sup>8</sup> [The opposition left the Working Group for the Improvement of the Electoral Process](#), Danas, 25/1/2025

Beyond these concrete violations, TS raised concerns about reputational damage. Participation in such a compromised process, it argued, risked legitimising a pseudo-democratic exercise while eroding public trust in civil society actors.

## Public Hearings – Simulacrum of Participation

After the failed vote and procedural breakdown, the Committee proceeded with a series of public debates in Belgrade, Kragujevac, Novi Sad and Niš. While the geographic dispersion was intended to simulate democratic outreach, the events were hastily scheduled, poorly publicised, and in some cases rescheduled at the last minute. These logistical issues discouraged meaningful participation and further diluted the legitimacy of the process. After the initial public hearing in Belgrade, CRTA representative no longer participated in these events, whereas SNS representative presented their amended proposal from January 2025. ODIHR provided an official opinion about that draft as well, pointing to several weak points, but also commenting on the consultative process.<sup>9</sup>

It is currently unclear what might be the ultimate goal of this simulacrum of participative process. Even if current SNS draft is adopted by the Parliament, in the existing or slightly amended version, there is no sign whatsoever that either parliamentary opposition or CSOs will be eager to participate in the further process and nominate candidates for the commission that will review the Unified Electoral Roll. On the other hand, Serbia's commitment, as outlined in the Reform Agenda and in line with ODIHR recommendations, is to fully implement an audit of the voter register, rather than simply adopting legislative changes to enable it.

## A Reform in Name Only

The Working Group's work is a textbook case of how formal democratic procedures can be hollowed out by political calculations. Despite numerous meetings, revised drafts and expert inputs, the outcome was a deadlock and a public disillusionment. The very conditions that led to its formation – widespread distrust in the electoral process – were exacerbated by its failure.

The Working Group's activities, as documented, reveal a troubling pattern:

- Reforms are framed within a narrow political context, dominated by ruling-party calculations on what is "acceptable" from the perspective of political interest. On the other hand, government did not take any practical steps toward improving electoral conditions, where no legislative intervention was needed.
- Guarantees of due process were selectively implemented or/and violated.
- Expert input from ODIHR was acknowledged, but only partially adopted.
- Civil society engagement, while initially welcomed, was extremely hindered by the lack of initiative of other stakeholders and lack of trust among them.

Moreover, the ongoing failure to implement ODIHR's long-standing recommendations, despite repeated electoral cycles and numerous observation missions, raises serious concerns about democratic backsliding and the electoral integrity in Serbia.

The symbolic inclusion of actors from CSOs provided a veneer of legitimacy, but the process was evidently not designed to yield effects. Instead of fostering inclusive governance, it confirmed fears of performative democracy, i.e. institutions that are only mimicking participatory reform. From its inception, the Working Group suffered from the fundamental contradiction of being a politically constituted body with a technical mandate. Its composition – partisan appointees from ruling and opposition parties, along with civil society representatives – reflected a façade of pluralism, but one that functioned within rigid political boundaries.

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9 [Opinion on Draft law on amendments to the law on the unified voter register](#), ODIHR, 28/3/2025

Instead of nurturing consensus, this structure incentivised zero-sum bargaining. The very design of the group prevented genuine deliberation and privileged institutional control over participatory reform.

Among others, the main problems were shown by the fact that key ruling party decision makers were not part of the formal process, and that the ruling party failed to clearly recognise problems and provide their proposals for addressing ODIHR recommendations, but rather presented their proposals as “concessions” to the opposition or the international community. Furthermore, only some of the opposition parties participated in the process, which made their position additionally vulnerable after their poor success in June 2024 local elections.

### **1.1.2. Unresolved Issues Ahead of Local Elections in Zaječar and Kosjerić**

As the official campaign period begins in Zaječar and Kosjerić,<sup>10</sup> Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition) is raising red flags about ongoing issues that continue to undermine the fairness of elections.<sup>11</sup> Local and national officials are still free to use public resources in ways that can tilt the playing field in their favour. From promoting social programmes to putting up billboards that showcase government achievements, public officials are able to present themselves in a favourable light, often under the guise of performing official duties. These activities are legal under the current rules, but they blur the line between the state and political campaigning.

Back in the 2021 elections, ministerial visits to Zaječar and Kosjerić increased significantly during the campaign – nearly 38 times more than usual. ODIHR’s main recommendation following the June 2024 local elections was to introduce measures ensuring a clear separation between the state and political parties, and to safeguard the neutrality of the public administration during the campaign period.<sup>12</sup> So far, those recommendations have been largely ignored.

Another concern are the strikingly low campaign budgets available to candidates: just over RSD 1,2 million in Zaječar and 350,000 in Kosjerić. If the number of electoral lists remains the same as in 2021, the list submitters in Zaječar would each receive around RSD 57,000 (approximately EUR 500) before the elections, while in Kosjerić the amount would be approximately RSD 28,000 (approximately EUR 250) per list.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to ODIHR recommendations, campaign spending is not subject to any legal limits. Since it represents the dominant primary source of income for all election participants, limited funding from the budget only increases the advantage of incumbents who can rely on state resources to amplify their message.

The fact that no new legal constraints have been introduced does not absolve ruling parties and officials from the responsibility to change course. On the contrary, their conduct in the upcoming campaign will serve as a key test of whether there is any real commitment to improving conditions for future elections and, ultimately, to addressing ODIHR’s recommendations.

### **1.1.3. A New Political Movement amidst Deepening State-Party Entanglement in Serbia**

Formally convening a 12-member Initiating Committee, President of the Republic Aleksandar Vučić launched the Movement for the People and the State (Pokret za narod i državu – PND) In March 2025. This launch marked the culmination of a two-year delay following his initial announcement on 8 March 2023, when he, as the then President of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), introduced the idea of establishing the People’s Movement for the State ahead of the December 2023 snap elections.<sup>14</sup> Vučić

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10 [Brnabić announced elections for councilors in Zaječar and Kosjerić for June 8](#), N1, 13/4/2025

11 [Press Release: What’s still unresolved before the elections in Zaječar and Kosjerić](#), Transparency Serbia, 14/4/2025

12 [ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report](#), 2/6/2024

13 The remaining public funding is allocated post-election, based on electoral performance.

14 [Serbia: Vučić’s People’s Movement for the State – What Can Be Expected](#), BBC, 11/3/2023

emphasised that the SNS would not be dissolved, framing the new entity as a “supra-party movement” intended to transcend partisan lines. However, from the outset, the movement appeared closely aligned with existing SNS structures.

Promotional events held throughout 2023 in Vranje, Sremska Mitrovica, Kraljevo, Sokobanja, and Pančevo prominently featured Vučić, raising concerns about the use of public resources for political campaigning.<sup>15</sup> Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition) responded to these developments by submitting a formal initiative to the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption on 14 March 2023.<sup>16</sup> The organisation questioned whether Vučić had violated the Law on the Prevention of Corruption, particularly by allegedly using public functions and resources for partisan purposes. The ambiguity surrounding the organiser of these promotional events, often perceived by the public as state-sponsored, only intensified scrutiny. Although these events were publicly promoted as civic gatherings, Transparency Serbia’s analysis revealed they were in fact organised by the SNS.

With a follow-up inquiry on 10 July 2023, TS sought clarification on whether the Agency had acted upon its initiative submitted in March 2023, as it had received no answer.<sup>17</sup> This inquiry, too, remained unanswered.

The movement’s formal establishment has been repeatedly delayed. While originally expected on Vidovdan (28 June) 2023, Vučić postponed the launch to September 2023. Statements by President of the Executive Committee of SNS, Darko Glišić, suggested that the movement would be founded by early autumn.<sup>18</sup> Yet, there was no mention of it at the SNS Main Board session in October 2023, which further contributed to uncertainty surrounding its structure and purpose. The movement was finally registered and launched on 28 March 2025,<sup>19</sup> exactly two years after it was announced.

Reactions to the movement have been mixed. Proponents regard it as a potential tool for revitalising Serbia’s political landscape and engaging citizens beyond rigid party affiliations. However, others view it as a strategic manoeuvre by the ruling elite to retain power under a new label, rather than a genuine democratic innovation. Transparency Serbia (member of the coalition PrEUgovor) believes that PND is nothing but a repackaging of SNS influence, using movement branding to deflect criticism and avoid accountability. Promotional events and public appearances by Vučić blurred the line between state and party roles, consistent with long-standing patterns of state-party entanglement in Serbia. TS also criticises the opaque legal status of the movement and its ambiguous financial and organisational structure, noting the absence of a clear institutional form – association, party, or coalition – that further shields it from scrutiny.<sup>20</sup>

In early 2025, the political climate further deteriorated ahead of the so-called “All-Serbian Patriotic Gathering” (11–13 April).<sup>21</sup> Despite being portrayed as a supra-party event, its organiser remained undisclosed.<sup>22</sup> President Vučić issued personal invitations in the name of the new movement, yet no formal information about PND’s operations – such as a website or public registry – was available. The Centre for Social Stability, a civil association acting as a GONGO,<sup>23</sup> handled much of the promotion, while government officials selectively used public channels, which led to blurred accountability. Moreover, the participation of state-owned companies such as Poštanska štedionica (a state-owned bank) and various local governments raised concerns about potential misuse of public funds and resources.

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15 [FOI Request](#), Transparency Serbia, 20/1/2025

16 [Initiative for actions within the authority of the Anti-Corruption Agency \(Law on the Prevention of Corruption and the Law on Financing Political Activities\) and informing the public about the findings](#), Transparency Serbia, 14/3/2023.

17 [Initiative for actions within the authority of the Anti-Corruption Agency \(Law on the Prevention of Corruption and the Law on Financing Political Activities\) and informing the public about the findings](#), Transparency Serbia, 10/7/2023

18 [Glišić on the People’s Movement for the State: Intense discussions are ongoing, SNS will certainly be part of it](#), Danas, 29/7/2023

19 [“Goal: raising awareness about the importance of the state – The Movement for the People and the State registered in the APR”](#), Blic, 1/4/2025

20 [Episode: “The People’s Movement”](#), Transparency Serbia, 24/3/2025

21 [A nationwide gathering is scheduled on the plateau in front of the National Assembly](#), Politika, 27/3/2025

22 [Initiative and request for access to information of public importance](#), Transparency Serbia, 8/4/2025

23 Government-organised non-governmental organisation.

Allegations of pressure on public employees to attend the rally mirrored earlier episodes, including the 2023 “Serbia of Hope” event, where the costs were never properly accounted for in SNS financial disclosures. The Agency for the Prevention of Corruption has still not finalised its review of the party’s 2023 financial reports, despite the fact that the statutory deadline expired in February,<sup>24</sup> highlighting persistent regulatory inaction.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Without delay, the Government and the National Assembly should take all necessary measures to improve the Law on the Financing of Political Activities and the Law on the Prevention of Corruption by addressing all ODIHR and CSO recommendations in a consultative process.
- The decisions of the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption on the rejection of charges during the campaign must be subject to control, and the Agency itself should have a legal obligation to control the legality of the actions of parties, officials and other persons during the campaign *ex officio*.
- The Prosecutor’s Office should act proactively at the beginning of the election campaign; it should educate the public about criminal offences related to elections, vote buying and illegal campaign financing and inform them about open channels for reporting abuses.
- The Prosecutor’s Office should investigate all suspicions related to the 2023 and 2024 election campaigns, related to vote buying and illegal campaign financing, regardless of whether there were criminal charges or only allegations in the media or on social networks, and inform the public about the handling of the filed and *ex officio* criminal charges.
- The space for public officials’ campaigning should be reduced by amending Article 50 of the Law on Prevention of Corruption, i.e. by restricting the promotional activities of officials in their official capacity during the entire duration of the campaign.
- In order to prevent abuse of public resources for the purpose of gaining voters’ affection in the form of hidden/indirect vote buying, all extraordinary money dispersing and social benefits should be prohibited (with strictly regulated allowed exceptions). This should include waivers and write-offs of debts and hiring in the public sector (with strictly regulated possible exceptions);
- The Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government should publish statistical data on the change of residence of persons, in a way that would enable analysis and identification of possible manipulations with voters’ migration;
- The Criminal Code should be amended to cover all known forms/modalities of vote buying identified in practice. It should also be aligned with election legislation. Prosecutor’s offices in charge of suppression of corruption should have jurisdiction over unlawful campaign financing;
- The system of distribution of budget funds for the campaign should be revised to allow distribution in the early stage of campaign, with individual amount per campaign participant not related to the total and final number of participants, as prescribed in the current rules;
- Misuse of public resources via websites and social media accounts of ministries, other institutions and state organs for positive or negative promotion of political options should be tightly regulated;
- Reports on campaign financing should be published on the website the Agency for Prevention of Corruption, in a user friendly and searchable form;
- The form for submitting reports on campaign financing should be improved so as to explicitly cover new types of promotion (such as social networks, web platforms etc.).

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24 [FOI response](#), Agency for Prevention of Corruption, 27/1/2025



## 1.2. The Work of the Parliament

*The functioning of the Serbian Parliament over the past six months reflects a systematic hollowing out of its democratic role. Although it appears procedurally active, the Assembly lacks substance, inclusiveness and credibility. The institution has become an administrative arm of the ruling coalition.*

*Amid protests that erupted across Serbia following the tragic collapse of the newly renovated train station canopy on 1 November 2024, which claimed 16 lives, the Parliament met only twice. Neither session addressed the ongoing crisis. Instead, dominated by the ruling majority's deputies, the Parliament engaged in a cognate debate on 68 and 70 mostly unrelated agenda items. This reflects the continuation of the abuse of parliamentary procedures, further undermining the significance of the institution and raising the bar for the sheer number of "discussed" items. It took the Parliament a month and a half to formally acknowledge the resignation of the Prime Minister and the Government, as demanded by protesters. The opposition's attempts to force the Parliament to confront the reality led to chaos – a mass brawl involving stun grenades and flares, which left several persons injured. Despite this, the Speaker continued the session, ignoring the procedural obligation to call for a break. However, these two overloaded sessions were enough to push the 2025 budget through.*

*Following the regular sitting, a new extraordinary session was initiated by the urgent need to elect a new Government. This session, held in a reduced composition as two opposition parliamentary groups refused to participate, seemingly went smoothly. Despite the formal proceedings, there is still no meaningful change in parliamentary practice. The Assembly continues to simulate adherence to basic regulations meant to uphold its image of the highest representative body, but in reality, these norms are increasingly manipulated in creative ways to give the ruling majority an unfair advantage.*

In the last six months, the National Assembly of Serbia has shown deepening signs of institutional deterioration. The Parliament held only two regular plenary sessions in this period, which is an alarmingly low number for a national legislative body. The practice of bundling numerous laws into joint sessions persists, and is now normalised as the default mode of legislative work. This procedural shortcut limits the deputies' ability to engage in detailed discussions and amendments. Instead of enhancing legislative efficiency, it has become a tool to suppress opposition and avoid uncomfortable topics. Many of the adopted laws were presented with minimal explanation, debated under constrained timeframes, and passed without any substantial deliberation.

At the time when Serbian citizens took to the streets in unprecedented numbers, the Parliament remained largely silent. The civic protests, which addressed concerns about violence, corruption and democratic governance, were not debated in plenary. Aside from a few closed-door committee meetings, the institution failed to engage with or acknowledge the demands of the protestors. This silence shows a disconnection between the elected representatives and their constituents, undermining Parliament's legitimacy and democratic function. Furthermore, both its inactivity and the sudden influx of draft laws in just two sessions may be an attempt by the ruling majority to silence any discussion of the protests and their demands.

Despite frequent incidents of verbal abuse, physical altercations, and persistent violations of parliamentary procedures, the Deputies' Code of Conduct, adopted in December 2020, was never referenced during plenary sessions. This glaring omission reflects the institution's unwillingness to enforce basic standards of behaviour. Adding to the opacity, the Code itself is no longer promoted on the main page of the National Assembly website, further undermining transparency and accountability in legislative conduct. Violations of the Code were not discussed by the relevant Committee since September 2021.

The Parliament continues to neglect its obligation to review and debate the annual reports of independent state bodies, effectively sidelining institutions tasked with oversight and accountability. Without parliamentary engagement or political backing, these bodies are left without any mechanisms to influence the executive or ensure the implementation of their recommendations, which makes their work largely symbolic.

## 1.2.1. Two Highly Controversial Parliamentary Sessions

The broader political environment has been marked by growing tensions, mistrust, and dissatisfaction with democratic institutions. Instead of acting as a venue for political dialogue and compromise, the Parliament has become a source of further division. The refusal to address protest demands, discuss institutional reforms, or ensure political accountability demonstrates a slide toward authoritarian governance. The use of procedural tools to silence dissent and avoid scrutiny is emblematic of a legislature that no longer functions as the supervisor of the executive power.

### 25 November 2024 Session: Procedural Efficiency at the Cost of Deliberation

The November session, although formally dense in terms of agenda items, was devoid of genuine legislative debate. The budget for 2025 and dozens of related and unrelated laws were discussed and passed in a fast-tracked manner. The agenda featured 68 items. Almost all proposals to amend the agenda, submitted by the opposition, were rejected. Among these proposals was the “Proposal for a decision to establish a commission of inquiry to determine the facts, circumstances and responsibility regarding the death of 15 people due to the collapse of a canopy at the Novi Sad railway station on 1 November 2024”.<sup>25</sup>

Joint discussions covered laws on pensions, healthcare, taxation, energy and more, all handled without distinct debates. As is now becoming a steady practice, the Speaker proposed and the deputies of the ruling majority voted for a cognate debate on all agenda points. However, the planned debate never took place, as members of the Parliament and several ministers became involved in a physical altercation. Security intervened to separate them, but the conflict continued as a group of deputies fought over an offensive banner that female deputies from the majority party had displayed on the Assembly balcony. In response, the Speaker, Ana Brnabić, muted the audio feed so the Serbian public could not hear what was happening inside the chamber. She then called for a recess, gave a public statement, and returned to the plenary hall. Surrounded by heavy security and a few opposition deputies, Brnabić swiftly went through the agenda, reading out all 68 items, including the 2025 state budget, as part of a cognate debate. She listed all the proposed laws, asked if anyone wished to speak, delivered a political speech.<sup>26</sup> closed the discussion, and left her seat – all in a matter of minutes.<sup>27</sup>

The Speaker closing discussions without any deputies speaking on multiple points showed how procedural formalities are exploited to bypass substantive debate. The resignation of two ministers was acknowledged, but the broader implications of these resignations for government policy were ignored. The session was concluded within half a day. Two days later the Parliament proceeded with the vote without the presence of the opposition, which did not hinder its work as the ruling majority holds an absolute majority and can make decisions independently. Following this session, the opposition deputies (from the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP) and Serbia Centre (Srce)) filed a criminal complaint against the Speaker, Ana Brnabić, for alleged abuse of official position and the criminal offence of negligent work in office by failing to put the legitimate request for the dismissal of the Government of Serbia on the agenda. They accused Brnabić of serious procedural violations during the last parliamentary session, notably the adoption of the state budget and several key laws without any debate. Opposition deputies claimed that they requested to speak but were ignored, while Brnabić publicly stated that no one had asked to be given the floor.<sup>28</sup>

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25 Parliamentary Weekly, Crta, 30/11/2024

26 [After the criminal complaint, the opposition is also calling for the dismissal of Ana Brnabić from the position of President of the National Assembly of Serbia](#), Danas, 3/12/2024

27 [The session of the Assembly was marked by a fight, vuvuzelas, and a lack of debate](#), N1, 25/11/2024

28 [After the criminal complaint, the opposition is also calling for the dismissal of Ana Brnabić from the position of President of the National Assembly of Serbia](#), Danas, 3/12/2024



### **Well-Intentioned, Yet Overlooked: The Fiscal Council's Unheeded Advice**

There were no opportunities to discuss the opinion of the Fiscal Council on the proposed budget for 2025, published just three days before the session. The Fiscal Council warned of the rising budget deficit. Here is the overview of the most important findings:

The proposed budget anticipates an increase in the fiscal deficit in 2025 to 3% of GDP. This is an increase compared to 2024, in which the last budget revision projected a fiscal deficit of 2.7% of GDP (around EUR 2.2 billion). The main source of financing of the budget deficit in 2025 will be state borrowing. According to government projections, Serbia's public debt will increase in absolute terms from EUR 39.3 billion to EUR 41.9 billion in 2025, which roughly corresponds to the planned fiscal deficit.

The fundamental challenges of the fiscal policy in Serbia remain unresolved. This assessment primarily refers to the relatively high deficit level of 3% of the GDP, as well as the overall direction of fiscal policy, which, under conditions of still relatively high inflation (and economic growth that is close to potential levels), appears pro-cyclical. Inflation in Serbia remains relatively high, with the most recent available data showing an annual growth in consumer prices of 4.5% in October (which is the upper limit of the National Bank of Serbia's target range). The increase in current budget expenditures is caused mainly by government's legal and contractual obligations, which have not been offset by savings in other areas.

The largest increase in the 2025 budget has to do with interest payments. These are planned to rise by as much as 19%, reaching approximately EUR 1.9 billion in 2025. The strong growth in interest costs is the result of the (nominal) increase of public debt in recent years, as well as the worsening borrowing conditions (higher interest rates).

Measured as a share of GDP, public investments in 2025 will account for 7.4% of the GDP, making Serbia (along with Estonia) a leader in Europe. Analysing the budget, three investment priorities of the government for 2025 can be identified. The largest portion of investments will be allocated to:

- Building transportation infrastructure (around EUR 2 billion);
- Equipping the military (around EUR 1 billion);
- The EXPO 2027 project, including the National Stadium and related infrastructure (around EUR 700 million).

The very high level of public investment, at 7.4% of GDP, underscores the need for better regulation and improvement of the public investment policy in Serbia. In the coming years, pressure to increase the fiscal deficit is likely to grow, and the government will need to resist it in a timely manner.<sup>29</sup>

## **4 March 2025 Session: More of the Same – Only Bigger**

The March session continued the problematic trends seen in November 2024, with an even more extensive legislative agenda. This session spanned multiple days but remained tightly controlled. More than 70 laws were debated in blocks. Once more, the Speaker proposed and the deputies of the ruling majority voted for a cognate debate on all agenda points. The first day of the session descended into chaos due to escalating tensions between the ruling coalition and the opposition. Opposition deputies disrupted the proceedings by igniting flares and releasing smoke bombs in the plenary hall, which led to a physical altercation. According to the Speaker, three female deputies from the ruling coalition sustained injuries. Despite the turmoil, the Speaker refused to adjourn the session, insisting that the parliamentary work continue. She condemned the opposition's actions, labelling them as "terrorist behaviour", and emphasised the importance of proceeding with legislative duties, including discussions on education reforms and support for farmers.<sup>30</sup>

29 [Assessment of the Draft Law on the Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2025](#), Fiscal Council, 22/11/2024

30 [See how the disorder in the Serbian Assembly occurred](#), Euronews, 4/3/2025

The opposition's protest was partly in solidarity with the ongoing student-led anti-corruption demonstrations, which were sparked by a tragic incident in November 2024 when a railway station canopy collapse in Novi Sad resulted in 16 fatalities. This session was intended to formalise the resignation of the Prime Minister Miloš Vučević and address new legislation on higher education, all related to fulfilling of the demands of protestors.<sup>31</sup>

The first day of the session ended with searches of opposition deputies' offices due to a (later confirmed) false bomb threat. The rest of the session days passed calmly, as the majority of the opposition decided not to attend in order to "avoid giving legitimacy to what [was] happening there." The Prime Minister's resignation was formally acknowledged by the Assembly 15 days after the session began. Although the session lasted only eight days in total, it was spread out over a period of three weeks. In the 50 days between the announcement and the formal acknowledgment of the Prime Minister's resignation, the Government proposed a total of 13 laws, 11 of which were submitted for adoption under the urgent procedure and placed on the parliamentary agenda.<sup>32</sup> This may be one of the reasons why the resignation was not formally acknowledged earlier, as the government in technical mandate would not be authorised to propose laws. Another, more plausible reason were probably the political calculations of Aleksandar Vučić on what type of government to propose (i.e. with politicians, or with "new faces" from other sectors) and whether to call for extraordinary elections instead.

### **Draft Laws Lack Mandatory Elements, Transparency Serbia Warns**

Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition) addressed the Serbian Parliament in February 2025 regarding several proposed laws submitted by the government, urging caution before scheduling discussions and making decisions on these drafts. Specifically, TS highlighted missing required elements in the legislative proposals, emphasising the need for the government to complete the drafts by adhering to necessary legal and procedural standards.

The analysis pointed out that certain proposed laws lacked essential details, such as a clear justification of the law's necessity, legal basis, financial estimates for implementation, and the identification of affected parties. For example, the proposed Law on Guarantee Schemes and Subsidising Interest for Youth Home Purchases violated the Law on Public Administration and the Government Rules of Procedure as it failed to involve a public consultation prior to approval, which is mandatory by law. The analysis of the law's effects also lacked specifics, such as the number of young people who would benefit from it or the potential market consequences like rising property prices.

The draft amendments to the Law on Special Procedures for EXPO Belgrade 2027 is not in line with regulations because it was proposed without organising a public debate or consultations with the public, despite the significant future impact of the law. Additionally, the draft lacks a clear justification for deviations from regular planning and construction rules, and does not provide sufficient analysis on how these changes will affect the implementation of the project or address potential risks.

The draft amendments to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance fail to comprehensively address and explain why certain proposed norms are preferable over alternative solutions that were suggested during the public consultation process. Furthermore, while prior consultations and a public debate on the draft law were held, justification for these consultations is not included in the explanatory part of the proposal. Additionally, some of the prescribed rules were violated during the public debate, and the comments provided by Transparency Serbia were not published or adequately considered in the final report.

31 [Chaos in the Serbian Assembly: Flares, a fight, injured female deputies](#), DW, 4/3/2025

32 [Parliamentary Weekly](#), CRTA, 20/03/2024

Transparency Serbia stressed that the missing details should be rectified before the draft laws are discussed in the National Assembly. The absence of public debate on several proposals, including the draft amendments to the Law on Free Access to Information, was also noted, urging that previously submitted initiatives be considered alongside the new proposals to ensure transparency and broader stakeholder input.<sup>33</sup>

Even though the Draft Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance was inserted into the parliamentary agenda of this session based on the Government's proposal, it was later withdrawn by the Government (on 5 March 2025) with the explanation that "the need for conducting additional consultations on the issues regulated by this law was subsequently assessed and established".<sup>34</sup> According to Transparency Serbia and other members of the Coalition for free access to information, some of the proposed solutions would unjustifiably limit access to information, which is a constitutional human right.<sup>35</sup>

### Prosecution Presses Parliament over Immunity Case

On 8 April 2025, the Special Department for Combating Corruption of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad submitted a second urgent request to the Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, seeking approval to initiate criminal proceedings against Dragana Arsić, a member of parliament from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), on corruption charges. The initial request was sent in July 2024, followed by reminders in October 2024 and January 2025. Despite all these efforts, the Assembly has not addressed the matter, and the request was omitted from the agenda of the Administrative Committee's last session on 15 April 2025. Neither Speaker Brnabić nor the committee's chairman Milenko Jovanov (members of the same political party as the accused deputy) has responded to the prosecutor's appeals. The Prosecutor's Office emphasised the urgency due to the risk of the expiry of the statute of limitations, which would prevent legal action.<sup>36</sup> Due to the above-mentioned developments, Ekološki ustanak (a parliamentary opposition party) announced that it will file a criminal complaint against the Speaker of the Serbian National Assembly, Ana Brnabić, on the grounds of reasonable suspicion that she had committed the criminal offence of obstruction of justice.<sup>37</sup>

## 1.2.2. The New Serbian Government: A Blend of Returning Ministers and New Appointees

On 14 April 2025, the Serbian Parliament received the proposed composition of the new government, with Professor and medical doctor Djuro Macut nominated for the position of Prime Minister. The parliamentary session was scheduled for the following day – just three days before the constitutional deadline for the formation of a new government. The proposed cabinet features a combination of returning ministers and new appointees. Amid an ongoing social and political crisis triggered by the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad train station, which ultimately led to the dissolution of the previous Government, the ruling majority opted to nominate a nonpartisan figure for Prime Minister, in an apparent attempt to appease the protestors dissatisfied with the current political elite.

However, Professor Macut can hardly be considered an independent candidate. In January 2025, he joined the initial committee for the establishment of the "Movement for the People and the State", a political initiative long anticipated and supported by President Vučić. Macut was also seen in *Pionirski Park* in

33 [Initiative](#), Transparency Serbia, 17/2/2025

34 [Response of the Government to a FOI request](#), 21/3/2025

35 [Proposals for amendments to the draft amendments and supplements to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance submitted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia](#), Transparency Serbia, 20/2/2025

36 [The Prosecutor's Office is requesting the lifting of immunity for an SNS MP due to corruption: Brnabić and Jovanov are protecting her](#), Nova, 23/4/2025

37 [Ekološki ustanak: Criminal complaint against Ana Brnabić for obstructing justice in the case of Dragana Arsić](#), N1, 28/2/2025

central Belgrade, where the “Students 2.0” group has been camping out for weeks, protesting against university blockades and calling for their end.<sup>38</sup> The proposed government includes several high-profile ministers who will retain their positions, including: Siniša Mali (Minister of Finance), Ivica Dačić (Minister of the Interior), Dubravka Djedović Handanović (Minister of Mining and Energy), Marko Djurić (Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Bratislav Gašić (Minister of Defence). Two of the most controversial nominations are those of Dejan Vuk Stanković – a political analyst aligned with the ruling majority<sup>39</sup> – for Minister of Education, and Boris Bratina – known for previously burning the EU flag<sup>40</sup> – for Minister of Information and Telecommunications. Notably absent from the proposed cabinet are several prominent figures from the ruling coalition, including: Miloš Vučević (former Prime Minister), Aleksandar Martinović (former Minister of Agriculture), Aleksandar Vulin (former Deputy Prime Minister), Irena Vujović (former Minister of Environmental Protection), Maja Popović (former Minister of Justice) and Slavica Djukić Dejanović (former Minister of Education).

The extraordinary parliamentary session was convened only 24 hours in advance, in yet another example of procedural abuse that has become commonplace in recent years. Deputies of two opposition parliamentary groups – Democratic Party (DS) and coalition NADA – decided not to participate at the session, claiming that they did not want to provide legitimacy to the current establishment.<sup>41</sup> The only item on the agenda was the election of the new Government. After the Prime Minister-designate delivered his exposé, a debate began focusing on the proposed cabinet members. A significant portion of the discussion centred on allegations of sexual harassment involving Dejan Vuk Stanković, the nominee for Minister of Education. At one point during the session, Stanković reportedly felt unwell.<sup>42</sup> The session also featured a notable moment when Miroljub Albijanić, deputy of the “Healthy Serbia”, party that is in coalition with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), criticised the Government and supported the students. Albijanić also said that the ruling coalition had promised his political party a ministerial post, but that no one ever contacted them about it. His speech was applauded by opposition deputies and criticised by members of the ruling majority, prompting Milenko Jovanov, the head of the SNS parliamentary group, to intervene and call for order.<sup>43</sup>

Members of the ruling coalition expressed their support for the new Government, affirming they would vote in favour. In contrast, representatives of opposition parties reiterated their demand for the establishment of a transitional Government. They declared they would not vote for the proposed cabinet, dismissing it as merely a reshuffle of the existing administration rather than a genuine change.

In his exposé, Macut emphasised the urgent need to de-escalate tensions and restore harmony in the Serbian society. Regarding economic policy, he stated that no major changes were planned – signalling continuity with the current approach.<sup>44</sup> The Prime Minister made frequent references to a formally non-existent programme, often previously mentioned by the President of the Republic and other high-ranking officials, entitled “A Leap into the Future – Serbia 2027”. Since the Government has confirmed that no such document was ever officially created, its contents remain unknown.<sup>45</sup>

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38 [Đuro Macut nominated as the candidate for forming the new Government of Serbia](#), BBC, 6/4/2025

39 [The performance that led Vučić to choose Dejan Vuk Stanković as the Minister of Education](#), Nova, 14/4/2025

40 [He burned the EU flag and called the Pride parade a ‘procession of the sick’: Who is Boris Bratina, the new Minister of Information and Telecommunications?](#), Nova, 14/4/2025

41 [The Assembly has concluded its work, the debate on the government will continue tomorrow](#), RTV, 15/4/2025

42 [BLOG ‘We are tired of blockades, groups calling themselves plenums are illegitimate’: Macut presented the exposé, debate on the selection of the ‘new government’ continues](#), N1, 15/4/2025

43 [First day of the parliamentary session on the new government concluded: The opposition focused mainly on the qualifications of ministerial candidates, while the ruling majority emphasised the policy of continuity](#), Danas, 15/4/2025

44 [The new Government of Serbia has been elected, ministers have taken the oath](#), N1, 16/4/2025

45 [Response of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation to a FOI request](#), 6/2/2024

### **Parliament Dismisses Constitutional Concerns over EXPO 2027 Law**

At its 13th session held on 23 November 2024, the Committee for Constitutional and Legislative Issues submitted its opinion to the Constitutional Court regarding the initiative to review the constitutionality of the Law on Special Procedures for the Implementation of the International Specialised Exhibition EXPO BELGRADE 2027, specifically focusing on Article 14. This initiative was submitted to the Constitutional Court by Transparency Serbia (a member of the PrEUgovor coalition) on 30 January 2024.

Besides the fact that the exclusion of the Public Procurement Law will have negative effects on the budget and the rule of law, there is also the absence of compliance with the Constitution in formal aspects. While paragraph 1 of Article 14 excludes the application of public procurement rules in procurements conducted by specialised EXPO enterprises, paragraph 2 authorises the Government of Serbia to “further regulate” procurement rules for such enterprises. In some of its earlier decisions, the Constitutional Court declared it legally impossible for the executive to “further regulate” an issue that is not already regulated in general terms. Additionally, TS pointed to a potential violation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between Serbia and EU.

The Committee rejected all of Transparency Serbia’s arguments, stating that the implementation of the EXPO 2027 project represents a matter of public interest for the Republic of Serbia. It dismissed the initiative as unfounded and recommended that the Constitutional Court reject it.<sup>46</sup>

Transparency Serbia responded to the Committee’s position on 5 March 2025 by submitting its comments to the Constitutional Court. In its response, the organisation once again urged the Court to make a prompt decision on the submitted initiative. TS stressed that the Court’s failure to consider the initiative before the adoption of the relevant government decree, and its continued inaction to date have already caused harmful consequences in the form of 60 procurement contracts that were concluded based on a regulation that was adopted without a constitutional basis.<sup>47</sup>

## **1.2.3. The Work of Relevant Parliamentary Committees**

### **Parliament’s Elective Function through the Work of the Finance Committee**

The past period also saw multiple key appointment processes by the Committee on Finance, the Republic Budget and Public Spending Control, including to the Council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), the Council of the State Aid Control Commission, the Council of the National Bank, the President of the State Aid Control Commission and the President of the State Audit Institution (DRI). During this period, at its second session of the regular autumn sitting, the Parliament elected four members of the Council of the Commission for Protection of Competition and its President on 27 November 2024, at the proposal of the Committee for Economy, Regional Development, Trade, Tourism and Energy.

Although public procedures were formally followed, the actual selection processes were opaque and controlled by the ruling majority. Candidates were often predetermined, and sessions of the relevant committees lacked wider public and expert consultation. These patterns reflect the broader issue of regulatory capture, where oversight bodies become politically dependent and ineffective in ensuring institutional accountability.

On 5 November 2024, during its 15th session, the Committee decided to form a Working Group tasked with verifying the eligibility of candidates for a position in the Council of the State Aid Control Commission. Three members of the Council of the State Aid Control Commission were elected at the first regular session, held on 19 March 2025.

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<sup>46</sup> [Opinion of the Committee for Constitutional and Legislative Issues, 23/11/2024](#)

<sup>47</sup> [Comment on the Opinion of the Committee on Constitutional and Legislative Issues no. 04 Ref. 011-1097/24 of 23/11/2024](#), Transparency Serbia, 5/3/2025

Later that month, on 22 November 2024, during its 17th session, the Committee initiated the selection process for the President and four members of the Governing Council of the National Bank of Serbia. According to the Law on the National Bank of Serbia, the Council consists of five members, including the president, all elected by the National Assembly for a five-year term based on the Committee's proposal. The Parliament elected the President and four members of the Council at the first regular spring session, held on 19 March 2025.

At the 21st session, held on 22 January 2025, the Committee withdrew the proposed candidate list for the President of the State Aid Control Commission from parliamentary procedure, postponing the decision-making process. The next step in this process was discussed at the 24th session, held on 24 March 2025, where the Committee reviewed the report of the Working Group tasked with verifying the eligibility of candidates for the President of the State Aid Control Commission. Two timely applications had been received: of Dragica Jorgović, a law graduate, and of Jasmina Trifunović, an economist. The Working Group confirmed that both candidates met the legal and procedural requirements. However, Trifunović withdrew her candidacy in writing, which led the Committee to conduct an interview with the remaining candidate, Dragica Jorgović. The Committee then adopted the candidate list and recommended Jorgović to the National Assembly for election as President of the State Aid Control Commission.

On 28 February 2025, the Committee convened its 23rd session, where it initiated the procedure for electing a new President of the State Audit Institution (DRI). Chairman of the Committee, Veroljub Arsić, informed the deputies that the current President, Duško Pejović, had officially retired on 10 February 2025, upon meeting the conditions for retirement, and that this occurred prior to the expiry of his mandate. Following the existing practice, the Committee decided to invite parliamentary groups to submit nominations within 15 days. It was also agreed that the Committee would hold interviews with the proposed candidates.

#### ✖ **ALARM: Institutional Crisis and Political Interference in the REM Council Appointment Process**

Between late 2024 and early 2025, the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), Serbia's key institution tasked with overseeing electronic media and safeguarding pluralism and public interest, experienced a serious institutional and legitimacy crisis. This period was marked by a governance vacuum and an appointment process for new Council members that was widely criticised for its lack of transparency, legal irregularities and strong political interference. The mandate of the REM Council – REM's main decision-making organ – expired on 4 November 2024, leaving the institution formally without leadership and the capacity to perform its legally defined functions. According to the Law on Electronic Media, the process of electing new Council members should have been initiated at least three months prior to the expiration date, i.e. by 4 August 2024. However, the Committee on Culture and Information of the National Assembly of Serbia, responsible for initiating this process, failed to act within the prescribed deadline.

The public call for nominations was published only on 27 November 2024, nearly four months late. This delay not only violated the law, but also paralysed REM's ability to function during a crucial period when oversight of the media sector was particularly needed. The President of the Committee, Nevena Djurić, from the ruling party's parliamentary group (Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia Must Not Stop), came under public scrutiny for failing to convene the Committee to initiate the selection process in a timely manner. Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition) submitted an initiative to the Committee about the legal breach,<sup>48</sup> while four media and civil society organisations went so far as to file a criminal complaint against Djurić for her failure to enforce the law, arguing that it resulted in REM effectively ceasing to function as a regulatory authority.<sup>49</sup>

48 [Initiative to supplement the agenda of the Committee session](#), Transparency Serbia, 21/1/2025

49 Criminal complaint filed against the president of the Culture Committee over REM, N1, 4/11/2024



When the appointment process finally began, it was marred by numerous irregularities and concerns about political interference. Several civil society and media organisations – including the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) and ANEM (Association of Independent Electronic Media) – criticised the candidate list, pointing out that it included individuals who had previously served on the REM Council during periods of significant inactivity and public criticism. They also raised alarm over the involvement of GONGO (government-organised non-governmental organisations) groups that proposed candidates who were closely aligned with the ruling party.

The public hearing with shortlisted candidates took place on 23 January 2025, in the Serbian National Assembly. However, the legitimacy of the hearing was challenged by multiple candidates and media experts. Several candidates withdrew their applications in protest, citing discrimination, political pressure and procedural flaws. They said that some of those who advanced to the final selection phase were either politically affiliated, or had been nominated by organisations that did not meet the legal requirement of having at least 300 registered members.

Moreover, despite legal provisions that required the National Assembly to include the appointment of REM Council members in the agenda of the first available session after the public hearing, the 4 March 2025 parliamentary session, while extensive in scope, did not include this item. This omission further deepened the crisis and signalled a lack of political will to resolve the issue transparently and in accordance with legal obligations.

In a particularly telling moment, 7 out of 18 shortlisted candidates withdrew from the selection process just five days after the public hearing. Their joint statement cited systemic discrimination, biased selection in favour of politically loyal individuals, and procedural violations that undermined the integrity of the entire process. They asserted that under such circumstances, the Assembly could not lawfully proceed with electing the new REM Council.<sup>50</sup>

The combination of missed deadlines, procedural manipulation and opaque decision-making severely compromised REM's credibility. It also prevented the institution from fulfilling its role during a time of heightened political sensitivity and the ongoing electoral processes, raising serious concerns among domestic watchdogs and international partners, particularly in the context of Serbia's EU accession obligations.

After two weeks of the student blockade of Public Broadcaster buildings, where the request was to renew the procedure for the election of REM Council members (such a proposal was also submitted by the opposition deputies), the Committee convened on the eve of the EC enlargement commissioner's visit to Belgrade. By the decision of 28 April, the Committee annulled the previous public call and opened a new one. The decision on annulment stated only objective grounds for the inability of the previous procedure to be finalised successfully, but denied any wrongdoing by the Committee in its previous work.<sup>51</sup>

## The European Integration Committee and Serbia's Stagnant Reform Process

The 2024 European Commission Report on Serbia<sup>52</sup> was discussed by the European Integration Committee shortly after its release, at the session held on 22 November 2024. The Report was presented to the Committee members by the European Union Ambassador to Serbia, Emanuele Giaufret. He noted that while the report outlines a clear set of reforms, the pace of these reforms in Serbia had slowed. The Report shows that, over the past 9 years, Serbia had made only slight progress toward EU membership and remains stuck halfway along the reform path. He emphasised that the work of the National Assembly is crucial in supporting the Government's reform efforts and overseeing their implementation.

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50 [‘The law is practically suspended’: Seven out of 18 candidates have withdrawn their candidacies for membership in the REM Council](#), N1, 28/1/2025

51 [Ninth session of the Committee on Culture and Information](#), National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, 28/4/2025

52 [Serbia 2024 Report](#), European Commission, 30/10/2024

In response, the then Minister for European Integration, Tanja Mišćević, assured that Serbia would continue to implement the European Commission's measures and recommendations. She mentioned that the Government is currently focused on revising the voter registry and reorganising the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media. However, both processes have stalled due to obstruction from the ruling majority deputies (see section on the *Working Group and the Alarm box*). Despite the Committee's regular discussions about the EC reports, no tangible outcomes have emerged from this process.

### Shying Away from the Protests

The absence of discussion in the plenum of the National Assembly about the persistent mass protests requesting that institutions do their work is not accidental: the ruling majority decided to ignore this issue. Protest-related issues were discussed only once, at the initiative of the Speaker of the Parliament, Ana Brnabić, in January 2025,<sup>53</sup> before the Committee on Education, Science, Technological Development and the Information Society. Members of this Committee considered the only item on the agenda: the blockade of universities and the protection of students' rights.

However, silence was no longer possible once the establishment was accused by the protestors of using a prohibited sonic weapon to disrupt the largest in the series of protests, organised on 15 March 2025 in Belgrade. Three days later, the Committee on the Control of Security Services<sup>54</sup> and the Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs<sup>55</sup> discussed the facts and circumstances related to the protest that took place on 15 March 2025, at which the "sound cannon" was allegedly used. Both the director of the Security Information Agency (BIA), Dr. Vladimir Orlić, and the Minister of the Interior, Ivica Dačić, strongly denied the existence and use of the sound cannon. However, the Minister of the Interior admitted its existence just a few days later, after a photo from the protests appeared in the media. He downplayed its significance by claiming it could allegedly only have been used as a loudspeaker, revealing thereby that the BIA's director had misinformed the Committee.

## Parliamentary Hearings in Serbia – Flawed Procedures, Excluded Voices

Between November 2024 and March 2025, the Serbian Parliament held 6 public hearings,<sup>56</sup> all of which failed to fulfil their primary purpose: to enable a genuine, multi-stakeholder debate on matters of public interest.

The most striking example was the public hearing on the 2025 Budget, convened by the Committee on Finance, Republic Budget and Public Spending Control. It was scheduled for Sunday afternoon, 24 November 2024, just one day before the parliamentary session on the Budget. The hearing was announced only three days in advance, with both the Committee session and the hearing scheduled at 4 p.m., effectively overlapping. Invitations were sent exclusively to public institutions and state officials. It was only after an initiative from Transparency Serbia (a member of both the PrEUgovor coalition and the National Convention on the EU) that the invitation was extended to this CSO, making its representatives the only civil society participants at the event. Holding budget hearings on Sundays, just before parliamentary sessions, has become a recurring practice – one that clearly prevents any meaningful public input or improvement of such a vital document.

Another example of procedural failure was the public hearing entitled "Public Discussion with Proposed Candidates for Members of the REM Council", organised by the Committee on Culture and Information on 23 January 2025. Following the hearing, multiple candidates requested that the selection process be annulled in 7 of the 9 categories, citing serious procedural irregularities. These requests were dismissed in their entirety. Just five days later, 7 of the 18 shortlisted candidates withdrew their candidacies, citing systemic discrimination, political favouritism toward candidates aligned with the ruling party, and violations of legal requirements concerning nominating organisations (see section on REM).

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53 21/1/2025

54 18/3/2025

55 18/3/2025

56 [Public Hearings](#), National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, [last accessed on 5/5/2025]



Four additional hearings, organised by the Committee on Constitutional and Legislative Issues, were presented as part of an outreach effort to improve electoral conditions, in coordination with the parliamentary Working Group and ODIHR. However, these events were hastily planned, poorly publicised and rescheduled, which undermined both participation and legitimacy. The Draft Law on the Unified Voters' Register presented at these hearings was authored by a deputy from the ruling party and endorsed by the Committee as a product of the Working Group, despite the fact that the Group had failed to reach a consensus and had produced two competing drafts. Despite ODIHR's calls for inclusive lawmaking, authorities continued to treat consultations as a checkbox exercise. Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition and the Working Group for improving election conditions) sharply criticised this, warning that the hearings served as a façade for a closed, government-driven process lacking real engagement. This blatant procedural breach led to the resignation of all opposition deputies and the three CSO members from the Working Group. Nevertheless, the Committee continued to organise public hearings, simulating inclusivity while pushing forward a predetermined agenda (see section on Working Group).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reported violation of parliamentary procedure by the speaker, secretary, and committee chairs and secretaries have to be swiftly investigated and resolved, in particular where criminal charges were already filed.
- The National Assembly should discontinue the practice of conducting cognate debates on unrelated topics, as it dilutes the quality of deliberation and undermines meaningful discussion on matters of public interest.
- The Speaker of the Assembly should ensure compliance with the law and the Rules of Procedure, ensure that the competent committee starts to consider reports of violations of the Code of Ethics, ensure equal treatment and respect for all deputies regardless of their political affiliation, take care of order at sessions, and ensure discussion of items on the agenda.
- The Parliament should ensure that all draft laws submitted for procedure fully comply with mandatory requirements, and should require the proponent – most often the Government – to make necessary corrections in cases of non-compliance.
- The President of the competent committee should ensure full compliance with legal and procedural requirements, and guarantee equal opportunities for all qualified candidates in the election of REM Council members and other appointment processes;
- Deputies should give higher priority to debating the reports of independent state institutions, while respecting the deadlines prescribed by the Rules of Procedure, and should adopt conclusions that would clearly determine the measures to be implemented, the state authorities responsible, and the deadlines for their implementation;
- The Parliament, although excluded from the national anti-corruption strategy, should design its own anti-corruption measures.

### 1.2.6. Lack of Effective Parliamentary Oversight over the Security Sector in Serbia

*The parliamentary committees responsible for the security sector were more active during this reporting period. At their sessions, opposition deputies made certain efforts to shed light on specific security incidents, including the arrests of activists during the protests and the alleged use of sonic weapons at the protest that was held on 15 March in Belgrade, following which both committees held sessions on the same day. However, discussion at these sessions did not contribute to determining the facts regarding the type of weapon that was used. Unfortunately, deputies made minimal use of the mechanism of parliamentary questions to address security-related issues in 2024. Overall, the National Assembly failed to conduct effective oversight of the*

*security sector, as it did not clarify security incidents that caused public concern. As a result, public trust in security institutions diminished.*

Long-standing issues concerning the functioning of the parliament persisted. In 2024, the National Assembly held plenary sessions for only 27 days, despite the absence of national-level elections during that period. Sessions of the Assembly were marked by insults and violence, as well as violations of parliamentary procedures by the ruling majority. The government continued to be the proponent of the vast majority of adopted legal acts, while the opposition was largely marginalised.<sup>57</sup>

In 2024, only two parliamentary sessions were dedicated to posing the questions to the Government – in July and September, despite the fact that, according to Article 206 of the Rules of Procedure of the NA, these sessions are supposed to take place regularly, every last Thursday of the month.<sup>58</sup> In July, questions were posed by two deputies (neither one from the opposition), while in September they were posed by two from the opposition. On both occasions, deputies made minimal use of the opportunity to ask about security-related issues. In July, a question was raised regarding the equal representation of Bosniaks in the security sector, and the challenge of lacking precise statistics on the ethnic composition of employees in this sector was acknowledged.<sup>59</sup> In September, however, not a single posed question was directly related to the functioning of the security sector in Serbia.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the poor practice continued, as deputies failed to use this mechanism to exercise more effective oversight of the security sector.

On the other hand, during the sessions of both parliamentary committees responsible for the security sector there were notable efforts by opposition deputies, members of both committees, to clarify the facts regarding the security incidents that have disturbed the Serbian public. During the 14th convocation of the National Assembly, the Committee for the Control of Security Services held a total of 8 sessions, while the Committee for Defence and Internal Affairs held a total of 11. More specifically, the Committee for the Control of Security Services held four open and four closed sessions, while the Committee for Defence and Internal Affairs held three closed and eight open sessions.

The Committee for the Control of Security Services held its fourth session on 1 August 2024, at the headquarters of the Security Information Agency (BIA). At this session, which was closed to the public, the Committee adopted by a majority vote the BIA's report on its work and the report on the security situation in the Republic of Serbia for the period 1 October 2023 – 31 March 2024. The reports covered the key activities of the Agency during that period. The president of the Committee, Igor Bečić, gave a positive assessment of BIA's work and expressed full support for its activities aimed at protecting the security of the Republic of Serbia.<sup>61</sup> At its closed sixth session, held on 16 December 2024, the Committee reviewed the report of the Military Security Agency (VBA), and discussed and adopted the reports on VBA's work for the period 1 October 2023 – 30 September 2024. The reports were assessed as precise and comprehensive, with particular emphasis on VBA's effectiveness in counterintelligence protection of the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Army.<sup>62</sup>

Unlike the previous sessions of this Committee, the 8th one was marked by discussions among the Committee members. On 13 March 2025, the Committee for the Control of Security Services adopted the report on the oversight of the security services' work for 2024. The session featured a debate between opposition deputies and members of the committee from the ruling coalition, particularly concerning the announced student protests in Belgrade. Aleksandar Ivanović, member of the National Movement of Serbia, emphasised the need to obtain reports from the security services about the preparations for the ongoing protests in Serbia, while members of the Committee from the ruling coalition disputed his claims.<sup>63</sup>

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57 Aleksandar Ivković, Sofija Popović, Igor Miroslavljević, Sabina Sali, Nikola Burazer, [Shadow Report – State of Democracy in Serbia 2024](#), p. 5

58 Ibid, p. 14

59 National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, [Parliamentary Questions in July](#), 25/7/2025

60 National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, [Parliamentary Questions in September](#), 26/9/2025

61 National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, [The fourth session of the Committee for the Control of Security Services and the oversight visit to the Directorate of the Security Intelligence Agency](#), 1/8/2024

62 National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, [The sixth session of the Committee for the Control of Security Services](#), 16/12/2024

63 "The Committee of the Serbian National Assembly Adopted the Report on Oversight of the Security Services' Work in 2024", NIN, 13/3/2025

At the beginning of September 2024, the 7th session of the Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs of the National Assembly of Serbia discussed the reports of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) for the previous year and a half. Key topics included the three-year absence of a Police Director, the lists of “undesirable persons” at the borders, the arrests of environmental activists, and selective police actions. Opposition deputies criticised the political instrumentalisation of the police, the untimely submission of reports, and the insufficient response of the MoI to protests and security incidents. They also pointed out the possible illegalities in issuing residence permits prior to the elections. Minister of the Interior Ivica Dačić rejected the accusations of selectivity and politicisation, stating that the police operate according to the law and orders from competent authorities. He further explained that lists of “undesirable persons” are a common practice worldwide.<sup>64</sup> This discussion raised broader concerns about political influence over the police, particularly concerning the treatment of critics of the ruling regime.

Opposition deputies submitted a request to convene a session of the Committee for Defence and Internal Affairs at the end of September 2024, proposing two agenda points: the first concerned the review of the MoI Report on the investigation into the murder of Danka Ilić, the little girl who went missing on 26 March 2024 near Bor, while the second concerned the report of the MoI Internal Control Sector on the death of Dalibor Dragijević, who passed away on 7 April 2024 at the Police Station in Bor after being detained on suspicion of helping the suspect Dejan Dragijević conceal the girl’s body.<sup>65</sup> However, the session of this Committee with these agenda points never took place, indicating that there was no political will to hold it.

## Committees Deny Use of Sonic Weapons, Minister Later Confirms Possession

Shortly after the 15 March protest in Belgrade, both committees held sessions on the same day – 18 March 2025. The Committee for Defence and Internal Affairs adopted conclusions from the session, including the finding that claims about the use of the sound cannon at the 15 March protest were inaccurate, as there was no evidence to support them. President of the Committee, Milovan Drecun, called for an end to spreading misinformation and urged relevant institutions to investigate the circumstances surrounding the claims. Minister of the Interior Ivica Dačić stated that the sound cannon had not been used, and that anyone who might have employed unlawful means would be held accountable. Additionally, Minister of Defence Bratislav Gašić emphasised that the use of illegal equipment would have been obvious and documented. The opposition insisted on further investigation, while the Committee for the Control of Security Services determined that the BIA, the VBA and the Military Intelligence Agency had not used the sound cannon and had acted in accordance with the law. Vladimir Orlić, Director of the BIA, stated that the attempted “colour revolution” had failed, emphasised that there was no escalation of violence, and assessed that the situation in the country remained stable.<sup>66</sup> These sessions were thus not used to investigate whether sonic weapons had been used during the protest, but rather to allow representatives of the executive branch to deny such claims.

The day after the above session, Ivica Dačić admitted that the police actually do possess sonic weapons that are colloquially referred to as “sound cannons”, and that these systems, purchased in 2021, are currently stored in a warehouse. As he explained, the police have not yet used them.<sup>67</sup> Such statements from all the representatives of the executive branch connected to the security sector – where the possession of sonic weapons was first denied and then confirmed – diminished citizens’ trust in these institutions.

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64 “The session of the Committee on Internal Affairs was held, with a debate on the police director and lists of undesirables”, NIN, 6/9/2024. For additional information about these cases, see: Jelena Pejić Nikić (ed.), *PreUgovor Alarm Report on the Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 – November 2024*, Belgrade, 2024, pp. 34-36

65 “The opposition is requesting a session of the Committee for Defence and Internal Affairs regarding the case of Danka Ilić”, N1, 24/9/2024

66 “Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs: Claims about the use of the sound cannon are not true”, Radio Television Vojvodina, 18/3/2025

67 “Dačić: The police do have a sonic cannon; it’s stored in boxes in a warehouse. The statement that we don’t have it was – awkward”, N1, 19/3/2025

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The European Union should enhance monitoring of the work of the National Assembly and react if the abuses of parliamentary procedures hindering the ability of deputies to effectively monitor the security sector continue in this convocation;
- The deputies should make use of the institute of MPs' questions to exercise effective control over security sector institutions and refer to the reports of independent state institutions and the civil society to prepare and inform their positions during relevant discussions;
- The competent committees (the Defence and Internal Affairs Committee and the Security Services Control Committee) should hold regular meetings, use their competences to a greater extent, and nominate relevant topics from their jurisdictions for discussion;
- To be able to carefully consider reports on the work of security institutions, monitor budget spending and plan control visits; members of the parliamentary committees responsible for the security sector should obtain certificates that will grant them access to confidential information.

## 1.3. The Position of Civil Society in Serbia

*Threats and pressures against civil society in Serbia significantly increased during the reporting period. The collapse of the concrete canopy of the railway station in Novi Sad, which resulted in 16 deaths, triggered a wave of protests, blockades and strikes across Serbia, with citizens demanding accountability and action against corruption. Although Serbian students emerged as the leading collective force in this latest wave of civic unrest, civil society organisations were also actively involved in protesting corruption and criticising the Serbian authorities' malpractice. In response, the government intensified its crackdown on civil society through physical attacks on protesters and independent journalists, arrests and criminal charges against activists, cyber-attacks, intrusive financial inspections and smear campaigns.*

In January 2025, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Mary Lawlor, expressed concern about the situation of human rights defenders in Serbia, highlighting arbitrary arrests, surveillance, smear campaigns and other forms of harassment. She emphasised that the authorities have a duty to create an environment in which individuals can defend human rights without fear.<sup>68</sup> In March 2025, the global network CIVICUS, which monitors the state of civil societies worldwide, added Serbia to its watch-list as Serbian authorities escalated repression against civil society organisations and incited violence against tens of thousands of people protesting government corruption.<sup>69</sup>

### Legal Framework and the Formal Cooperation between the Civil Society and the State

Since the last Alarm Report, the Council for the Creation of an Environment Stimulating for the Development of Civil Society, established by the Serbian Government in September 2023, has held three sessions – on 29 and 30 October 2024, and on 17 December 2024. None of the them addressed the increasing pressures on civil society in Serbia.<sup>70</sup> In mid-January 2025, the Government adopted the Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society in Serbia for the period 2025-2026.<sup>71</sup> However, just ten days later, members of the Council from civil society organisations (CSOs) suspended their participation in the body's activities due to intensified threats against Serbian civil society.<sup>72</sup>

For the same reason, in early February 2025, a broad coalition of CSOs working on the rule of law, human rights and democratisation suspended their cooperation with Serbia's legislative and executive authorities.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, the Programme Council of NCEU appealed to the European Commission, stating that the political crisis in Serbia prevents CSOs from continuing to participate in EU accession-related activities involving cooperation with political decision-makers, whom they hold responsible for the current state of European integration.<sup>74</sup>

On 29 November 2024, deputies from Aleksandar Vulin's Socialist Movement, a part of the ruling coalition, submitted the proposed Law on the Special Register of Agents of Foreign Influence to the Serbian Parliament. The draft law defines "agents" as "any association and non-profit organisation that is primarily financed or otherwise supported by foreign states, their institutions, international and foreign organisations, foreign nationals, or registered non-governmental organisations funded from abroad."<sup>75</sup> If adopted, this Law would require all civil society organisations working on human rights and democratisation to officially register as agents of foreign influence, and to pay high penalties for non-compliance with the law. This move represents a continuation of efforts to vilify, intimidate and silence critical voices in Serbian society.

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68 Beta, "UN rapporteur concerned over the situation of human rights defenders in Serbia", N1, 17/01/2025

69 CIVICUS, "Serbian civil society under pressure as country sees biggest protests in decades – CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist", CIVICUS, 10/03/2025

70 Council for the Creation of an Environment Stimulating for the Development of the Civil Society, "Sessions of the Council"

71 "Official Gazette of the RS" no. 6/2025 of 21/01/2025.

72 KOMS, "Članovi i članice saveta za stvaranje podsticajnog okruženja za razvoj civilnog društva zamrzavaju članstvo zbog ugrožavanja rada OCD" [Members of the Council for the Creation of an Environment Stimulating for the Development of the Civil Society are suspending their membership due to endangering the work of the CSOs], KOMS, 25/01/2025

73 BCSP, "Joint Resolution on the Suspension of Cooperation with the Legislative and Executive Authorities in Serbia", 04/02/2025

74 NCEU, "NKEU sent a letter to the President of the EC: EU should not turn its backs on Serbian citizens", 04/02/2025

75 Law on the Special Register of Agents of Foreign Influence (proposal), National Assembly of RS, 29/11/2024

## Physical Attacks on Protesters, Students, and Journalists

After the tragic event in Novi Sad, citizens began protesting against corruption and impunity. The initial demonstrations were largely spontaneous. In addition, citizens launched weekly commemorative actions every Friday at 11:52 a.m. – the time when the canopy collapsed – by blocking traffic in cities and towns across Serbia. Student blockades began at the end of November 2024, with a growing number of faculties gradually joining the movement. All these forms of protest have been peaceful and, as such, are protected as basic human rights under both domestic and international law. Nevertheless, protesters have been physically attacked on numerous occasions, with some of the assaults directly linked to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) or even state institutions.

The event that triggered nationwide student blockades was the physical attack on students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts during the commemorative silence on 22 November 2024. According to student testimonies and video recordings of the incident, there were around ten attackers, some of whom were immediately identified as SNS officials. However, it took more than two months for the High Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade to interview the students and professors of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts.<sup>76</sup> On 6 February, an indictment was submitted to the court against three individuals, while criminal charges against two others were dismissed.<sup>77</sup> The remaining attackers were never identified by Serbian authorities.

Among the most alarming incidents was the arrest of an elderly citizen of Novi Sad who had been protesting in front of the Prosecutor's Office on 21 November. He was detained for spraying a police officer with pepper spray. The man was reportedly beaten at the police station while in custody, suffering injuries that required surgery, including the removal of a testicle.<sup>78</sup> Following the incident, the Serbian Minister of the Interior dismissed the accusations of police brutality as absurd, claiming that the protests constituted an "attack on state institutions".<sup>79</sup>

Equally concerning is the fact that dozens of drivers deliberately drove into protesters during commemorative actions and other street protests.<sup>80</sup> Some of these assaults resulted in serious bodily injuries. For example, a student from Kraljevo, struck by a car during a protest in Ruzveltova Street in Belgrade, sustained head injuries and had to be hospitalised.<sup>81</sup> Following the initial incidents of cars hitting protesters at blockades, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić appeared to justify the assaults, stating that "[protesters] jumped on car hoods," and that the drivers "did not break the law" by hitting people but were simply "going their way."<sup>82</sup>

Another young woman, a student from Novi Sad, sustained severe head injuries when she was attacked with a baseball bat one night in late January 2025. The attackers reportedly emerged from the premises of the SNS and started chasing and assaulting the students.<sup>83</sup> Suspicions of the ruling party's involvement in attacks on students and other protesters are supported by other evidence too – *inter alia*, an audio recording of the high-ranking SNS member Damir Zobenica, in which he is heard instructing other party members on how to provoke citizens during the commemorative actions.<sup>84</sup>

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76 Tamara Marković Subota, "Težak put do pravde: 69 dana do prve reakcije tužilaštva nakon napada na studente FDU-a (VIDEO)" [Difficult road to justice: 69 days until the first reaction of the prosecution after the attack on students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (VIDEO)], Insajder, 01/02/2025

77 Radio Free Europe, "Nisu identifikovani svi napadači na studente u Beogradu, kaže docent Fakulteta dramskih umetnosti" [According to the assistant professor of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, not all the attackers of the students in Belgrade have been identified], RFE, 07/02/2025

78 A.L., "Ilija Kostić pred tužiocem opisao kako su ga tukli u policijskoj stanici: 'Rekao mi je da ustanem, pa me je kolenom udario u testise'" [Ilija Kostić described to the prosecutor how he was beaten at the police station: 'He told me to get up, then he hit me in the testicles with his knee'], *Danas*, 25/11/2024

79 "Dačić: Besmisleno je optuživati policiju za brutalnost", [Dačić: It makes no sense to accuse the police of brutality] 021, 08/12/2024

80 Civic Initiatives, "Protesti protiv korupcije u Srbiji: Pregled događaja i postupanja institucija prema demonstrantima" [Protests against corruption in Serbia: Overview of events and actions of institutions towards protesters], Civic Initiatives, updated on 24/03/2025

81 I.M., "Dačić: Vozač automobila osuđivan ranije sedam puta" [Dačić: Car driver previously convicted seven times], *Vreme*, 16/01/2025

82 Direktno, "Vozač tokom blokade čoveka vozio na HAUBI, Vučić opravdavao SUMANUT ČIN" [During the blockade, the driver carried a man on the HOOD, Vučić justified this FOOLISH ACT], Direktno, 01/12/2024

83 021, "Napadnuti novosadski studenti: Vijali ih s palicama i kolima, devojci dislocirali vilicu" [Novi Sad students under attacks: They were beaten with bats and hit by cars, one girl suffered a dislocated jaw], 021, 28/01/2025

84 Stefan Kosanović, "Stručnjaci za zvuk: Snimak Damira Zobenice gotovo sigurno autentičan" [Sound experts: Damir Zobenica's recording is almost certainly authentic], *Raskrikavanje*, 29/11/2024



Independent journalists reporting from the protests and blockades have also been frequently subjected to both physical and verbal attacks.<sup>85</sup> Reporters without Borders condemned the violence against Serbian journalists during the anti-corruption protests, noting that “journalists have been on the front line of the violence inflicted by police and supporters of President Vučić.”<sup>86</sup>

### **Did Serbian Authorities Use an Illegal Weapon Against Peaceful Protesters?**

During the biggest citizens’ protest in Serbian history, held on 15 March in Belgrade, a large crowd was observing a moment of silence for the victims of the Novi Sad canopy collapse. Suddenly, a jarring sound shattered the quiet. Numerous videos shared on social media show the crowd splitting in panic, as if making way for an invisible vehicle. Fortunately, the panic quickly subsided, and the stampede stopped before causing serious injuries.

Immediately after the incident, suspicions arose that a sonic weapon – a device capable of causing pain, dizziness and hearing damage – had been deployed against the peaceful protesters.<sup>87</sup> Serbian authorities promptly denied these allegations. Two days later, Minister of the Interior stated that the Ministry did not possess any sonic weapons. However, just a day after that statement, he admitted that the Serbian police in fact did possess a Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), though he claimed it was not used on 15 March.<sup>88</sup>

Since the protest, more than 4,000 citizens have reported to Serbian civil society organisations the consequences they experienced – from panic and fear, to physical symptoms and injuries. To date, there has been no official explanation of what caused the chaos during the commemorative silence on 15 March.

The use of acoustic devices and similar weapons is illegal in Serbia, as they are not included among the permitted crowd-control measures under the current Law on Police. Moreover, the legal conditions required to justify the use of crowd-control tools were not met at the time and location of the protest. Even when such conditions are fulfilled, any crowd-control measures must be proportionate and directed only at individuals violating the law, not indiscriminately applied to peaceful citizens.<sup>89</sup>

Several civil society organisations – Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Civic Initiatives, the Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights (YUCOM), Initiative A11, FemPlatz, and CRTA – have filed a criminal complaint with the Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime. The complaint was filed against unknown persons, on suspicion of committing an act of terrorism on 15 March by using a dangerous device against peaceful protesters. In addition, the above-mentioned civil society organisations appealed to the United Nations, prompting the initiation of a special procedure, and submitted a request for interim measures to the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>90</sup>

### **✂ ALARM: Detaining, Arrests, and Charges against Activists**

During the reporting period, Serbian security institutions continued – and intensified – the practice of detaining and arresting activists, students, protesters and other opponents of the current regime. Since the tragic event in Novi Sad, approximately 100 individuals have been arrested or detained in connection with the latest wave of citizen protests.<sup>91</sup> While most were released within 48 hours, many were charged

85 Civic Initiatives, “[Protesti protiv korupcije u Srbiji: Pregled događaja i postupanja institucija prema demonstrantima](#)” [Protests against corruption in Serbia: Overview of events and actions of institutions towards protesters], *op. cit.*

86 RSF, “Protests in Serbia: RSF calls for justice for attacks on at least 12 journalists”, RSF, 30/01/2025 <https://rsf.org/en/protests-serbia-rsf-calls-justice-attacks-least-12-journalists>

87 Milica Radenković Jeremić and Lara Owen, “Government denies using the ‘sonic cannon’ at Serbia protests”, BBC, 18/03/2025.

88 Jovana Krstić, “Od Srbije nema ‘zvučni top’, do Srbije ima ‘zvučni top’: Hronologija kontradiktornih izjava” [From ‘Serbia does not possess a sound cannon’, to ‘Serbia does possess a sound cannon’: The chronology of contradictory statements], RFE, 19/03/2025.

89 BCSP, “A War against Citizens: Who Authorised the Use of the Illegal Weapon?”, BCSP, 16/03/2025.

90 Civic Initiatives, “Podneta krivična prijava za terorizam zbog incidenta 15. marta, sada dostupna baza sa svedočenjima o posledicama zvučnog udara” [Criminal complaint filed for terrorism due to the incident on 15 March; the database with testimonies about the consequences of the sound impact is now available], *Civic Initiatives*, 09/04/2025,

91 Civic Initiatives, “Protesti protiv korupcije u Srbiji: Pregled događaja i postupanja institucija prema demonstrantima” [Protests against corruption in Serbia: Overview of events and actions of institutions towards protesters], p. 6

with offences such as causing general danger, inciting the violent overthrow of the constitutional order, assaulting officers on duty, and spreading panic.

During the arrests, many of the police officers involved were in civilian clothes and failed to present identification, thereby violating their legal obligations. In some instances, detentions resembled kidnappings – for example, two student activists from Novi Sad were forcibly pushed into a car without registration plates by six unidentified men and taken to the premises of the Security Information Agency (BIA) for interrogation.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, some of the detained individuals were denied their right to legal defence, and their attorneys were reportedly assaulted by police officers on duty.<sup>93</sup>

On 14 March, the day before the large citizens' protest in Belgrade, six activists from Novi Sad were arrested on charges of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order. The arrests followed the release of an audio recording – made by covertly eavesdropping on a meeting of the activists – which was leaked to the media before the matter reached judicial authorities.<sup>94</sup> According to the activists' attorney, the recording was made by the BIA, with the order signed by the president of the Higher Court in Belgrade. In addition to the misuse of security institutions for surveillance of political opponents and the unauthorised leaking of sensitive information, the charges themselves are unjustified, as the group took no action to implement the content of the disputed conversation. The arrested activists were not released from custody during the reporting period.

## Cyber-Attacks and Illegal Surveillance

In December 2024, *Amnesty International* published the report "*Digital Prison: Surveillance and Repression of Civil Society in Serbia*", which examines the Serbian government's use of digital repression. According to the report, Serbian security institutions have systematically abused spyware tools originally developed to combat crime and enhance citizens' security. Contrary to their intended purposes, spyware such as *NoviSpy* and *Pegasus*, along with forensic tools like *Cellebrite*, have been used to illegally collect data from the electronic devices of journalists, activists and citizens peacefully expressing dissent against the authorities. *NoviSpy* was reportedly installed on devices during police interrogations, while *Cellebrite* technology was used to unlock smartphones, map social networks, intercept communications, and analyse the private data of protesters. The *Amnesty International* report also points to the misuse of foreign financial donations that were intended to advance the fight against organised crime. However, the Serbian authorities used it to access technologies like *Cellebrite* without appropriate oversight or protective mechanisms.<sup>95</sup>

The findings in the report are based on in-depth interviews with 13 individuals who were directly targeted by spyware or subjected to data extraction from their mobile devices, as well as 28 civil society representatives from across Serbia. The report also draws on forensic analyses. The investigation revealed that configuration data embedded in a spyware sample was linked to an employee of BIA, who had previously been involved in Serbia's efforts to acquire *Android* spyware from the now-defunct company *Hacking Team*.<sup>96</sup> Following the publication of the report, *Pegasus* spyware attacks were attempted on at least two Serbian journalists.<sup>97</sup>

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92 N1 Beograd, Autonomija, "Privedena aktivistkinja: Bila su šestorica u crnom, jedan me je podigao i odneo u auto bez tablica" [Female activist detained: There were six people in black, one of them lifted me and took me to a car that had no plates], *N1*, 08/11/2024.

93 Nova, "FemPlatz: Policajci napali i izbacili iz stanice advokaticu koja je došla da zastupa uhapšene na protestu u Beogradu" [FemPlatz: Police officers attacked and threw out of the police station a female attorney who came to represent those arrested at a protest in Belgrade], *Nova*, 16/03/2025.

94 Savo Djurdjić, "Politički zatvorenici i taoci režima" [Political prisoners and hostages of the regime], *Radar*, 02/04/2025.

95 Amnesty International, "Digital Prison: Surveillance and Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia", *Amnesty International*, December 2025.

96 *Ibid.*

97 Aleksa Tešić, "Dve novinarke BIRN-a mete Pegazus špijunskog programa" [Two BIRN journalists were targeted with the Pegazus spy programme], *BIRN*, 27/03/2025.



## Intrusive Financial Inspections

On 25 February, Serbian police raided the offices of four Belgrade-based civil society organisations – CRTA, Civic Initiatives, the Centre for Practical Politics, the Trag Foundation, and KOMS – after the Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation into their use of U.S. foreign aid. The raids came in the wake of U.S. President Trump's decision to curb USAID activities by imposing a 90-day spending freeze on 24 January.<sup>98</sup> Tabloid media outlets controlled by the Serbian regime published news of the police action before it began, suggesting that sensitive information was leaked from the police for propaganda purposes.<sup>99</sup>

The targeted organisations regularly undergo financial audits, and one of them does not receive any USAID funding at all. Meanwhile, the primary recipient of USAID funds in Serbia is the government itself. These facts indicate that the U.S. President's order was used as a false pretext to once again label civil society organisations that criticise systemic corruption as agents of foreign influence and to criminalise their work. On 13 March, CRTA filed a criminal complaint for unauthorised handling of information and documentation seized during the raid by members of the Criminal Police Directorate, and the subsequent transfer of that information to the President of the Republic.<sup>100</sup>

This is not the first time that state institutions have been misused to portray CSOs critical of the government's malpractice as enemies of the nation or as being involved in criminal activities. In July 2020, the Directorate for the Prevention of Money Laundering within the Ministry of Finance of Serbia compiled a list of employees of media outlets and CSOs whose banking data it sought to scrutinise – allegedly to determine whether these organisations and individuals were linked to money laundering or terrorist financing.<sup>101</sup> The investigation was concluded without any charges against CSOs or independent media. However, the tabloid campaign alleging the misuse of foreign funds has persisted to this day.

## Smear Campaigns Continue

Smear campaigns in pro-regime tabloids and other media have been one of the main tools used to repress civil society in Serbia. Due to tight government control over the media landscape, such campaigns significantly influence public opinion. During the reporting period, government-affiliated media consistently targeted and slandered activists, students, CSO leaders, and others involved in citizens' protests and blockades.

One of the most serious incidents occurred when the daily newspaper *Večernje novosti* published scans of the passports of two students, brothers Lazar and Luka Stojaković, insinuating that Croatian intelligence services were involved in the student protests, as the brothers hold dual citizenship.<sup>102</sup> Another student activist, Mila Pajić, was repeatedly singled out by Serbian tabloids as the alleged leader of the student protests. She was slandered as anti-Serbian due to her activism related to dealing with the past. Tabloids also claimed to have access to her medical records, portraying her as mentally unstable.<sup>103</sup> These cases suggest real or fabricated leaks of sensitive personal data from state institutions. Despite this, no institution or media outlet involved in these smear campaigns has been held legally accountable.

Most concerning is that the highest state officials, led by the President of Serbia, have consistently labelled the student and citizen protests as a "colour revolution," alleging foreign interference. Notably, President Aleksandar Vučić publicly named two prominent civil society activists, Maja Stojanović and

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98 Milica Stojanović, "Serbian NGOs Accuse Government of Pressure Over Police Raids", *Balkan Insight*, 25/02/2025

99 *Ibid.*

100 CRTA, "Krivična prijava protiv predsednika Vučića i drugih zbog curenja podataka iz istrage protiv Crte" [Criminal charges filed against President Vučić and others for leaking data from the investigation of CRTA], CRTA, 13/03/2025

101 European Western Balkans, "Uprava za sprečavanje pranja novca traži uvid u transakcije novinara i nevladinih organizacija" [The Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering seeks insight into the transactions of journalists and non-governmental organisations], European Western Balkans, 28/07/2025

102 N1, "„Novosti“ objavile lične podatke studenata" [Novosti published the personal data of students], *Danas*, 03/01/2025

103 Beta, "Odsek za psihologiju iz Novog Sada: Opasne laži medija o mentalnom zdravlju studenata" [Department of Psychology from Novi Sad: Dangerous media lies about the mental health of students], N1, 17/01/2025.

Dragan Popović, falsely accusing them of organising the protests.<sup>104</sup> Such accusations have led to further threats and intimidation through pro-government media and are part of a broader strategy to delegitimise and silence critical voices.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- All political prisoners must be immediately released from prison.
- The prosecutor's office and the police should immediately investigate the potential use of a sonic weapon against peaceful protests and provide guarantees that similar events will not happen again.
- The prosecutor's office and the police should effectively and indiscriminately investigate all attacks on activists, so that perpetrators can be adequately prosecuted.
- State officials and all political actors should immediately stop all forms of threats, pressures and campaigns directed against civil society organisations that criticise the government or participate in peaceful protests.
- Deputies of the National Assembly of Serbia must oppose the adoption of the so-called Law on Foreign Agents, which would stifle the rights and freedoms that serve as the basis for the functioning of civil society.
- The police and the prosecutor's office must suspend investigative and criminal proceedings against protest participants who were exercising their right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression.
- The Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Council for the Creation of an Environment Stimulating for the Development of the Civil Society must work on a special strategy that would deal with the prevention of attacks on human rights defenders, and on a strategy that would prevent violations of the constitutional rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of association.
- The Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, as well as the Government of the Republic of Serbia, must consistently and without exception condemn all attacks and pressures on civil society organisations and human rights defenders.

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<sup>104</sup> N1 Belgrade, "[Civilno društvo u Srbiji pod brutalnim pritiscima vlasti: Potrebna hitna reakcija](#)" [Civil society in Serbia under brutal pressure from the authorities: Urgent reaction needed], *N1*, 30/01/2025.

## 2. REGIONAL ISSUES AND GOOD NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS

*During the reporting period, there was both stagnation and deterioration of Serbia's regional relations. A part of this trend is attributable to the official responses to ongoing student and civic protests, which touch upon the relations with several neighbours. There has been no tangible progress in the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Priština, due to which the Serbian community in Kosovo suffers the most, although its representative have participated in parliamentary elections. Serbia remains an important factor in the liberalisation of economic relations in the region, with ongoing emphasis on the development of the Common Regional Market.*

### 2.1. Legacy of War Issues

The Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor (OWCP) has formally picked up the pace in confirming new indictments for war crimes committed in the wars of the 1990s. It has confirmed seven new indictments in 2024, up from only three in 2023 but still down from 11 in 2022.<sup>105</sup> However, all these 2024 indictments were filed against members of the KLA, the former Kosovo Albanians' armed group, for various counts of war crimes committed during the 1999 war, and are showing a rather narrow focus of the OWCP in its recent work.

After the annulled competition in 2024, the OWCP is awaiting the appointment of the new Head Prosecutor. Group of NGOs that monitor the judicial branch, led by the Humanitarian Law Centre, issued a public letter of warning against the re-appointment of the previous Head Prosecutor, Snežana Stanojković.<sup>106</sup> Among many of her shortcomings in that role, they emphasised that over the 7-year period under her lead the OWCP issued only 16 indictments based on its own investigations. All the others were actually international transfers, usually from Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the OWCP avoided transferring cases involving foreign nationals arrested in Serbia.

The Working Body for monitoring the National Strategy for Prosecuting War Crimes has issued its sixth report, for the period from April 2023 to June 2024.<sup>107</sup> As its previous reports, it is broken into hundreds of fragmented activities and their marks, which are positive for a vast majority of the activities. However, it lacks a summary, a conclusion and an overall sense of the fulfilment.

The International Commission for Missing Persons (ICMP) gave a public presentation of the working database on persons still missing from the wars in the 1990s. The possibilities of the new, unified database were presented at the event in Belgrade on 3 April 2025, with queries using various ID details and addition of new data provided by the interested parties. The database has been cleared of double entries and misleading data, issues that have thus far technically hobbled all the regional efforts to provide clear information on the missing persons.<sup>108</sup>

The trial of the president of the Serbian Radical Party Vojislav Šešelj and his associates for contempt of court, which the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) has transferred to the Republic of Serbia in February 2024, has been pending before the Higher Court in Belgrade for over a year now. The observer of the IRMCT has reported to the media that he is getting only "limited information" from the Serbian court and that the "acting head of the Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor is unavailable to him", while Šešelj himself publicly stated that he has not been contacted by the court at all.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Indictments, Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor

<sup>106</sup> "Open Letter to the High Prosecutorial Council Regarding the Appointment of the War Crimes Prosecutor", HLC, 07/04/2025

<sup>107</sup> Report no. 6 on the implementation of the National Strategy for Prosecuting War Crimes, Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Serbia

<sup>108</sup> "The International Commission for Missing Persons presented the Database of active cases of persons missing due to armed conflicts in the territory of the former Yugoslavia", The Commission on Missing Persons, 03/04/2025

<sup>109</sup> "Serbia's prosecutor's office is ignoring the demands from the Hague: Šešelj is on TV instead of on trial", RSE, 08/04/2025

## 2.2. Belgrade-Priština Relations: Still No Progress in the Dialogue

There has been no discernible progress in the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština under the auspices of the EU in the course of the reporting period. It is still essentially stuck in the details of the implementation of certain provisions of the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements, conflicting interpretations and unilateral moves. Kosovo has continued its campaign of gaining international recognition of independence, as Kenya and Sudan have recognised it as a sovereign state in April 2025.<sup>110</sup>

A meeting between two negotiators on the topic of missing persons was planned for 15 January 2025 in Brussels, with the aim of establishing the Joint Commission on Missing Persons. The Joint Commission was envisaged by the Declaration on Missing Persons from 2023, under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross and its Group on the Missing Persons that coordinates regional efforts in these matters. Details on the establishment of the Joint Commission were agreed by two negotiators, Petar Petković (Belgrade) and Besnik Bislimi (Priština) during the meeting in Brussels on 17 December.<sup>111</sup> The January meeting was supposed to also be its inaugural meeting, but Petar Petković cancelled after the Priština negotiator failed to show up. He also did it as a statement of protest as the Priština government's police raided some 35 offices of local Serb institutions in a number of municipalities on the same day, which he branded as "Albin Kurti's effort to ethnically cleanse Kosovo of Serbs".<sup>112</sup> The work of these institutions was thus practically terminated, with a formal explanation by the police that they were the institutions of the Serbian state and were therefore illegal.<sup>113</sup> A new attempt to establish the Joint Commission is planned for April, now to be held under Peter Sorensen, who replaced Miroslav Lajčák as EU's Special Representative for the Belgrade-Priština Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues at the end of January.

Political parties of Kosovo Serbs participated in parliamentary elections on 9 February 2025, thus ending a multi-year electoral boycott. This was the most positive development concerning this topic in the reporting period. Close relations of the Serbian List (SL), the leading local Serb party, and the SNS and President Aleksandar Vučić was once again confirmed, as President Vučić had called Kosovo Serbs to participate in these elections and to vote for the SL.<sup>114</sup> The SL got nine out of 10 possible parliamentary seats that belong to the Serb community in Kosovo. Talks on forming the new government in Priština are still under way, and its composition is still an open question.

During the night of 29 November 2024, an explosive device damaged the concrete casing of the Ibar-Lepenac water canal in the Varage village, in the Zvečan municipality with Serbian majority in North of Kosovo. The canal transfers water for the cooling of the Kosovo thermal plant and for human use in local communities. No people died in the explosion, and there was only material damage. The spillage of water disrupted both the operation of the thermal plant near Priština and the local water supply.<sup>115</sup> It took seven days to construct a functional bypass, while the full repair of the canal was completed by the end of the year.<sup>116</sup>

Kosovo government was quick to blame Serbia for the "criminal terrorist attack"<sup>117</sup>, and has arrested two local Serbs for it. The official Belgrade strongly denied that it had anything to do with the attack, and asked for enhanced KFOR presence in the north of Kosovo. The new KFOR commander, General Enrico Barduani, assessed the security situation in Kosovo as "fragile, with the negative outlook".<sup>118</sup> Kosovo

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110 "Sudan recognises Kosovo", N1, 13/04/2025

111 "The negotiators of Serbia and Kosovo agreed on the implementation of the declaration on the missing persons", RSE, 17/12/2024

112 "Petkovic left the meeting in Brussels: Kurti does not want dialogue, but to cleanse Kosovo and Metohija of Serbs", RTV, 15/01/2025

113 "Kosovo closes parallel Serbian institutions, the prosecution claims that it did not approve the action", RSE, 15/01/2025

114 "Vučić supported Srpska Lista and called on Serbs to vote in the elections in as large a number as possible", KosSev, 27/01/2025

115 "What is known so far about the explosion on the Ibar-Lepenac canal in Kosovo?", RSE, 30/11/2024

116 "Rizvanoli: Ibar – Lepenac canal is now repaired", KosSev, 31/12/2024

117 "What do we know so far about the explosion on the Ibar-Lepenac canal in Kosovo?", RSE, 30/11/2024

118 "KFOR Commander: The security situation in Kosovo is fragile and has the potential to worsen", KosSev, 30/12/2024

government asked for international aid, notably from the FBI.<sup>119</sup> The two arrested men are still in custody, no official charges for the attack have been filed as at the end of this reporting period.

There has been no progress in the investigation led by the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office of Serbia regarding the participation of Serbian citizen Milan Radoičić in the armed clash that took place near the Banjska monastery in September 2023. Radoičić is at large in the territory of Serbia. The Prosecutor's Office has not filed an indictment against him yet, despite their Head Prosecutor Nenad Stefanović publicly stating that it would be filed no later than at the beginning of 2025.<sup>120</sup> Kosovo institutions, which Serbia approached through EULEX, continue to refuse to provide the requested documentation, believing that Radoičić should be tried in person in Kosovo. At the end of April, the court in Priština issued a warrant for him and 19 other persons of Serbian ethnicity for war crimes against the civilian population.<sup>121</sup>

## 2.3. Multilateral Relations: Continued Focus on the Common Regional Market

Regarding the development of regional economic initiatives, in the reporting period Serbia was once again focused on its activities within the Common Regional Market (CRM) initiative. As stated in its official bid from December 2024, its current immediate goal is to join the Single European Payment Area (SEPA) as soon as possible.<sup>122</sup> As with other Balkan countries, this membership will allow for cheaper and more efficient transfer of money, particularly remittances, which for Serbia are in the range of EUR 4 billion, or some 8% of the annual GDP.<sup>123</sup> The European Payments Council, which decides upon the matter, has requested an opinion from the European Commission. At the beginning of March, the Commission stated that Serbia needs to make further regulatory changes, namely in the Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism, and the Law on Central Repository of Beneficial Owners. As these changes were adopted by the National Assembly on 6 March, the expectation is that membership in SEPA would be granted during the next EPC session, most likely in May.<sup>124</sup>

The Open Balkans Initiative (OBI) had a fairly low public profile during the reporting period. Only one major activity, the "Open Balkan Wine Vision" exposition, was organised in late November 2024 in Belgrade. Besides the visit by President Vučić as the only high-profile regional politician present, the signed cooperation agreement between relevant national tourist agencies of North Macedonia and Albania was the only major achievement of the event.<sup>125</sup> The administrative process for the citizens of three participating countries (Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania) who wish to live and work in any of the other two OBI countries is still not fully digitalised, as the e-Albania portal is not yet in operation.<sup>126</sup>

Serbia has continued its constructive participation in other regional initiatives. The annual South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) meeting was held on 6 November in Tirana. Ministers of Defence and highly ranked representatives from all SEDM nations participated at the meeting. The most important point of the ministerial meeting was the approval of a new project entitled "SEDM – A Platform for Enhancing the Member States' Resilience".<sup>127</sup> Serbia was represented by the Acting Assistant Minister of Defence. Also, Serbia took the role of the lead nation in the SEDM project "The Role of Women Leaders in the Field of Defence and Security".<sup>128</sup>

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119 "The FBI is involved in the investigation of the explosion on the Ibar-Lepenac canal", Al Jazeera Balkans, 21/12/2024

120 "Prosecutor Nenad Stefanović: Decision on the indictment against Milan Radoičić for Banjska to be made in early 2025 at the latest", *Danas*, 02/12/2024

121 "Kosovo issues an arrest warrant for Milan Radoičić for war crimes", RSE, 28/04/2025

122 "Serbia is once again in the SEPA waiting room, North Macedonia and Moldova have been accepted", *Nedeljnik*, 12/03/2025

123 "The Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) in the Western Balkans 6: A perspective on remittances", *Re-ActLab*, 14/11/2025

124 "Serbia's entry into SEPA delayed by regulatory requirements", *Biznis*, 14/03/2025

125 "At the Fair in Belgrade, North Macedonia and Albania signed a Memorandum of Cooperation in Tourism", *Kosovo-online*, 24/11/2024

126 "Open Balkan Initiative – Current Status", *Intermark*, 03/03/2025

127 "SEDM Ministerial Meeting – Tirana 2024", SEDM, 06/11/2024

128 "Meeting of the Cooperation Process of Defence Ministers of Southeast European Countries – SEDM", Ministry of Defence, 07/11/2024

## 2.4. Bilateral Relations: Deterioration with Several Neighbours

Over the reporting period, Serbia's regional relations have been influenced by the ruling SNS party and governmental reactions to the widespread protest led by student groups after the fall of the canopy of the newly renovated railway station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, which claimed 16 lives. The protests steadily grew, mobilising different social groups across the country.

### **ALARM: Expulsion of Foreign Nationals Posing “Unacceptable Security Risk”**

As part of the attempted suppression of the protests, security services used denial of entry into the country and expulsion of selected foreign nationals. On several occasions, the government detained various foreign nationals and requested that they leave the country. No specific explanation was ever provided, other than they posed an “unacceptable security risk”, but it was done ostensibly because they have either supported the protests in Serbia, usually through social media posts, or the security officials for some reason believed they were actually participating in the protests.

The largest such case occurred on 22 January, when 13 participants of the Erste Foundation seminar in Belgrade were apprehended during the night. They were quickly issued with an order to leave the country. There were foreign nationals from Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, North Macedonia, Albania, Moldova, Romania, Austria and Czechia.<sup>129</sup> This provoked reactions from Croatia and Albania specifically, through official démarches. After that, another three Croatian citizens were told to leave the country in early April, among them the head of the Croatian Chamber of Commerce office in Serbia. By the end of the reporting period, almost 20 Croatian citizens who worked and lived in Serbia have been expelled under the suspicion of posing an “unacceptable security risk”.<sup>130</sup>

There have been no continued positive developments in relations with Croatia after two meetings of ministers of foreign affairs in July and October, and after the agreement to form a bilateral commission to work on open issues. After stagnation came the deterioration into worsening of relations due the above-mentioned expulsion of Croatian (among other) citizens from Serbia. In the context of ongoing protests, the media close to the government and the ruling SNS party, as well as numerous public officials, are casually using the term “ustashas” – the name of pro-nazi Croatian armed units in WW2 that were the prime force in genocide against Serbs in parts of Yugoslavia – to label student and civic protesters.<sup>131</sup> By doing this, they are further raising the inter-ethnic tensions and smearing a part of the society. However, it is important to emphasise that relations between the two societies are being improved by Serbian students who, on their marathon run to Brussels and while passing through Croatia, were greeted very friendly by both citizens and officials. These meetings received significant media attention.<sup>132</sup>

Bilateral relations further deteriorated after Croatia signed defence cooperation agreements with Albania and Kosovo on 18 March 2025. Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement opposing such a move, stating that it was signed with an “illegitimate representative of a provincial authority” (Kosovo) and is aimed against Serbia, disregarding issues of regional stability.<sup>133</sup> There was no advancement in the context of solving bilateral issues, on the track that was announced by two ministers of foreign affairs in the summer of 2024. On top of these issues, Belgrade recalled its ambassador to Zagreb at the end

129 “A total of 13 foreign citizens were detained in Belgrade and expelled from Serbia without explanation”, Autonomija, 22/01/2025

130 “Ambassador Bišćević: Four Croats were expelled from Serbia in two days, 15 in three months”, N1, 09/04/2025; “Expulsion of Croatian citizens from Serbia: Human dramas in the vortex of political tensions”, RSE, 23/04/2025

131 “German public service media report: Protests in Serbia and Vučić's propaganda war in the media”, N1, 23/03/2025

132 “Students welcomed in Varaždin with the song 'For a million years', the mayor and Croatian MPs also attended the reception”, N1, 27/04/2025; “Student marathon runners from Serbia on their way to Brussels arrived in Osijek, Croatia”, RSE, 25/04/2025

133 “Announcement of a dangerous precedent in the region”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18/03/2025



of March, without a formal explanation but with a shared understanding of the public in both countries that her tenure was marked by too many public spats and problems in recent months.<sup>134</sup>

Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina remained stable, but are affected by the internal political crisis in BiH as the President of the Republic of Srpska Milorad Dodik and President of the RS Assembly Nenad Stevandić have been sentenced by the court for unconstitutional actions and are wanted for arrest by BiH state institutions. Belgrade was mostly quiet about the entire affair, but the highest-ranking Serbian officials kept their close relationship with Dodik throughout the crisis. When Sarajevo tried to get Interpol to issue international warrants for the arrest of Dodik and Stevandić, Belgrade intervened and sent a note to Interpol opposing such a move. According to the Minister of Internal Affairs, Ivica Dačić, Dodik and Stevandić hold dual citizenships of both BiH and Serbia, and Serbia has "an interest and obligation to protect its citizens at the national and international level".<sup>135</sup>

Relations with Albania remained stable, but are now burdened with the above-mentioned defence agreement between Albania, Croatia and Kosovo, to which Serbia has strongly reacted. The effect of the positive drive to bilateral relations that was given by the Open Balkans Initiative has somewhat subsided over the previous year. On a positive note, Serbia's and Albania's joint bid to host the 2027 UEFA tournament for national teams under 21 years of age has been selected by the UEFA in February.<sup>136</sup> This presents a new opportunity for further development of societal ties.

Relations with Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bulgaria remained stable and with a generally positive tone. Relations with Romania are also positive, but Romania had to react twice to the developments in Serbia in the context of the ongoing protests. First, on 22 January, its embassy in Belgrade asked for clarification from the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the reasons why a Romanian citizen, a participant in the Erste Foundation seminar mentioned above, was hastily expelled from Serbia.<sup>137</sup> Then, it had to make a public rebuttal of a story that was published by a heavily pro-governmental tabloid *Informer*, which claimed that the opposition was bringing in a large number of Romanian citizens so they could break into apartments of protesting citizens and loot them.<sup>138</sup> The aim of this fake and offensive story was to discourage citizens from participating in the ongoing protests, and is an example of how current internal affairs are affecting regional relations.

Of all the neighbouring countries, official Belgrade has been prioritising relations with Hungary for quite some time. A plan to construct an oil pipeline between the two countries, proposed in 2023, is now formally in place. The Serbian part of the line should cost EUR 157 million; it will cover 113 kilometres from Novi Sad to the Hungarian border and should be completed by 2028.<sup>139</sup> Hungarian Minister of Defence Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky visited Serbia on 1 April, and the two sides signed an annual plan on military cooperation, based on the 2023 framework agreement. However, this signing was subjected to a strong spin by pro-governmental media, as well as by the President himself, who spoke of a "military alliance" with Hungary, thus publicly putting into question the official policy of military neutrality.<sup>140</sup> The agreement does not deal with the matter of such political magnitude, but rather covers technical military matters such as transfer of military equipment, related procedures, and so on.<sup>141</sup> The signing came shortly after the above mentioned military agreement between Croatia, Albania and Kosovo, and was therefore given a very high public profile as a sort of counterbalance.

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134 "The recalled ambassador of Serbia, Jelena Milić, filled the newspaper columns in Croatia for months", Danas, 25/03/2025; "Pupovac reveals the reasons for the sudden recall of the Serbian ambassador in Zagreb: Vučić had no choice, an outburst occurred...", Jutarnji list, 25/03/2025

135 "Dačić: Note to Interpol regarding the request to issue a warrant for Dodik and Stevandić", RTS, 27/03/2025

136 "UEFA has made it official: Serbia and Albania will host the 2027 European Youth Championship", Sport klub, 04/02/2025

137 "Romania requests clarification from Serbia regarding the expulsion of a Romanian citizen", Beta, 23/01/2025

138 "The Embassy of Romania condemns the fake news of Informer and demands a public apology", N1, 14/03/2025

139 "The Government of Serbia adopted a plan for the construction of an oil pipeline from Hungary to Novi Sad, 113 kilometres long", NIN, 31/03/2025

140 "The goal is a military alliance between Serbia and Hungary": Vučić on the signing of the military cooperation plan", Danas, 01/04/2025

141 "There are no elements of a military alliance: What did the defence ministers of Serbia and Hungary sign?", Danas, 01/04/2025



There have been no meaningful changes in relations with new candidate states. Serbia did not join EU's restrictive measures against legal and physical persons for destabilising actions against Moldova in late October 2024.<sup>142</sup> Serbia's position is also in line with the overall policy of not aligning with EU's restrictive measures against Russia or Russian interests. Relations with Ukraine mostly remain in the shadow of Serbia's relations with Russia. In the United Nations (UN), Serbia has voted for the Ukrainian and European resolution affirming Ukraine's integrity and sovereignty, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly. However, shortly after, President Vučić decried such a position, offering "apologies": "I believe that Serbia made a mistake today; I apologise to the citizens because I was responsible for it, because I guess I'm tired and burdened and I can't get to everything".<sup>143</sup> President's comment was later lauded by the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>144</sup>

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Serbia should focus on implementing its obligations arising from the Ohrid Agreement and its Implementation Annex. The full implementation of the agreement between Belgrade and Priština from February 2023 is the only reasonable way forward, which is important not only for the process of integration into the European Union, but also for the normalisation of the life of the Serbian community in Kosovo.
- Serbia should make additional efforts to fulfil the Common Regional Market Action Plan for the period 2025-2028.
- Serbian officials and institutions should be mindful of regional and bilateral effects of the practice of expulsion and denial of entry to citizens of neighbouring countries without clear explanations, and should cease such practice.

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142 "Serbia did not comply with EU measures regarding Moldova and chemical weapons", RSE, 25/10/2024

143 "Serbia voted for the European resolution on Ukraine – Vučić apologised to the citizens for that", N1, 25/02/2025

144 "Zakharova for RTS: We flinched because of Serbia's vote in the UN General Assembly, relations between Russia and the USA are in the resuscitation phase", RTS, 01/03/2025

### 3. THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON THE EUROPEAN UNION

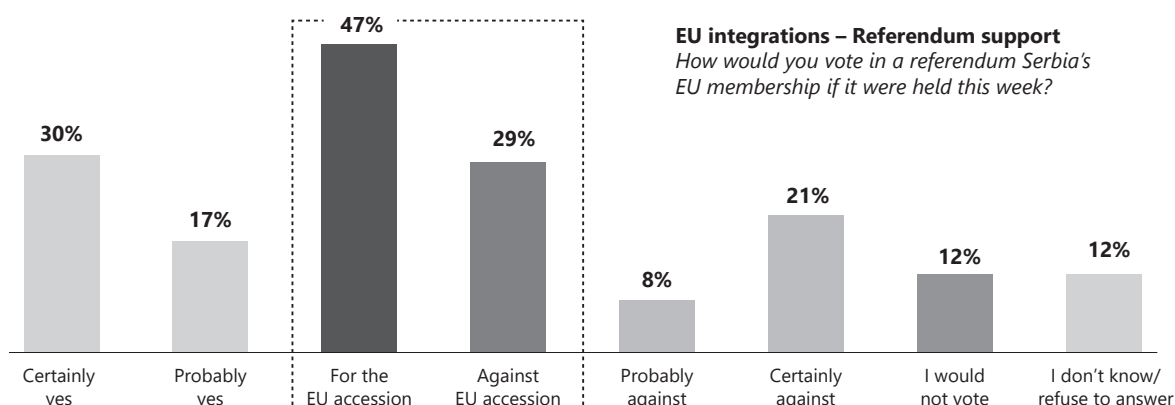
*Serbian citizens are more critical towards the EU, influenced by the ongoing student and civic protests.*

The debate on the lithium mine was revived when President Vučić, after the meeting in Brussels with Ursula von der Leyen on 25 March 2025, hinted that the 'Jadar' project would soon be included in the list of strategic projects of the European Union.<sup>145</sup> However, this has not happened by the time of the conclusion of this report. The National Convention on the European Union sent a letter to the officials of the European Commission, in which it warned of the negative consequences of such a step, due to further damage to the image of the EU in Serbia. In a moment when protests for fundamental democratic rights and freedoms and the rule of law are in full swing, such a step would be understood as "support for the preservation of the existing situation".<sup>146</sup>

During the formation of the new government in mid-April, in the midst of the protests, the ruling majority chose Dr. Boris Bratina, a professor of philosophy, as the Minister of Information and Telecommunications. He was once a member of the board of directors of the far-right movement "SNP 1389", whose ban was requested by the Public Prosecutor's Office in 2011, although the competent court rejected the request in 2012.<sup>147</sup> Minister Bratina publicly burned the flag of the European Union at one of the rallies against the independence of Kosovo, held on 24 March 2009.<sup>148</sup>

Ipsos conducted a survey in the autumn of 2024 on several issues relevant to the public sentiment regarding the EU, but the integral report is not publicly available. Srdjan Bogosavljević, head of Ipsos in Serbia, has provided some information on the findings in early December 2024. According to their survey, 46% of the population would vote for Serbia's membership in the EU, while 30% would vote against it. He claims that this is a positive trend for the "pro" option. Pragmatic and economic considerations continue to dominate within this cohort. However, he also stated that the perception of Russia and China remains more favourable than the one of the EU.<sup>149</sup> In an interview at the end of the year, Predrag Kurčubić, one of Ipsos directors, also provided some survey data – while 47% of the population would vote in favour of EU membership, and 29% against it, 30% of the population has a positive view of the EU while 41% has a negative one.<sup>150</sup>

Figure 1: Referendum Support for Serbia's EU Accession



Source: Ipsos (via Kurir)<sup>151</sup>

145 "Vučić: In 7 days, EU will declare Jadar its strategic project s", Danas, 25/03/2025

146 "NCEU sent a letter to EC officials regarding the inclusion of the 'Jadar' project in the list of EU strategic projects", NCEU, 01/04/2025

147 "Boris Bratina", Istinaomer

148 Boris Bratina and Miša Vacić at a rally on 24 March 2009 in Belgrade, YouTube

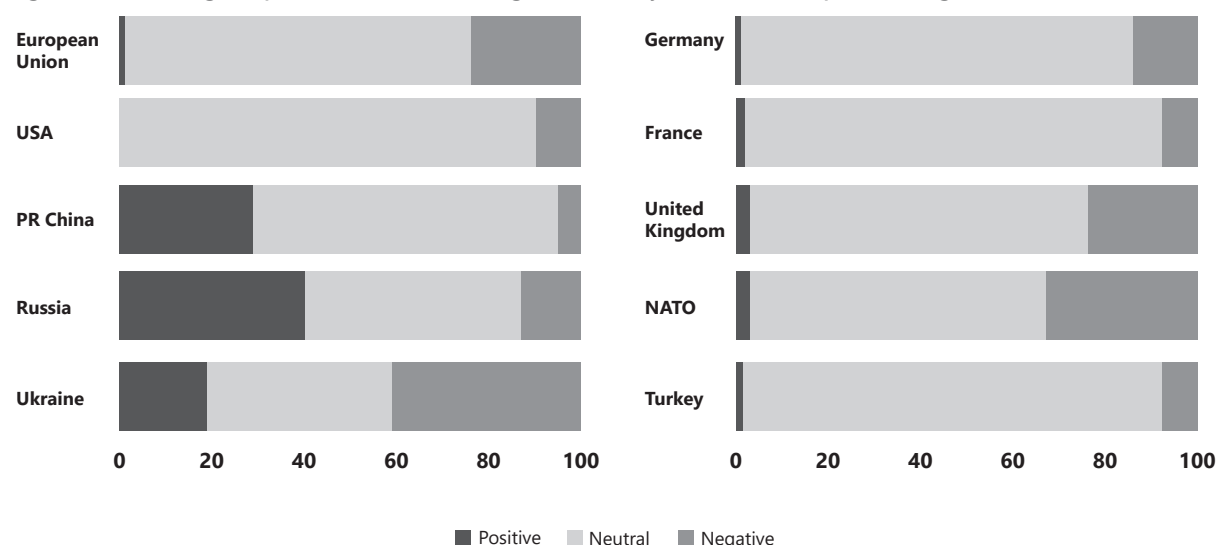
149 "Bogosavljević: EU support is growing in Serbia, but Russia and China are more popular", RTS, 03/12/2024

150 "Here is what the survey says about politicians, the biggest problems in society, and the attitude towards the EU", Kurir, 25/12/2025

151 Ibid.

The New Third Way has conducted a survey on Serbia's relations with the West for a period from August to November 2024.<sup>152</sup> This organization has done media monitoring of some 5,000 news articles throughout the period shows the way that certain topics have been framed, i.e. the tonality towards various international actors.

Figure 2: Percentage of positive, neutral and negative tonality across the sample of foreign actors



Source: Novi treći put<sup>153</sup>

The survey clearly shows that in the summer of 2024 there was an increase in the negative tonality of news about the EU, due to the fact that the lithium mine issue came to the centre of public attention. This trend was strengthened due the gap in terms of the very negative attitude of the majority of public towards that project on the one hand, and due to the support for that project by the EU. Thus, except for a short period in the winter of 2023/24, the tonality is net negative, although the neutral one is essentially dominant.<sup>154</sup>

Public survey on the perceptions of Serbia's most important political and economic partners shows a similar picture as before. The EU is viewed as the most important economic partner (60.4%), although this percentage is declining. In this respect, China has grown significantly in the perception of citizens, to a record 27.6%. While the ratio of EU v. China as major economic partners was approximately 77:14% in 2022, in this survey it is 60:27%. Russia retained the top position as Serbia's main foreign policy partner in citizens' view, with 39%, while the EU ranked second with 34%, somewhat weaker than before.<sup>155</sup>

The overall conclusion is that the most popular media outlets remain anti-Western in the tonality of the news articles. In the reporting period the trend of the news tonality on the EU has been somewhat negative, after a period of increased positive reporting.<sup>156</sup>

During the protests, government officials, SNS party representatives and pro-government media constructed a narrative of a protest that is induced and led from the outside. "Coloured revolution", as a derogatory term coming from well-known Russian playbooks, is now casually used by the President himself to label the protests.<sup>157</sup> Such narratives are common among the ruling elites in autocracies, or

152 "Serbia and Relations with the West: The Media and Civic Attitudes", Novi treći put, November 2024

153 Ibid.

154 Ibid, p. 6

155 Ibid, p. 16

156 Ibid, p. 18

157 "Why do the authorities in Serbia see a 'coloured revolution'?", RSE, 25/02/2025

those who show autocratic tendencies, such as those in Georgia, Serbia and Slovakia.<sup>158</sup> Through artificial polarisation, the aim is to gather supporters for the “defence of Serbia itself” from “foreign influence”, which is at times tied to the EU.

According to preliminary results of the survey done by Demostat there is a drop in popularity of the EU among pro-EU voters, which is influenced to the ongoing protests. While their pro-EU commitment remains, in terms of supporting the EU membership, they feel that the EU is letting down the anti-corruption and pro-democracy protests as it prefers not to get vocally involved. That is the sentiment shared by the core pro-EU base, i.e. of urban, more educated and well-off cohorts.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> “Handbook for autocrats: How the authorities in Georgia, Slovakia and Serbia are using the same narratives and tactics against protests”, Istinomer, 14/03/2025

<sup>159</sup> “The disappointment of EU supporters in Serbia is a consequence of the behaviour of Brussels”, Demostat, 28/03/2025

## 4. CHAPTER 23 – JUDICIARY AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

### 4.1. Judiciary

*The mass protests of students and citizens were caused by the collapse of the canopy of the railway station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, which caused the death of 16 people. This event, and many that stemmed from it, made all the anomalies of the domestic justice system even more obvious: selectivity in the application of law and strong political influences on the investigation, despite all earlier normative efforts to prevent them. The students presented demands whose common thread was the insistence that the prosecutor's office performs its work in accordance with the law, both in the case of the collapse of the canopy and in cases of attacks on demonstrators. The protests are still under way, precisely because of the fact that the judicial authorities have not fulfilled their task and that the state repression against those who warn against this is in fact intensifying.*

*The analysis of the work of the judicial councils since the adoption of the constitutional amendments showed that the councils are not complying with the obligations under laws and by-laws regarding the transparency of their work. Due to strong criticism from members of the legal profession, it was announced that public debates on amendments and supplements to the criminal legislation and the Draft Law on the Judicial Academy will continue in 2025; however, there were no activities on that front as of the end of April.*

#### 4.1.1. The Collapse of the Canopy in Novi Sad – The (In)action of the Prosecution under Pressure

The collapse of the canopy of the railway station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024 caused the death of 16 people,<sup>160</sup> while one person was seriously injured. The Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad conducted an on-the-scene-investigation on the day of the accident, but it took three weeks to complete the investigation and arrest suspects.<sup>161</sup> The competent prosecutor's office conducted the preliminary investigation proceedings prior to arresting the suspects, thus allowing the persons who were arrested later, and potentially also others who were involved in the reconstruction of the station building, to influence witnesses, contaminate or destroy evidence, leave the country or otherwise influence the course of the investigation and the outcome of the proceedings.

The reluctance of the competent prosecutor's office to order an investigation and react urgently in this case can be directly linked to the statements that were made by the highest state officials, who claimed on the day of the accident and in the days that followed that the canopy was actually not reconstructed during the work on the station building. The station building was officially opened in July 2024, by public officials who assured citizens that it was a 'construction pearl' above the European standards, a place that is safe for travel, and "the airport of the city of Novi Sad and Vojvodina".<sup>162</sup>

Through their statements made after the accident, as well as many times before, the officials sent signals to the prosecutor's office on how to (not) act. For example, immediately after the collapse of the canopy the Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure Goran Vesić said that "liability of each person that was responsible for endangering the safety of passengers at the station will be sought and established in the upcoming days", but he also added that "the canopy was not reconstructed" and

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<sup>160</sup> Fourteen persons were killed on the spot, while two died later from the consequences of sustained injuries.

<sup>161</sup> "21.11.2024. Saopštenje za javnost" [Press release, 21/11/2024], Higher Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad, 21/11/2024

<sup>162</sup> "Predsednica Gojković o rekonstrukciji zgrade železničke stanice u Novom Sadu" [Maja Gojković on the reconstruction of the railway station building in Novi Sad], YouTube, 05/07/2024

that “responsibility for that will be established as well”.<sup>163</sup> The President of the Republic made a similar statement, and then repeated it on several occasions, adding that there was no corruption in the station building reconstruction project.<sup>164</sup>

As a result of the extraordinary interest of the public in this case, witnesses, video recordings and the project documentation quickly confirmed that the collapsed canopy *was* the subject of reconstruction, i.e. that state officials were not telling the truth. Citizens held peaceful gatherings throughout Serbia, demanding responsibility for the actions that led to the collapse of a public building.

### Three Prosecutor’s Offices, One Event, Not a Single Trial

It was only the persistent protests of citizens in Novi Sad, and then in other cities as well, that led to the resignation of high-ranking state officials (two ministers and the director of the Public Company “Infrastructure of the Railways of Serbia”),<sup>165</sup> the investigation, and the indictment by the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Novi Sad against 13 persons, filed on 30 December 2024. The indictment did not enter into legal force; instead, after three full months of waiting and exceeding all statutory deadlines, it was returned to the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Novi Sad for revision in April.<sup>166</sup>

The different treatment by the court of the suspects who participated in the reconstruction of the station building (suspects from the construction profession) and the three suspects who were public officials was quite obvious. While the suspects from the ranks of the profession are still in custody, the detention of Goran Vesić, the competent minister in charge of construction affairs at the time of the collapse of the canopy, was terminated immediately after it was ordered, with the court’s finding that there is no reasonable suspicion that he even committed the criminal offence he was being charged with.<sup>167</sup> The court issued another similar decision in January 2025, at the repeated proposal of the prosecution to order detention.<sup>168</sup> In this unusual decision, by which the court delved into the merits of conducting the proceedings against Vesić and not only into the existence of grounds for ordering detention, the former minister was released from criminal liability even before the trial. Two women who were public officials at the time of the collapse of the canopy (Anita Dimoski and Jelena Tanasković) also enjoyed the privileged position compared to the representatives of the profession, having spent the time since they were arrested under the so-called house arrest.<sup>169</sup> In this way, the judicial authorities showed that, despite the identical circumstances of the case, they treat citizens who hold public positions and have political protection differently from those who do not.

As the court’s decision on the indictment was being awaited, the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade conducted its own investigation and, after only six days of investigative actions, filed an indictment for the alleged unlawful commissioning of the station building.<sup>170</sup> In the case involving the fall of the canopy, the preliminary investigation procedure was conducted also by the Public Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime, which focused on money flows, i.e. possible corruption-related acts, having taken over the case from the Special Department for the Suppression of Corruption of the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Novi Sad.<sup>171</sup> The Public Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime waited more than

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163 “Vesić: Živote je izgubilo 14 ljudi, istraga će utvrditi zašto nadstrešnica nije bila u planu rekonstrukcije” [Vesić: 14 people died; the investigation will determine why the canopy was not part of the reconstruction plan], *RTS*, 02/11/2025

164 “Vučić: U konstrukcionom smislu nije rekonstruisana nadstrešnica, nije pala zbog korupcije” [Vučić: In terms of construction, the canopy was not reconstructed, it did not fall due to corruption], *RTV*, 20/02/2025

165 “Tri ostavke, nula odgovornosti” [Three resignations, zero responsibility], *portal 021*, 20/11/2024

166 “Optužnica o padu nadstrešnice vraćena na dopunu” [Indictment on the fall of the canopy returned so it could be supplemented], *Danas*, 11/04/2025

167 “Goranu Vesiću ukinut pritvor” [Goran Vesić’s detention terminated], *RTS*, 27/11/2024

168 “Viši sud u Novom Sadu ponovo odbio da odredi pritvor Goranu Vesiću” [The Higher Court in Novi Sad once again refuses to order the detention of Goran Vesić], *Radio Free Europe*, 10/01/2025

169 “Zbog pada nadstrešnice u Novom Sadu: Produžen kućni pritvor Jeleni Tanasković i Aniti Dimoski, Nebojša Šurlan još 30 dana u zatvoru” [House arrest of Jelena Tanasković and Anita Dimoski was extended due to the fall of the canopy in Novi Sad, while Nebojša Šurlan is to remain in prison for another 30 days], *Danas*, 31/03/2025

170 “Saopštenje” [Announcement], Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade, 04/03/2025

171 “Istragu o padu nadstrešnice preuzima Tužilaštvo za organizovani kriminal” [The investigation into the fall of the canopy to be taken over by the Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime], *N1*, 12/02/2025

three months to launch or take over the investigation of corruption-related crimes, even though the collapse of the canopy clearly indicated that the reconstruction of the station building was carried out without a public tender, with multiple increases of the cost of work, and that it was a job that involved more than 200 subcontractors selected based on unclear criteria.

The Public Prosecution for Organised Crime never revealed the reasons for the postponement of the financial investigation, but it can be linked to the statements of officials – above all those of the President of the Republic – that there was no corruption on this job. It was only the persistent insistence of the citizens that led to the “opening of the case” on the financial flows; however, the public has not been informed about its progress to date. The prosecution is still conducting the earliest (preliminary investigation) phase, which can last indefinitely.

The Supreme Public Prosecutor transferred the case from the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade to the Public Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime,<sup>172</sup> but the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade “appropriated” it nevertheless, filing an indictment and forwarding it to the Higher Court in Belgrade.

This created a confusion of jurisdiction in a case that was greatly important to both the victims and all the citizens, the dominant impression being that different chief public prosecutors wanted to establish control over it. Proceedings involving the same event are now being conducted by no less than three public prosecutor’s offices, but there has been no visible progress in establishing responsibility half a year after the incident took place. Trials have not started in any of the three cases, but even if they have, due to the partition of the case and its contamination in the preliminary investigation and investigation phase, the public can expect different, even mutually contradictory court decisions regarding the same event, which will not lead to justice for the victims and the return of citizens’ trust in judicial institutions.

#### **4.1.2. The “Push Button” Procedure: Causing Panic and Chaos in the Case of the “Sound Cannon”**

At the student-citizen protests that were held on 15 March 2025 in Belgrade, during the 16 minutes of silence for the victims of the collapsed canopy, an illegal sound device<sup>173</sup> was used against the peacefully gathered citizens. It resulted in a stampede of those who were gathered, and medical issued that citizens reported to health institutions.<sup>174</sup> Civil society organisations alone were contacted by more than 3,000 people who felt the effects of the device.<sup>175</sup>

After three days of different information concerning the source of the sound that caused chaos during the protest, officials confirmed that Serbia does possess multiple sound devices used to break up demonstrations, and that one of them was deployed near the Serbian Parliament building during the protest but was allegedly not used.<sup>176</sup>

While the European Court of Human Rights was examining the case in the procedure related to the proposal to issue a temporary measure against the Republic of Serbia,<sup>177</sup> the President of the Republic announced on the very day of the incident that the “sound cannon was not used”, that the investigation

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172 “Saopštenje za javnost Vrhovnog javnog tužilaštva – 03.03.2025.” [Press release of the Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Office], Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Office, 03/03/2025

173 The unlawfulness of the means used is assessed based on Articles 105 and 106 of the Law on Police, which does not allow the use of such means against individuals or a group of persons.

174 “Masovno javljanje građana sa zdravstvenim tegobama nakon protesta u Beogradu – Dragoslava Barzut” [Many citizens report health problems after the protest in Belgrade], Nova S, 17/03/2025

175 “Saopštenje organizacija civilnog društva: Više od 3.000 svedočenja građana i građanki Srbije”, Građanske inicijative [Announcement of civil society organisations: More than 3,000 testimonies of citizens of Serbia], Civic initiatives], 17/03/2025

176 “Jak zvuk na protestu u Beogradu: Kontradiktornosti, krivična prijava, a evropski sud traži odgovore” [Loud noise at the protest in Belgrade: Contradictions and criminal charges, while the European Court is looking for answers], BBC, 16/03/2025

177 “BCLJP: Sud u Strazburu saopštio da odluku o privremenoj meri donosi veće sudija” [Belgrade Centre for Human Rights: The court in Strasbourg announced that the decision on the temporary measure will be made by a panel of judges], 11/04/2025



into the incident will be completed in 48 hours, and that all those who are spreading lies will be held accountable.<sup>178</sup>

Minister of Health Zlatibor Lončar said that citizens “recited” their complaints to doctors, implying that they had come to health institutions with fictitious health problems. Lončar also called for competent authorities to prosecute citizens who were “mixing the health system and politics”.<sup>179</sup>

In synchronisation with the statements of officials of the executive branch of power, the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade ordered the First Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office to open a case and order the identification of persons who have spread false information about the use of the so-called sound cannon, due to the existence of grounds for suspicion that they committed the criminal offence of ‘causing panic and disorder’ under Article 343 of the Criminal Code.<sup>180</sup>

In accordance with what the President of the Republic announced, and the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office ordered, the First Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office informed the public that no sound cannon was used on 15 March, simultaneously opening a parallel case on the causes that led to medical issues of a large number of citizens.<sup>181</sup> Since the First Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office stuck to the statement that no sound cannon was used, and failed to urgently prosecute citizens for spreading false news and causing panic, the Chief Public Prosecutor of the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade Nenad Stefanović issued a mandatory instruction to the Special Public Prosecutor for High-Tech Crime, Boris Majlat, ordering him to “process [Zdravko Ponoš, an opposition member of parliament and president of the *Srbija Centar* (SRCE) party] without delay, due to his allegations that a ‘sound cannon’ was used at the 15 March protest”.<sup>182</sup> When the Special Public Prosecutor for high-tech crime expressed his objection to the above, the competent Commission of the High Prosecutorial Council accepted it and, on several grounds, prevented the application of the mandatory instruction to arrest Ponoš.<sup>183</sup>

Civil society organisations filed a criminal complaint with the Public Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime against unknown persons due to the suspicion that the crime of terrorism had been committed, i.e. that the use of a sound device at the protest held on 15 March was intended to seriously intimidate the population, resulting in an attack on citizens’ lives and bodies.<sup>184</sup> The outgoing Prime Minister and the President of the Republic simultaneously announced that the investigation into the event will be conducted – by invitation – by the American FBI and the Russian FSB.<sup>185</sup> Only the FSB report was later published, but experts questioned its seriousness and authenticity.<sup>186</sup>

In this case, as in the case of the canopy, one can notice the same type of acting – the critical event detrimental to the lives and bodies of citizens is first followed by the statements of politicians, and then by various and mutually contradictory actions of the judicial authorities. Their aim is to relativise the event and its victims, but also to lead to different speculative and parallel versions of the same event, which prevents the establishment of truth and responsibility.

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178 “Vučić: Vojska i Kobre nemaju zvučni top, istraga o širenju laži biće završena za 48 sati” [Vučić: The Army and the Cobras do not have a sound cannon, the investigation into the lies will be completed in 48 hours], N1, 17/03/2025

179 “Lončar: Nikakav zvučni top nije upotrebljen, nadležni da procesuiraju ove tvrdnje” [Lončar: No sound cannon was used, authorities to process such claims], RTV, 17/03/2025

180 “Saopštenje” [Announcement], Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade, 16/03/2025

181 “Tužilaštvo: Nije upotrebljen „zvučni top“, radimo na utvrđivanju „razloga izazivanja ponašanja građana” [Prosecutor’s office: The ‘sound cannon’ was not used, we are trying to determine what provoked the behaviour of citizens], N1, 18/03/2025

182 “Ukinuto uputstvo tužioca Stefanovića za privođenje Ponoša zbog zvučnog topa” [Prosecutor Stefanović’s instruction for the arrest of Ponoš due to the sound cannon was cancelled], Danas, 05/04/2025

183 *Ibid.*

184 “Zvučno oružje: Krivična prijava za terorizam protiv NN lica” [Sound weapon: Criminal complaint for terrorism against unknown persons], Vreme, 10/04/2025

185 “Aleksandar Vučić: FSB dolazi za dva-tri dana, nadam se, FBI za sedam-osam” [Aleksandar Vučić: The FSB will come in two or three days, I hope, the FBI in seven or eight], Politika, 26/03/2025

186 “Pravni i bezbednosni stručnjaci saglasni: Izveštaj FSB nema težinu, liči na naručenu propagandu” [Legal and security experts agree: The FSB report has no weight, it looks like commissioned propaganda], Danas, 17/04/2025

### 4.1.3. Reactions of Judges and Prosecutors to Pressures Led by the President of the Republic

In the observed period, holders of public prosecutors' and judges' offices repeatedly addressed the public with a sharp reaction regarding the increasingly frequent and increasingly open pressure of public officials on the judiciary, most of all that of the President of the Republic.

One of the reactions, signed by more than 600 judges and prosecutors, referred to the President's statement that "prosecutors who do not protect the order and the law will be changed",<sup>187</sup> with which the President, according to the judges and prosecutors, wrote a new page in the 12 years of enslavement and humiliation of the judiciary. "After countless slanders and targeting of a small number of judges and prosecutors who refused to observe the devastation of the judiciary in silence, this time the President of the Republic went a step further by announcing that, in accordance with his own assessment, he will now openly influence the prosecutor's bodies in terms of staffing" – reads the statement of the judges and prosecutors.<sup>188</sup> The signatories of the statement believe that it is high time for judges and prosecutors to oppose such and similar actions.

The next reaction, of more than 250 judges and prosecutors, followed soon after the President of the Republic threatened to file criminal charges against the female prosecutor whose conduct in the preliminary investigation procedure he did not approve.<sup>189</sup> In that letter, judges and prosecutors stated that immunity does protect the President from any opinion expressed while discharging office, but that "direct influence on criminal proceedings exceeds the president's prerogatives".<sup>190</sup> In the opinion of judges and prosecutors, a declaration that he will personally file a report against the public prosecutor who legally undertook actions in the pre-criminal proceedings – in which, incidentally, the President believes that there are no grounds for criminal prosecution – represents a blatant obstruction of the public prosecutor in the discharge of office, and thus constitutes an act of committing the criminal offence of 'obstruction of justice'.<sup>191</sup>

Since the student demands related to the judiciary, judges and prosecutors also addressed the judicial councils, asking that the sessions of the highest judicial bodies in the country – the Supreme Court, the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council – be scheduled by the end of April to discuss the current situation in the judiciary.<sup>192</sup>

In all the cases, they reacted with letters that they signed as individuals, that is, as prosecutors and judges. Although these reactions to the increasingly strong pressures of the executive power on the judiciary are a positive step forward, it is worrying that the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council, despite the constitutional obligations and the calls of judges and prosecutors, did not step forward in any way to protect the autonomy of prosecutors and the independence of the judiciary from undue influence.

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187 "Vučić preti otkazima policajcima i tužiocima koji ne budu „šttili poredak" [Vučić threatens to fire police officers and prosecutors who fail to 'protect the order'], N1, 22/03/2025

188 "Skoro 600 sudija i tužilaca potpisalo saopštenje protiv Vučićevih pretnji" [Almost 600 judges and prosecutors sign a statement against Vučić's threats], 27/03/2025

189 "Vučić ponovo prijetio, sudije i tužioci reagovali otvorenim pismom" [Vučić threatens again, judges and prosecutors respond with an open letter], Al Jazeera Balkans, 15/04/2025

190 *Ibid.*

191 "Povećava se broj sudija i tužilaca koji smatraju Vučićeve izjave poprimaju obeležja krivičnih dela" [The number of judges and prosecutors who consider Vučić's statements to be criminal is increasing], Nova.rs, 13/04/2025

192 "A group of judges and prosecutors request sessions of the highest judicial authorities on the topic of student demands", N1, 22/05/2025

### ***Ex Officio* Disciplinary Proceedings against Prosecutor Jasmina Paunović**

The pressure on the prosecutor of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, Jasmina Paunović, stood out as particularly severe. In December 2024, the Disciplinary Prosecutor of the High Prosecutorial Council (HPC) started the *ex officio* procedure of verifying her disciplinary responsibility due to her statements in the media that the case of the collapse of the canopy in Novi Sad that killed (by that time) 15 people should have been handled by the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime. The Disciplinary Prosecutor viewed the actions of prosecutor Paunović as a violation of the principle of impartiality and a threat to citizens' trust in the public prosecutor's office.<sup>193</sup>

Part of the professional public pointed out that impartiality is directly related to acting and decision-making in a specific case, that prosecutor Paunović could not have acted impartially in a case she was never assigned,<sup>194</sup> and that Jasmina Paunović and a few of her colleagues have for years been exposed to pressure and unfair treatment solely because of their refusal to ignore the problems the Serbian judiciary was facing. It was precisely thanks to their speaking in public that the citizens' trust in the prosecutor's office was to some extent restored, rather than threatened.<sup>195</sup>

Despite the fact that less than two months after the disciplinary proceedings were initiated the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime in fact took over part of the "canopy" case from the Novi Sad and Belgrade Higher Public Prosecutor's Offices, i.e. acted in line with Paunović's statements, the proceedings against her were not completed until mid-April, when her mandate ended due to retirement.

## **The High Judicial Council Unlawfully Pressured Judicial Employees**

Instead of the High Judicial Council (HJC) taking actions that would contribute to protecting the independence of the judiciary, on 17 March the president of the Council and Supreme Court judge, Zorana Delibašić, sent a letter to all the court presidents regarding the announced one-day strike of employees in the judiciary, asking them to compile a list of the employees on strike and reduce their salaries. Delibašić referred to the Law on Strikes, which stipulates that "an employee who participates in a strike exercises all the basic rights from the employment relationship, except for the right to earnings".<sup>196</sup>

Part of the professional public assessed that the letter of the president of the HJC aimed to deter employees in advance from exercising their legal rights, over which the HJC has no jurisdiction whatsoever, and that, besides the quick order to make a list of the strikers and withhold their wages, the HJC so far had nothing to say about the numerous and daily pressures exerted on the judiciary by the highest authorities.<sup>197</sup>

### **4.1.4. Transparency of the Work of the HJC and the HPC: Insufficient and on the Margins of Social Events**

In accordance with the changes to the Constitution, judicial councils were entrusted with significant new powers, the most important of which is the election of judges and public prosecutors without the influence of the legislative and executive branches of power. The Government of Serbia and the National Assembly – with the exception of the National Assembly's role in the election of the Supreme Public Prosecutor – are now excluded from the procedure for the election and dismissal of judicial office holders. It was precisely

193 "Pokrenut disciplinski postupak protiv tužiteljke Jasmine Paunović zbog komentarisanja slučaja „Nadstrešnica“" [Disciplinary proceedings initiated against prosecutor Jasmina Paunović for her comment regarding the 'canopy' case], Danas, 10/12/2024

194 "Saopštenje Udruženja tužilaca Srbije: Ko i kako može da ugrozi poverenje javnosti u javno tužilaštvo?" [Announcement of the Association of Prosecutors of Serbia: Who, and how, can threaten citizens' trust in the public prosecution?], 11/12/2024

195 "Disciplinski tužilac hitno da obustavi postupak protiv tužiteljke Jasmine Paunović" [Disciplinary prosecutor must urgently suspend the proceedings against prosecutor Jasmina Paunović], 16/12/2025

196 "Visoki savet sudstva nezakonito vršio pritisak na zaposlene" [The High Judicial Council unlawfully pressured employees], CEPRIŠ, 25/03/2025

197 *Ibid.*

the circumstance that judicial councils, which are obliged to ensure and guarantee the autonomy of the prosecution and the independence of the judiciary, have been entrusted with new competences that increased the need for the public to be informed about their work in an objective and timely fashion.

The analysis of the work of the judicial councils since the adoption of the constitutional amendments and the constitution of the new convocations of the Councils has shown that most of the previously highlighted recommendations regarding transparency have not been fulfilled, or have been fulfilled only in part, despite the fact that some have in the meantime become a legal obligation of both councils. The HJC is not providing the public with access to data on voting at public sessions. There is a lack of information on persons in charge of public relations and those in charge of protection against undue influence in both councils. There is no clearly highlighted information on the procedures for reporting undue influence on the websites, or calls to report undue influence on public prosecutors or judges. The websites lack the councils' strategic multi-annual programmes and annual plans, so the annual reporting is in fact reduced to reporting on activities, not on strategic goals and results.<sup>198</sup>

Councils generally carry out activities that keep the public at a "safe distance", instead of those that would enable closer and direct contact between judicial councils and the public, such as holding regular or extraordinary press conferences. The HJC also avoids broadcasting its sessions, although it had decided to do so in its own act. The result of all the above is that citizens know who is at the head of the legislative and executive branches of power, because of their presence in the media, but the majority have never seen presidents and members of the highest judicial bodies. Citizens do not recognise the names and faces of the holders of the highest judicial positions, or the role these people should play in a democratic society.<sup>199</sup>

The greatest progress in the observed period was achieved by broadcasting the sessions of the HPC. However, the increased number of electronic sessions, which are not broadcast and are conducted via e-mail, undermines the achieved improvement regarding transparency. This tendency was observed in 2024, when more than two thirds of the sessions were held electronically.<sup>200</sup>

#### **4.1.5. Amendments to Relevant Laws Are Without Consensus and Still Pending**

##### **Public debate on changes to the criminal legislation**

The public debate on amendments and supplements to the Criminal Code (CC) and the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) took place from 1 October to 1 November 2024, just before the above described turbulent social events. On 29 November 2024, the Ministry of Justice informed the public that the National Assembly had adopted certain amendments and supplements to the Criminal Code and that work on other amendments and supplements would continue in 2025, at the suggestion of the domestic expert public and in consultation with the European Commission.<sup>201</sup>

The adopted amendments increased the prison sentences for serious offences against the safety of public transport and prescribed three new criminal offences sanctioning attacks on health, education and social workers.

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198 Sofija Mandić, "Izveštaj o javnosti rada Visokog saveta sudstva i Visokog saveta tužilaštva 2023-2024" [Report on the transparency of the work of the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council 2023-2020], CEPRIS, Belgrade, 2025

199 *Ibid.*

200 *Ibid.*

201 "Nastavak javne rasprave o izmenama i dopunama KZ-a i ZKP-a" [Continuation of the public debate on amendments and supplements to the CC and the CPC], Ministry of Justice, 29/11/2024

The professional public criticised the increasingly frequent practice of changing criminal law regulations without a substantial public debate and with minimal analysis of possible consequences, concluding that this undeniably degrades the legal system and reduces the citizens' trust in institutions.<sup>202</sup>

As regards the essence of the proposed changes to both Codes that will be discussed in 2025, the above specifically pointed out the danger of violating certain constitutional principles and European standards, as well as the risks of populist repressive legislation in the function of daily political needs, contrary to the principles of the rule of law and legal certainty.<sup>203</sup>

## **Public debate on the “single point of entry into the judiciary” – without a consensus of the profession and the ministry**

The public debate on the Draft Law on the Judicial Academy took place at the same time as the debate on changes to the criminal legislation – from 1 October to 1 November 2024. The National Convention on the European Union assessed that the public debate on the Draft Law on the Judicial Academy was organised prematurely, because the drafting process had suffered from procedural failures.<sup>204</sup>

Most professional associations were united in the assessment that the Judicial Academy has neither the capacity nor the authority, especially due to previously established illegalities in its work, to become the “single point of entry into the judiciary”, which is what the Draft Law attempts to make it. The associations agreed that there is no unique training model in comparative law, and that Serbia must establish a model that best suits its needs, mentality and conditions.<sup>205</sup> On 9 December, the Venice Commission issued the Opinion on the Draft Law on the Judicial Academy and the draft amendments and supplements to the Law on Judges and the Law on Public Prosecutor's Office, in which it took the position that decisions on the training model in the judiciary fall under the broad discretion of the state, and that both models (the existing training model and the “single point of entry”) are possible and sustainable, although the Venice Commission believes that the “single point of entry” may be viewed as a more favourable alternative.<sup>206</sup>

Since, despite the Opinion of the Venice Commission, there was no agreement between the profession and the Ministry of Justice on the future method of training and the position of the Judicial Academy, it was announced that the public debate on the Draft Law would continue in 2025. As of the end of April, no steps were taken to continue the debate.

After the resignation of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević and the termination of his Government's mandate, on 16 April 2025 the National Assembly elected a new Government. The long-time director of the Judicial Academy was elected as the new Minister of Justice, which could affect the additional insistence of the Ministry to establish the so-called single point of entry into the judiciary. Although the law says that the Managing Board of the Judicial Academy should conduct a public competition for the election of a new director, after the election of Nenad Vujić as Minister of Justice on 16 April, this body elected Srdjan Pavličić as acting director<sup>207</sup> without a public competition and despite the fact that the law does not prescribe this possibility, while the absent director of the Judicial Academy should be replaced by deputy directors, in accordance with the Statute of the Judicial Academy.

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202 G. Ilić, V. Beljanski, “Osvrt na radni tekst novela Krivičnog zakonika i Zakonika o krivičnom postupku” [Review of the working text of the amendments to the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code], CEPRIŠ, Belgrade, 2025

203 *Ibid.*

204 “Nacionalni konvent o EU: Preuranjena javna rasprava o Nacrtu zakona o Pravosudnoj akademiji” [National Convention on the EU: Premature public debate on the Draft Law on the Judicial Academy], N1, 27/09/2024

205 “Bogosavljević: Ne sme se dozvoliti da Pravosudna akademija vrši selekciju kadrova” [Bogosavljević: The Judicial Academy must not be allowed to select staff], CEPRIŠ, 17/12/2025

206 “Mišljenje Venecijanske komisijeCDL-AD(2024)036” [Opinion of the Venetian Commission], Council of Europe, 09/12/2024, p. 10, paragraph 46

207 “Director”, Judicial Academy, information about the organisation of work

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Public officials should adhere to the prohibition of any undue influence on judges in their exercise of judicial office.
- Immediately announce a competition for the vacant position of director of the Judicial Academy.
- The HJC and the HPC should start ensuring the independence of courts and judges, as well as the autonomy of public prosecutors and the public prosecutor's office, in accordance with the Constitution and the law.
- The HJC and the HPC should respect the prescribed standards of transparency in their work and should not use the exceptions prescribed by acts to undermine those standards.
- Although it is necessary for both judges and prosecutors to react individually to serious violations of the Constitution and the law, the institutional burden of defending the judiciary against the political branch of power must not fall on their shoulders alone.
- Public debates on laws that affect the position of the judiciary, as well as on all other laws, should be prepared in a procedure that includes the participation of representatives of the professional public, and within a time limit that is sufficient to discuss all the important aspects of statutory changes.

## 4.2. Fight against Corruption

*Serbia's proclaimed anti-corruption efforts continue to be undermined by a lack of genuine political will, institutional inertia and selective application of the law. Although the government formally adopted the new Anti-Corruption Strategy and its accompanying Action Plan, the latter's de facto one-year timeframe, absence of public promotion, and disregard for civil society input reflect a performative approach rather than a commitment to systemic change. Public perception echoes this disillusionment, with corruption surpassing all other concerns among citizens for the first time in 25 years. Yet, high-profile declarations, such as the President's promise of the "fiercest fight against corruption", remain unaccompanied by meaningful results, compromising prosecutorial actions conducted in 2025. Similarly, Serbia's failure to address most of GRECO recommendations on executive and police accountability illustrates a pattern of significant delays, symbolic compliance and minimal institutional reform at best.*

*Recent government efforts to amend the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance, citing concerns over so-called 'abusive' requests, have sparked debate among civil society, legal experts and media, who caution against potential unintended consequences for transparency. While certain statistical indicators in public procurement, such as increased contract value and greater use of quality-based award criteria suggest modest improvements, key problems persist regarding the use of legal exemptions and non-transparent contracting practices in major infrastructure projects. The collapse of the canopy of the reconstructed Novi Sad railway station, carried out under an intergovernmental agreement, raised important questions about contracting, oversight, transparency, and the safety standards applied in major infrastructure projects. While the government published a number of documents related to this project, following mass protests it did not make an effort to increase transparency or introduce competitive bidding for the rest of infrastructure projects.*

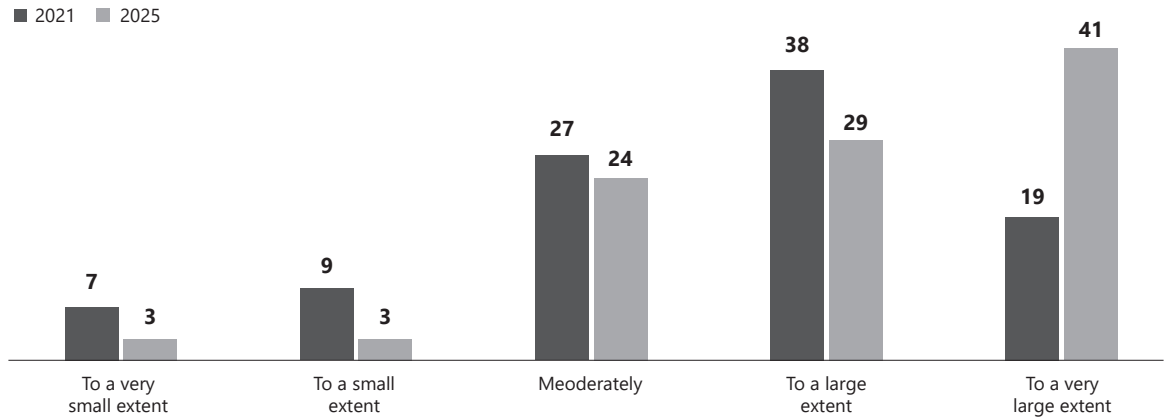
### 4.2.1. Corruption Recognised as Serbia's no. 1 Problem: A Turning Point in Public Awareness

The collapse of a newly renovated train station canopy in Novi Sad, in November 2024, claimed the lives of 16 people and ignited a wave of student-initiated protests across the country. What began as mourning for the victims has evolved into a broader movement against systemic corruption. For the first time, citizens are openly and directly blaming corruption not only for this specific tragedy, but also for the overall dire state of the country. The slogan "Corruption kills" has emerged as the defining rallying cry of the movement.



This public sentiment is reflected in the findings of a recent survey conducted by Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition) in March 2025.<sup>208</sup> For the first time in 25 years, corruption has been identified as the country's most pressing issue, cited by 22% of citizens. Notably, 41% of respondents believe that corruption is present to a "very large extent", more than double the figure from 2021, while 52% believe it has worsened in recent years.

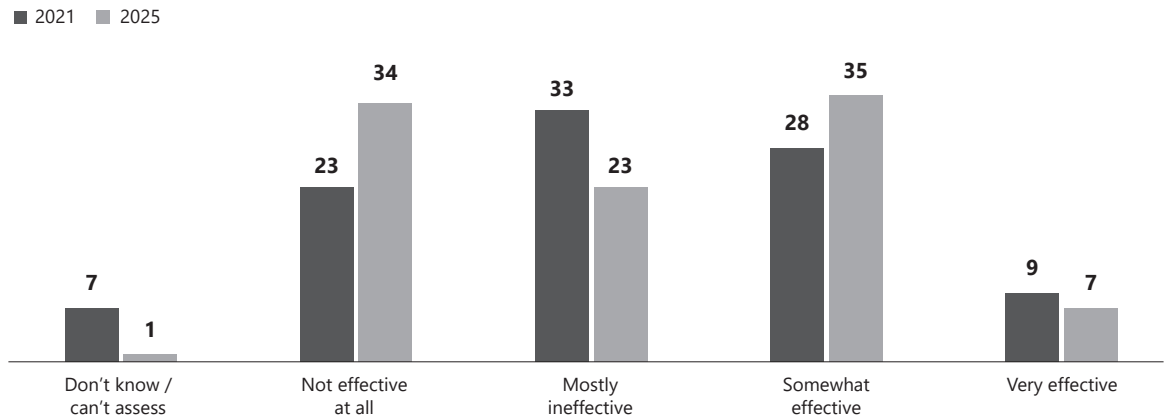
Figure 3: Citizens' perception of the prevalence of corruption in Serbia, in %



Source: Transparency Serbia<sup>209</sup>

Despite the existence of a National Anti-Corruption Strategy, public confidence in its effectiveness remains low. Nearly a third of citizens are unaware of the strategy, and among those who are, only 16% believe it yields tangible results. An overwhelming 75% of respondents oppose confidentiality clauses in state contracts, even when requested by foreign partners. Moreover, 71% believe that prosecutors avoid pursuing politically powerful individuals, and 56% think the prosecution lacks the independence needed to act impartially.

Figure 4: Citizens' assessment of the government's effectiveness in the fight against corruption, in%



Source: Transparency Serbia<sup>210</sup>

Viewed together, these protests and survey findings paint a clear picture: public trust in institutions is eroding, and corruption is no longer perceived as a distant, abstract issue, but rather as a direct threat to citizens' safety, justice and quality of life.

208 [Public Opinion Survey: Corruption is the Biggest Problem for 22 Percent of Citizens](#), Transparency Serbia, 31/3/2025

209 *Ibid.*

210 *Ibid.*



## 4.2.2. Silent Adoption of the Action Plan in the midst of Anti-Corruption Protests

In December 2024, six months after the adoption of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy for 2024–2028<sup>211</sup>, the Government of Serbia adopted the Action Plan<sup>212</sup> for the implementation of the strategy, but only for the period 2024–2025. However, by the end of April 2025, no working body had been established to oversee its implementation. The first version of the Action Plan did not include many of proposals submitted during the drafting process by CSOs, while the main “criteria” to reject such proposals were lack of willingness of respective institution to implement proposed reforms or lack of resources (instead of planning new necessary resources based on the Action Plan). There was also no explanation provided for the postponement of several reforms intended for the 2026–2028 period outlined in the Strategy. Instead of moving forward with reforms between July and December 2024, the government chose to delay them until the adoption of the Action Plan.

The adoption of the Action Plan (AP) largely went unnoticed, as it coincided with large-scale anti-corruption protests. The government made no efforts to promote it, and it took the Ministry of Justice several months to publish the final version on its website. As a result, the fact that the AP was adopted remains unknown to the general public. Around 100 days later, in his exposé, the new prime minister made no reference to this AP, instead merely stating that a new action plan would be adopted by the end of 2025.

### New Government, Old Phrases

In his exposé, Djuro Macut emphasised the urgent need to de-escalate tensions and restore harmony in Serbian society. However, corruption – one of the most pressing social issues in Serbia, according to a public opinion survey by Transparency Serbia<sup>213</sup> (a member of the PrEUgovor coalition), was addressed only in vague and generic terms. He stated: “Readiness and determination to confront all forms of corruption have been demonstrated, a continuous campaign against corruption and financial crime is being carried out across all segments of society,” and added, “The firm commitment of the new government will be to continue the policy of zero tolerance and the fight against crime and corruption, in which there will be no protected individuals, whether due to party membership or any other grounds.”<sup>214</sup> Notably, the same wording appeared in the exposé of the former Prime Minister, Miloš Vučević.<sup>215</sup>

There has been no visible progress in the implementation of the AP so far. The events that triggered the anti-corruption protests since November 2024 have highlighted even further the inadequacy of policy documents – none of the key issues have been addressed, such as the lack of transparency and competition in government contracting, as well as the influence of non-competent public authorities (e.g., the President of the Republic) on decision-making and criminal investigations.

Neither the executive nor legislative branch, based on their activities, appear to treat the fight against corruption as a priority. Moreover, the goals set out in the Strategy are insufficient to achieve visible progress in this area. The Action Plan foresees an increase in the Corruption Perception Index from 36 in 2023 to 38 in 2025. However, in 2024 Serbia continued to decline, scoring 35 – the worst result since 2012. These results, published in February 2025 by Transparency International<sup>216</sup>, despite such importance given in the Strategy, were fully ignored by Serbian authorities and pro-governmental media, including public service. The Strategy envisions that the Index, as an indicator of progress toward its general goal,

211 [National Strategy for the Fight Against Corruption for the Period 2024–2028](#), Government of the Republic of Serbia, 25/07/2024

212 [Action Plan for the Implementation of the National Strategy for the Fight Against Corruption for the Period 2024–2028](#), Government of the Republic of Serbia, 26/12/2024

213 [Public opinion survey: Corruption is the biggest problem for 22 percent of citizens](#), Transparency Serbia, 31/3/2025

214 [Đuro Macut's exposé: Here's what the future Prime Minister said](#), B92, 15/4/2025

215 [The Biggest Government, the Fewest Expectations: Comment on the May Day Exposé of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević](#), PrEUgovor, 23/5/2025

216 [Press Release: Serbia's further decline on Transparency International's global Corruption Perceptions Index](#), Transparency Serbia, 11/02/2025

should rise to 43 by 2028, which is currently the global average, from which Serbia lags eight points. The European average is 56, and among EU members, it is 62.

## Controversial findings on implementation of AP for Chapter 23

Until the adoption of the National Strategy and accompanying Action Plan, Serbia relied on the Action Plan for Chapter 23 (AP 23)<sup>217</sup> for anti-corruption efforts, which included many activities from the earlier National Anti-Corruption Strategy and its action plan. Even after its 2020 revision – which mostly postponed deadlines without establishing new policies – AP 23 has largely remained unimplemented. Coordination Body meetings are still not being held, even though AP 23 mandates that these meetings be open to the public and involve civil society representatives.

Two institutions monitor the implementation of AP 23 – the Ministry of Justice, which prepares and publishes quarterly implementation reports, and the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (Agency)<sup>218</sup>, which submits annual reports on anti-corruption measures to the Parliament. There remains a discrepancy between how the Agency and the Ministry assess the fulfillment of activities under AP 23. Of the 130 activities in the “Fight Against Corruption” subsection of AP 23, the Agency evaluated 80 in 2024. It marked 45 as implemented, 28 as not implemented, and could not assess seven.

In the anti-corruption measures domain, the Agency evaluated six activities and found five unimplemented. In the corruption prevention domain, it assessed 51 activities, 14 of which were not implemented, and five could not be assessed. In corruption suppression, 23 activities were evaluated, nine were not implemented, and two could not be assessed at all.

In 2024, the Government did not review reports from the Anti-Corruption Council, nor was the Council actively involved in the legislative process. The Agency rated the inclusion of the Council in this process negatively, while the Ministry claimed partial implementation, citing participation in three working groups (none of which were active in 2024).

The Council’s budgetary and personnel capacities were not strengthened either. In 2024, the Council submitted several reports to the Government: on systemic corruption phenomena, the position of the Republic Directorate for Property as a defendant in numerous administrative disputes, and on financing of sports and sports infrastructure. In March 2025, it submitted a report on the Law on the Registration of Real Estate and Infrastructure, pointing to many shortcomings and corruption risks.

There were no developments in 2024 regarding the continuation of the Operational Plan for Preventing Corruption in High-Risk Areas, which expired on December 31, 2022.

The Agency found that there was no analysis of the effects of the Law on the Prevention of Corruption – especially regarding asset/income reporting by officials, conflict of interest prevention, political financing, and monitoring of integrity plans. The Ministry rated this activity as partially implemented.

No workshops were held in 2024 with the relevant parliamentary committee, nor were there any ethics and integrity trainings for MPs. AP 23 calls for at least two workshops annually. Yet, the Ministry rated the activity as successfully implemented.

The Agency stated that it couldn’t assess the activity related to concluding ongoing recruitment competitions and initiating new ones for vacant positions in public administration due to prolonged procedures. The Ministry marked the activity as successfully implemented. However, at the end of 2024, only 150 of 428 senior posts were filled in accordance with the law.<sup>219</sup>

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217 [Revised AP23 with implementation status as of 31 December 2024](#), Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Serbia, 31/12/2024

218 [Report on the Implementation of the Revised Action Plan for Chapter 23 – Anti-Corruption Sub-Chapter for 2024](#), Agency for the Prevention of Corruption of the Republic of Serbia, 31/03/2025

219 Ibid, p. 49

According to the Agency, the staffing capacity of the Central Harmonisation Unit, which oversees public internal financial control, was not strengthened. Only 11 people were employed at the end of 2024. The Ministry claimed partial implementation. Public enterprises had yet to form internal audit units, though the deadline was Q4 2022. Of 48 public enterprises at the central level, 30 (62%) had functioning internal audits, covering 98% of revenue in 2023.

The Agency found that the activity related to monitoring the implementation of the Whistleblower Protection Act was not implemented. The Ministry claimed it was successfully implemented, citing a 2023 report published in June 2024. The Agency said there was no public awareness campaign to encourage whistleblowing, while the Ministry considered it partially implemented.

The Agency also noted that the activity of risk analysis for police work-related corruption was not fully implemented. The Ministry rated it as partially implemented, stating workgroups reported that analysis would soon be completed.

There was no training of customs officers or implementation of video surveillance at customs offices and border crossings in 2024. The Agency said that data systems for criminal investigations were not interconnected, nor was a secure system for electronic data exchange established. The Ministry rated this as partially implemented.

By the end of 2024, the bylaw under Article 16(4) of the Law on the Organisation and Jurisdiction of State Authorities in Combating Organised Crime, Terrorism, and Corruption had not been adopted. This act should regulate timelines, procedures, and official communication between the police and prosecutors. The Ministry said the bylaw was in preparation, though no information is publicly available.

Personnel capacities of the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime were not strengthened. In 2024, staffing was reduced due to the termination of three prosecutors and one technical staffer, leaving six prosecutor positions and 15 staff vacancies. Office space is currently insufficient for full staffing and will be addressed only after a new building is constructed.

The Agency noted that the establishment of a unified electronic register of corruption-related crimes had not been implemented. The Ministry, however, said it was successfully implemented and that the register, which had 10,609 resolved cases by the end of 2024, complied with data protection laws.

## **Agency's Annual Report for 2024**

In its 2024 Annual Report<sup>220</sup> to the National Assembly, the Agency made only four recommendations, most of them highly relevant, but did not address weaknesses of the Anti-Corruption Strategy. As in previous years, the first recommendation was to fulfill GRECO's Fifth Evaluation Round recommendations, including amendments to the Law on Prevention of Corruption and the Law on Lobbying. The Agency also stressed the need for changes to the Law on Financing Political Activities to regulate third-party influence on elections.

It recommended that authorised law proposers timely fulfill their obligation to submit draft laws to the Agency for risk assessment in corruption-prone areas. It also recommended introducing anti-corruption content in school curricula to raise awareness among elementary and high school students.

By the end of 2024, Serbia had 47,249 active public officials. The Agency issued 292 warnings and notices, including 73 conflict-of-interest warnings, one public recommendation for dismissal, and four terminations of office. The Agency approved 719 officials to perform simultaneously several public functions and reviewed asset/income reports of 417 officials. A total of 204 procedures were initiated due to suspected inaccuracies. In 2024, the Agency received 157 complaints – 48 anonymously. Most complaints were related to inspections, public procurement, and local/state administration.

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220 Agency for the Prevention of Corruption. [Report for 2024](#), March 2025.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a working group for the amendments to the National Anti-Corruption Strategy, which will include representatives of civil society and propose revision of the Strategy, based on identified weaknesses in the system. Adopt an Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy for the period 2026–2028.
- Adopt a revised Action Plan for Chapter 23, which, in addition to adjusting deadlines, will provide guarantees for the implementation of genuine reforms and accelerate the path toward European integration.
- The Ministry of Justice and the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption should harmonise methodologies for assessing the implementation of activities from the Action Plan for Chapter 23. Competent authorities should ensure that both institutions have full access to information regarding the implementation of specific activities so that both reports contain consistent and verified information.
- Reinforce the capacities of the Anti-Corruption Council by securing adequate financial, human, and infrastructural resources, and actively involve the Council in the legislative process, particularly in drafting laws in high-risk areas.

### 4.2.3. President's Crusade against Corruption Avoids the Highest Ranks

At the end of 2024, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić took to national television to declare what he described as the “fiercest fight against corruption” in Serbia’s recent history.<sup>221</sup> He promised that citizens would witness visible results by 31 March 2025, targeting both those in power and their associates over the past two decades. While the rhetoric was dramatic, serious doubts were raised about the legitimacy and implications of such an announcement.

#### Institutional Overreach and Lack of Transparency

First and foremost, Vučić has neither constitutional nor legal authority to direct prosecutorial or police activities, which raises immediate concerns over institutional independence and the rule of law. The announcement, viewed in context, appears to have been politically driven – an attempt to influence both the domestic opinion amid rising public protests, and international observers focused on Serbia’s EU integration track. The language of the announcement closely mirrored the European Commission’s call for Serbia to improve its results in high-level corruption investigations, prosecutions and final convictions.

Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition) sought to verify whether there was any actual institutional follow-through behind Vučić’s announcement. It submitted formal freedom of information requests to the top public prosecutor’s office, specialised anti-corruption departments in four regional prosecutor’s offices (Belgrade, Niš, Novi Sad and Kraljevo), and the Office for Organised Crime. TS requested data on issued mandatory instructions, received criminal complaints, initiated prosecutions, and any plans communicated about upcoming actions.<sup>222</sup>

The results were telling. By early February 2025, no new mandatory instructions for prosecution had been issued since the President’s statement. Responses from prosecutors confirmed a continued silence and inaction. Notably, most of the offices had not communicated any plans regarding future indictments to

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221 Vučić’s announcement of a ‘war on corruption’ – propaganda move or a way out of the crisis?, Danas, 27/12/2024

222 FOI answers: Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Office, Appellate Public Prosecutor’s Office, Public Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime, Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade, Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Novi Sad, Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Niš, Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Kraljevo

superior bodies or government institutions, raising the question of how Vučić could have obtained the information on which he based his public claims.<sup>223</sup>

## The Numbers Don't Add Up

The statistical data collected after the presidential announcement, but before a new wave of prosecutorial actions, provide indirect evidence that such action might be based on new findings on corruption. In fact, the number of criminal complaints filed in January 2025 was generally lower compared to the same month in the previous year. For example, in Belgrade, only 9 complaints were filed in January 2025, compared to 161 in January 2024. Similarly, data from Niš and Kraljevo showed no significant increase – rather, slight fluctuations well within the norm.

As regards prosecution, no clear surge in indictments could be observed in connection with complaints that were received in early 2025. In Kraljevo, no indictments were filed based on January complaints.

Similarly, the number of reported corruption cases in 2024 did not differ significantly from previous years. It may be therefore concluded that public prosecutors, when launching their campaign in February, did not address an increased number of identified corruption cases, but rather sought to fulfil the wishes of the country's political leader. This additionally undermined public trust in the autonomy of key institution in the suppression of corruption.

## Selective Action, Delayed Justice

What followed Vučić's renewed statement on 10 February 2025,<sup>224</sup> however, suggests that certain actions were taken, but selectively and questionably. The arrest of Milorad Grčić, former acting director of EPS (Serbia's state electricity company), was presented as a significant step. Yet the charges, misconduct in public procurement, relate to a period between 2018 and 2021, raising the issue of why the case had lain dormant for years. Even more troubling is the fact that a financial investigation was ordered after the arrest, contradicting standard practice in complex corruption cases, where asset tracing should precede any high-profile detention to avoid evidence tampering.

Grčić's previous legal issues had been known to prosecutors for years, including a formal criminal complaint filed in 2021 by the former energy minister for unlawful appointment. That case was quietly dismissed without explanation. Now that his arrest finally took place under renewed political pressure, there are questions regarding prosecutorial independence and possible political interference.

Similar concerns apply to the arrest of businessman Aleksandar Papić, implicated in money laundering and linked to previous scandals involving organised crime. Despite serious allegations and his name being mentioned in relation to a letter implicating top SNS officials in a highway construction fraud worth EUR 25 million, the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime has not issued any formal statement or opened public proceedings in that case, despite having received documentation from the opposition..

## A Fog of Mislabelling and Misrepresentation

Another aspect contributing to confusion is the broad labelling of all white-collar crimes as "corruption". Prosecutors and police frequently report on tax evasion or business fraud cases under anti-corruption banners, creating a distorted perception of effectiveness. The use of units labelled "anti-corruption" to investigate economic crimes only exacerbates this misunderstanding. Genuine corruption, e.g. bribery, influence peddling, or procurement fraud involving public officials, remains under-investigated and under-reported.

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<sup>223</sup> FOI answers: Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, Appellate Public Prosecutor's Office, Public Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime, Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad, Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Niš, Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Kraljevo

<sup>224</sup> Vučić: Prosecutors have a free hand, people must have trust in the state, *Srbija danas*, 10/2/2025

Additionally, the late intervention of the Supreme Public Prosecutor, who transferred Grčić's case to the Office for Organised Crime after his arrest, suggests coordination gaps and weak internal communication within the prosecutorial system. This fuels further doubt about the coherence and sincerity of the supposed campaign

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The High Prosecutorial Council should address the announcement of an anti-corruption campaign by the president of Republic and its impact to the perception of prosecutorial autonomy.
- The Government and the High Prosecutorial Council (HPC) should provide the prosecution with necessary resources: staff, office space and equipment. This includes enabling the employment of financial forensics experts, potentially through legislative changes allowing market-based salaries rather than civil servant wages.
- The HPC and all public prosecutor's offices should increase the number of prosecutors dedicated solely to corruption cases, enabling them to conduct proactive investigations based on publicly available data.
- The Law on the Organisation and Jurisdiction of State Authorities in Combating Organised Crime, Terrorism and Corruption should be amended so that the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime has jurisdiction over corruption cases involving all high-ranking public officials.
- The Criminal Procedure Code should be amended to allow the use of special investigative techniques in all corruption-related cases.
- A legal obligation should be introduced requiring public prosecutors to investigate, within a set timeframe, any documented allegations of high-level corruption made in the media. Additionally, there should be a duty to inform the public of the findings in such cases.
- Public prosecutor's offices should publish explanations for decisions not to prosecute in cases where high-level corruption was suspected.
- Public prosecutor's offices should clearly distinguish between corruption and other crime dealt with by their anti-corruption units.

### 4.2.4. Serbia's (Non-)Implementation of GRECO's Fifth Evaluation Round Recommendations

In 2022, the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) issued 24 recommendations to Serbia in its Fifth Evaluation Round, focusing on preventing corruption in the executive branch and the police. These recommendations presented a major opportunity to reform deeply rooted institutional weaknesses and align with European standards. However, the results of Serbia's efforts so far have been underwhelming. GRECO's recommendations offered Serbia a clear roadmap to strengthen transparency, accountability and anti-corruption safeguards at the highest levels of power. Yet, the response from Serbian authorities has been tepid. Although the official rhetoric signalled support, concrete institutional action was largely missing. Many of the goals Serbia set for itself were well below what was achievable, and efforts lagged far behind the deadlines set by GRECO.

Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition) produced an analysis of the implementation of GRECO recommendations,<sup>225</sup> in which it emphasised that the problem does not lie in the recommendations themselves. On the contrary, they are well-aligned with the structural needs of Serbia's political and administrative system. They touch on essential issues: transparent appointments, integrity checks for

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225 Prevention of corruption in the executive branch and the police, Transparency Serbia, December 2024

ministers and advisors, rules on lobbying, the disclosure of public officials' income and assets, and mechanisms to protect whistleblowers. Importantly, they also aim to reduce political influence over the police and enforce merit-based recruitment in leadership roles.



## Underutilised Reform Opportunities

Despite the weight and relevance of these recommendations, Serbia has fully implemented only one of the 24. According to GRECO's compliance report adopted in June 2024,<sup>226</sup> 10 recommendations were partially fulfilled, while 13 had seen no progress at all. The one fully implemented recommendation, on recording and limiting gifts to police officers, was largely symbolic in nature. Many recommendations required little or no legislative change. For instance, publishing the names and roles of government advisors could have been accomplished quickly and with no burden on the budget. Yet, this and many similar reforms remain unaddressed.

Delays have been attributed to political events, notably the snap parliamentary elections in 2022 and 2023. However, these cannot justify two years of inactivity. Ministries could have drafted legislation and held public consultations regardless of parliamentary timelines. Further delay is expected due to the slow development of Serbia's new Anti-Corruption Strategy (2024–2028), which only aims to fulfil 35% of GRECO's recommendations by 2028, a target widely seen as insufficient. Even the adoption of the Action Plan came late, arriving six months after the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2024–2028) had already been adopted. Moreover, the Plan only covers the period 2024–2025, with no explanation for postponing key reforms envisioned for 2026–2028. Instead of using the time between July and December 2024 to begin implementing reforms, the Government chose to delay action until the adoption of the Plan, further illustrating its overall slow and reactive approach to anti-corruption commitments. The approach taken by the Serbian authorities has been largely formalistic. In one case, GRECO judged a recommendation to be fully implemented simply because a policy document had been adopted, without analysing its content or impact. This raises concerns about future assessments being based on superficial compliance rather than substantive reform.

## Lack of Transparency in Lobbying

GRECO has urged Serbia to strengthen integrity mechanisms for persons with top executive functions (PTEFs), such as special advisers, cabinet chiefs, and high-ranking government officials. It recommends extending the scope of the Law on Prevention of Corruption to cover all such roles, introducing a dedicated code of conduct for PTEFs that addresses issues like conflicts of interest, lobbying contacts and post-employment restrictions, and adopting a similar framework for the President. Additionally, GRECO calls for expanding the definition of lobbying to include informal contacts with PTEFs, not just those based on formal written requests, and for mandatory disclosure of such interactions, including who was involved and what was discussed.

Although the Law on Lobbying was adopted back in 2018, its implementation has shown little to no effect in practice. In this context, the 2024 Annual Report of the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption<sup>227</sup> notes that activities continued to focus primarily on education – through the organisation of trainings and awareness-raising on lobbying rules – while only one lobbying contact was reported by a public official throughout the entire year. At the same time, two additional individuals were registered as lobbyists in 2024, while five previously registered lobbyists were removed from the register in the course of the year. These figures suggest either an implausible absence of lobbying in practice, or a serious institutional failure to enforce the law and ensure transparency in this area.

Despite the fact that the Action Plan for the implementation of the Anti-Corruption Strategy foresees that the Ministry of Justice will prepare amendments to the Law on Lobbying by the end of the second quarter of 2025, there is currently no publicly available information indicating that this process has actually begun.

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<sup>226</sup> Compliance report Serbia, GRECO, 4/7/2024

<sup>227</sup> 2024 Annual Report of the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, pp. 27-28, March 2025

## Can 2025 Deliver?

The next key GRECO deadline is 31 December 2025, and some initial steps in the implementation of recommendations have been taken. The President's Office adopted a Code of Ethics and published information about key advisors. Inter-agency cooperation has improved marginally. The Ministry of the Interior passed a new Police Code of Ethics, and the Ministry of Justice aligned the Anti-Corruption Strategy with most of GRECO's recommendations. New director of Police was appointed in May 2025, before the new rules for such appointments were introduced into the Law, following GRECO recommendations.

Still, the absence of integrity checks before the appointment of ministers and advisors, the lack of public access to information about their duties, and the failure to expand prosecutorial powers to investigate sitting top officials, including the President, reveal that core challenges have remained unaddressed.

Similarly, in the police, although ethical guidelines were updated and training improved, GRECO calls for stronger safeguards such as transparent recruitment, regular integrity testing and prevention of political appointments. Complaint mechanisms against police misconduct are still not sufficiently independent or visible to the public.

### **Investigative story 1: Rio Tinto Was Issued Environmental Protection Conditions Without Expert Approval**

In August 2024, the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia issued environmental protection conditions to Rio Tinto for the Jadar lithium mining project outlining what needed to be protected in the area and how this should be done. Documents obtained by the Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS) reveal that several Institute experts previously opposed these conditions, arguing they would not adequately safeguard the environment<sup>228</sup>.

Emails, official notes, and other documents CINS obtained show that experts questioned the validity of issuing such conditions, saying that no measures could prevent the irreversible destruction of the proposed mining area, as well as the habitats of numerous species there. Despite their objections, the Acting Director issued the conditions without modification, even retaining typographical errors. The decision to proceed without addressing the experts' statements raises concerns about the integrity of the process and the potential environmental impact of the Jadar project.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Action Plan for the first year of implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy should be expanded to include measures addressing all GRECO recommendations from the Fifth Evaluation Round, either through full implementation or through preparatory steps where a longer timeline is needed (e.g. constitutional amendments).
- The Action Plan for the 2026–2028 period for the implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy should be adopted without delay, and can later be supplemented at the end of 2025 based on the results of the first Action Plan.
- The goals related to fulfilling GRECO recommendations should be clearly stated in the Anti-Corruption Strategy, ensuring Serbia that fully meets its obligations. Accordingly, the Government must adopt amendments to this document.
- The National Assembly, although not involved in drafting the Anti-Corruption Strategy, should support its implementation – including by introducing annual public hearings to review reports on the Strategy and its Action Plan. The Law on the Prevention of Corruption should undergo revision

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228 Dina Đorđević. "Leaked Emails: Rio Tinto Given Environmental Protection Conditions Without Expert Approval", CINS, 07/02/2025

to incorporate GRECO and ODIHR recommendations, and to eliminate the harmful effects of the authentic interpretation of the term “public official,” followed by a renewed public consultation process.

- The Ministry of Justice should initiate without delay the amendments to the Law on Lobbying, to address GRECO recommendations and all known problematic issues.
- The Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, the President of the Republic, the Government, the ministries and the National Assembly should change their operational practices without waiting for formal legal amendments, particularly in the following areas:
  - » Regular review of reports from the Anti-Corruption Council and appointment of missing members based on the Council's proposals.
  - » Publication of information on contacts with lobbyists (those covered by the current Law) and other interested parties.
  - » Publication of information on engaged advisers and others providing advisory services.
  - » Conducting risk analyses of corruption within legislation, regardless of whether ministries have requested an opinion on a draft law, and publishing information on follow-up actions taken based on such analyses (by the Agency).
  - » Timely responses to requests for access to public information (by the Government and the President).
  - » Scheduling only those draft laws for parliamentary discussion that have undergone public consultation and whose explanatory notes include complete information on the legislative process and its rationale (by the National Assembly).
  - » Including members of the Government from 2016, 2020, 2022, and 2024, as well as the President and his advisers, in the asset and income report audit plan for 2025 (by the Agency).
- The Ministry of the Interior should publish and promote the acts it has adopted based on GRECO recommendations.
- The Ministry of the Interior should also plan a broader range of activities to implement GRECO recommendations, especially related to monitoring adherence to the Code of Ethics and specific rules (e.g. on gifts and secondary employment of police officers).
- After completing the public competition for the position of Police Director, the Ministry of the Interior should publish information that will allow the public to understand whether the selected candidate was the best among the applicants, and the Government should appoint the director without delay.

#### **4.2.5. Free Access to Information: How Serbia's Attempted Reform Backfired**

In late 2024 (4-23 December),<sup>229</sup> the Serbian Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government launched a public debate on proposed amendments to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance (the FoI Law), after ending the process of public consultation (19 November).<sup>230</sup> This move came amid strong public backlash and increasing pressure from both domestic and international stakeholders. The quiet withdrawal of the draft from parliamentary procedure highlighted the urgent need for a fundamentally different approach. Future reform efforts must be grounded in open consultation,

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229 [Public Call for Participation in the Public Discussion on the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance](#), Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government, 4/12/2024

230 [Notice on the Completion of Public Consultations in the Preparation of the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance](#), Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government, 19/11/2024

transparent legislative processes, and the meaningful inclusion of those who have long advocated for and upheld this essential democratic right.

However, these arguments were met with criticism from civil society organisations, legal experts and media representatives. Many questioned the necessity of the amendments or their capacity to resolve the stated problem. There was a widespread concern that the proposed changes would unjustifiably restrict citizens' right to access public information. While the misuse of the system obviously exists, critics stressed that it should not serve as a pretext for weakening a key democratic safeguard, and that there are other issues to address in amendments to this Law. The most pressing issues in this area, not addressed through amendments, which have persisted for years, include: the failure to implement the Commissioner's decisions, the inefficiency of inspection oversight regarding the enforcement of the Law, and the limited access to information about the work of public authorities over which the Commissioner has no jurisdiction in the appeals process (such as the Government, the President, the National Assembly and others).<sup>231</sup>

Civil society actors, particularly members of the Coalition for Freedom of Access to Information and the National Convention on the EU, including Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition) raised alarms about the lack of inclusivity throughout the process. The majority of the submitted comments and proposals were not taken into consideration, with the explanation that they fell outside the scope of the amendments to the Law. The most significant change compared to the initial Draft text is the removal of the provision that would have reintroduced the concept of abuse of rights as a basis for denying access to information. The composition of the Working Group tasked with drafting the amendments was another point of contention. It notably excluded representatives from civil society, academia, and the media – groups with practical experience and deep knowledge of how the law functions on the ground. The final version of the draft amendments, adopted by the caretaker government on 13 February 2025, was not published on Government web-site.

Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition) submitted amendments to the Draft in parliamentary procedure to all parliamentary groups and authorised parliamentary committees. In the accompanying text, TS pointed out that the scope of legislative intervention was unjustifiably limited and that the Government's proposal in this regard is inconsistent. In addition to numerous other issues that have proven problematic in the implementation of the Law so far, which should also have been opened up for public discussion, the Government missed the opportunity to propose solutions that would ensure the fulfilment of an international obligation of the Republic of Serbia: the implementation of GRECO recommendations, issued by the institution established by the Council of Europe. TS reminded that as early as 22 November 2007, the National Assembly received a citizens' initiative signed by 35,870 voters in accordance with the regulations in force at the time, which included certain proposals that are still relevant today.<sup>232</sup> In another submission to the Parliament, addressed to the Speaker and the Secretary General, Transparency Serbia (member of the PrEUgovor coalition) warned that the mandatory elements of this Draft Law are not presented in a systematic manner, although most of them can be found in the text. However, there are numerous instances where the proposed provisions are not explained in a way that justifies why the proponent considers them better than alternative solutions that were put forward during the public consultation process. A particularly concerning shortcoming of the Draft Law's justification is the fact that both preliminary consultations and a public debate on the draft were held, yet this is not mentioned at all in the accompanying explanation.<sup>233</sup>

In early March 2025 (4 March 2025), during the first regular parliamentary spring session, the Draft Law was initially placed on the parliamentary agenda at the request of the Government. However, on the second day of the session the Government withdrew the proposal, citing a subsequently assessed

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231 [The proposed amendments to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance do not address all the issues observed in its implementation and create room for further abuse of the right to access information of public importance](#), Partners for Democratic Change Serbia, 6/11/2024

232 [Proposed amendments to the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance submitted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia](#), Transparency Serbia, 20/2/2025

233 [Draft laws before the National Assembly – February 2025](#), Transparency Serbia, 17/2/2025

need for additional consultations on the issues addressed by the Draft.<sup>234</sup> This move came amid strong public backlash and increasing pressure from both domestic and international stakeholders. The quiet withdrawal of the draft from parliamentary procedure highlighted the urgent need for a fundamentally different approach. Future reform efforts must be grounded in open consultation, transparent legislative processes, and the meaningful inclusion of those who have long advocated for and upheld this essential democratic right.

#### Report of the Commissioner for 2024: Enforcement Gaps, Compliance Trends, and Persistent Barriers to Information Access

In 2024, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection faced a continued increase in the number of cases, particularly related to access to public information. A total of 21,449 new cases were received in this area, and the Commissioner resolved 15,282 of them. The most prevalent issue remains the abuse of the right to access information, primarily due to legislative gaps and changing court practices. Other key obstacles included difficulties journalists and civil society faced in obtaining information, non-compliance by public enterprises, and failure by authorities to comply with the Commissioner's decisions.

The Commissioner handled 10,923 complaints in 2024, a 34.6% decrease compared to 2023, largely due to efforts to address systemic abuses. Out of 7,691 resolved complaints, 47.65% were found to be justified. Alarming, 50.63% of these were due to complete silence by authorities. The Commissioner issued 802 misdemeanour orders and submitted 100 requests for initiating proceedings. In 122 cases, authorities failed to implement legally binding decisions, resulting in a compliance rate of 77.98%.

Only 53 motions for administrative enforcement were submitted in 2024, and two RSD 50,000 fines were issued. The Administrative Court upheld 91.84% of the Commissioner's decisions. The Commissioner continues to face systemic resistance and non-cooperation, particularly from public enterprises and local government units.<sup>235</sup>

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- In compliance with GRECO recommendations, the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance should be amended to allow the submission of complaints to the Commissioner against all public authorities, including the 7 that are currently exempted (President of the Republic, the Government, the National Assembly, the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court and the National Bank);
- The best solution to the problem of "abuse of rights" should be found after consultations with all relevant stakeholders (the Commissioner, the Administrative Court, the Supreme Court of Cassation, the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government, the Bar Association, civil society organisations and media associations), preferably through a public debate organised by the parliamentary committee responsible for the judiciary and public administration;
- The Government should arrange a mechanism to ensure the enforcement of the Commissioner's decisions where necessary, and should start responding to all the requests for information it receives;
- The administrative inspection should monitor the implementation of the Law on Free Access to Information more often;
- The Commissioner should file misdemeanour reports whenever "administrative silence" is established.

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234 [FOI response, Government of the Republic of Serbia, 21/3/2025](#)

235 [Annual Report of the Commissioner for 2024](#), Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, March 2025

## 4.2.6. Public Procurement

### Positive Statistical Indicators in 2024

In the previous reporting period, there were no significant news in the field of public procurement in Serbia. The annual report of the Public Procurement Office (hereinafter: PPO) for 2024 was published at the end of March 2025, and some positive statistical indicators can be extracted from it after several years of stagnation or "regression".<sup>236</sup>

The first thing that can be noticed in the PPO report is that the total value of concluded public procurement contracts has increased, while the number of concluded contracts has decreased.<sup>237</sup> A total of 46,618 public procurement procedures were initiated in 2024, which represents a 3% decrease compared to 2023. The facts that the total value of concluded contracts increased, while the number of procedures and concluded contracts decreased, leads to the simple conclusion that it was the value of individual contracts that increased, which can be interpreted in different ways. Some public procurements that were not carried out regularly, and were of extremely high value, also contributed to the increase in the annual value, such as the public procurement of public city transport buses for certain lines in the City of Belgrade, which involved a contract worth RSD 142 billion. The share of public procurement in GDP remained approximately the same, i.e. there was a small increase from 10.50% to 10.87%.<sup>238</sup>

When it comes to the level of competition, the average number of offers in 2024 was 2.5, which represents an increase compared to 2023, when that average number was 2.4. However, while this represents an increase compared to the previous year, the level of competition has actually returned to that of 2022, when the average number of offers was also 2.5. The percentage of procedures with a single submitted bid decreased minimally (from 51% to 50.75%), representing a positive, although insignificant, shift. The percentage of suspended procedures decreased from 11.5% in 2023 to 9.71% in 2024, which can be highlighted as another positive example.

The total registered value of procurements that are exempted from the application of the Law on Public Procurement (hereinafter: LPP) is RSD 667 billion and represents a decrease compared to the previous year, when the value of such procurements was almost the same as the value of those that were carried out under the LPP. However, this registered value does not include procurements for the realisation of the specialised international exhibition EXPO 2027, as procurements for this project are carried out according to a special law, and not as an exception provided by the LPP. According to the data available in the special section of the Public Procurement Portal, which refers to procurement for the EXPO 2027 project, the value of the contracts concluded for this project for the year 2024 amounted to slightly more than RSD 34 billion.<sup>239</sup> Similarly, statistics do not include the cost of other "special law" procurements, such as e.g. the "Morava corridor".

Something that can be cited as a positive example in the development of the public procurement system is the increased application of the contract award criteria that are not based only on the lowest offered price (from 4.46% to 9.78%, compared with 2023).<sup>240</sup> The main reason for this is the new legal provision, whose application began on 1 January 2024, according to which in the case of awarding a contract for the public procurement of specified services<sup>241</sup> the contracting authority cannot determine the lowest offered price as the sole award criterion.

In 2024, there has also been an increase in the use of ecological aspects in public procurements. Namely, the number of public procurement procedures in which contracting authorities applied environmental

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236 [Public Procurement Office Annual Report](#), p. 20

237 The value increased from RSD 859 to RSD 1,048 billion, while the number of contracts decreased from 336,000 to 318,000

238 Assessment of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

239 Available at: <https://jnportal.ujn.gov.rs/contracts-expo>

240 [Public Procurement Office Annual Report](#), p. 20

241 Computer programme development services, architectural services, engineering services, translation services or advisory services.



aspects increased, in comparison to 2023, from 1,592 to 3,244.<sup>242</sup> Also, the share of procedures with applied environmental aspects in the total number of initiated procedures increased, from 3.32% in 2023 to 6.91% in 2024. Again, the main reason for this improvement is the new legal provision, whose application began on 1 January 2024, which compels contracting authorities to apply environmental aspects when conducting public procurement procedures that have specific subjects.<sup>243</sup>

Since the annual report of the Republic Public Prosecutor's Office containing statistical data on criminal offences had not been published by the end of the reporting period<sup>244</sup>, information is not available on how many proceedings were initiated due to a criminal offence related to abuses in public procurement. However, as part of the anti-corruption action that was publicly announced by the President of the Republic, a number of announcements about arrests due to illegalities related to public procurement were published on the website of the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>245</sup> Since the announcement of the anti-corruption action, seven such announcements were found on the Ministry's website, involving persons who were arrested for malfeasance in public procurement. However, although the suspects were arrested for actions that were related to public procurement (for example, avoiding the obligation to carry out the public procurement procedure), in no case were they suspected of having committed the criminal offence of "abuse in public procurement", but were mostly charged with the criminal offences of abuse of official position or influence peddling. These data support the fact that it is necessary to change the criminal offence related to public procurement in order to facilitate criminal prosecution for it and enable prosecutors to act proactively.

### **✖ ALARM: Fall of the Canopy in Novi Sad – Reconstruction of the Railway Station was Contracted without a Public Procurement Procedure**

The reporting period was marked by the fall of the canopy of the reconstructed railway station in Novi Sad, which took the lives of 16 persons. Namely, the reconstruction of the railway station was carried out based on the contract Serbian authorities concluded with a Chinese consortium, which was not awarded based on a public procurement bidding, but rather on an intergovernmental agreement between the Republic of Serbia and the People's Republic of China. At the time of the fall of the canopy of the railway station, the above-mentioned contract was not available to the public, and the main question was whether the canopy had been subjected to reconstruction or not. Since the works were not contracted through a public procurement procedure, technical documentation about the project or the contract were not available to the public, and it was therefore impossible to determine with any certainty whether and what had been done regarding the canopy.

The fall of the canopy led to a series of protests by the general public, students' blockades of the faculties and the formulation of student demands, the first of which refers to the publication of the complete documentation on the reconstruction of the Railway Station in Novi Sad. The state authorities previously refused to present to the citizens the documents on the works that were carried out during the three-year reconstruction of the building, how much was paid for those works, and who carried them out. The alleged obstacle to the publication of information was the "absence of consent of the Chinese contracting party".<sup>246,247</sup>

On 28 May 2018, the Government of Serbia entrusted the work of modernising the railway from Novi Sad to Kelebija to a consortium of two companies from the Republic of China, for USD 1,162,810,000, without bidding.<sup>248</sup> Before that, a contract was concluded with the same consortium for the section from Belgrade

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242 Public Procurement Office Annual Report, page 22

243 Photocopier paper, computer equipment, office electronic equipment, air conditioners and cleaning products

244 30/04/2025

245 Mol, [Press Releases](#)

246 This answer was first given to the journalists of the Portal "021.rs", in January 2024, and a few years ago, when asked about the secrecy of those contracts, the President of Serbia showed the cooperation agreement that was concluded by the Government of Serbia back in 2009.

247 Radio 021, [The renovation of the railway station in Novi Sad is a secret: the Chinese want it to be, and the ministry obeys](#), 26/01/2025

248 [Commercial agreement on the modernisation and reconstruction of the Hungarian-Serbian railway connection on the territory of the Republic of Serbia for the section Novi Sad – Subotica – State Border \(Kelebija\)](#), 28/05/2018



to Stara Pazova for over USD 350 million.<sup>249</sup> The interstate agreement from 2009 was used as the legal basis for awarding these jobs without a competition,<sup>250</sup> as were the laws through which the Parliament approved credit arrangements for certain projects. On the other hand, neither the basic Agreement, nor any of its three annexes<sup>251</sup> contain a provision on the secrecy or confidentiality of the contract.

That the contract concluded by the Government of Serbia and the Infrastructures of the Serbian Railways with the consortium from China<sup>252</sup> should not be marked confidential is best confirmed by the fact that Transparency Serbia received a response to the request for access to information from the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure (hereinafter: MCTI) in mid-2021, in which the MCTI provided the Commercial agreement on the modernisation and reconstruction of the Hungarian-Serbian railway connection on the territory of the Republic of Serbia for the section Novi Sad – Subotica – State Border (Kelebija).<sup>253</sup> Along with that contract, three years ago the Ministry also submitted annexes that had been concluded until then, referring to the section of the railway from Belgrade to Stara Pazova, including the value of certain contracted works. The analysis of this and other similar projects was published by Transparency Serbia in May 2021.<sup>254</sup> In other words, it is obvious that there was no reason why the same ministry would seek the consent of the “Chinese side” three years later in order to provide journalists with information about the value of certain works that were contracted in the meantime, which include the reconstruction of the railway station in Novi Sad.

It became obvious that there was no basis for secrecy on 12 December, when the then Prime Minister, Miloš Vučević, made the decision to publish the documents, at the “request” of the President of the Republic,<sup>255</sup> although he previously found it “strange” and “incomprehensible” for students to be asking that the documents be published, and explicitly claimed that the documents were “taken by the prosecution”.<sup>256</sup> Until then, the state authorities, above all the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, 40 days after the tragedy in Novi Sad refused requests from journalists, organisations and individuals to submit contracts, projects and information on the supervision of the reconstruction of the railway station, citing protection of criminal proceedings.<sup>257</sup>

However, the incompleteness of the documentation could already be gleaned from the very wording of the Government’s decision. Namely, the MCTI was ordered to make publicly available all the documents that are “at the disposal” of that ministry and “concern the possible commission of a criminal offence that caused the collapse of the canopy of the station building in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024”.<sup>258</sup> In other words, those documents which, for whatever reason, this ministry does not possess (although perhaps it should have them) will not be published, and neither will those which the ministry does not consider to be related to the possible commission of criminal acts.

It soon became clear that these suspicions were in fact correct, since the documentation was supplemented on several occasions. However, despite several hundred published documents, some documents that are crucial from the aspect of public procurement, and refer to the subcontractors’ selection procedure, are still missing.<sup>259</sup>

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249 [Commercial contract on the modernisation and reconstruction of the Hungarian-Serbian railway connection on the territory of the Republic of Serbia for the section Belgrade Centre – Nova Pazova](#)

250 [Law on the ratification of the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation in the Field of Infrastructure between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China, The National Assembly, 20/12/2009](#)

251 [Annex from 2012 for the “Pupin bridge”](#), [Annex from 2013 \(Article 2\)](#), which specified the procurement rules, and [Annex from 2017 \(Articles 5-6\)](#), which expanded the scope of application and exemption from tax and customs duties on the import of trains.

252 [Joint Venture of China Railway International Co. Ltd & China Communications Construction Company Ltd](#)

253 [Commercial agreement on the modernization and reconstruction of the Hungarian-Serbian railway connection on the territory of the Republic of Serbia for the section Novi Sad – Subotica – State Border \(Kelebija\), 28/05/2018](#)

254 [Public Procurement And Public-Private Partnerships – Between Solid Regulation And Poor Practice](#), Transparency Serbia, May 2021

255 [Complete documentation about the canopy will be made available to the public tomorrow; Vučić: I will personally pardon anyone convicted of rampage in Novi Sad, BLIC, 11/12/2024](#)

256 [“Prioriteti Vlade: Šta nas očekuje u narednom periodu?”](#) [Government priorities: What awaits us in the upcoming period?] K1, TV YouTube channel, 11/12/2024

257 [TS, MCTI decision to deny access to information of public importance which TS requested, 21/11/2024](#)

258 [The Government of the Republic of Serbia, Decision made to make documentation on the canopy collapse in Novi Sad publicly available, 12/12/2024](#)

259 [Key financial data on the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station are still unavailable, Transparency Serbia, 31/12/2024](#)

Namely, although the contractor is a Chinese consortium, Article 16 of the Commercial Agreement provides for the engagement of subcontractors. It was agreed that at least 46% of the value of the works, goods and services should come from Serbia or other countries except China. The subcontractors are selected by the Chinese consortium, after announcing a public call for tenders, whereby "it must not restrict competition" and "must ensure that the selection is made publicly and transparently". The MCTI and the Railway Infrastructures give consent for the engagement of subcontractors. On the other hand, the contractor (the Chinese consortium) is responsible for any default by the subcontractor.

Among the published documents there is, among other things, a list of engaged subcontractors, as well as contracts concluded with some of them. What is missing, however, is information about how these subcontractors were selected, what their tasks i.e. obligations were, whether they meet the references that might have been required had their selection been made through the public procurement procedure, and how they negotiated the prices of the works they would carry out.<sup>260</sup> In short, there is no information about how the subcontractors were chosen, whether by direct agreements or some procedure. It is also unknown what part of the contracted funds was transferred by the members of the Chinese consortium to numerous subcontractors.

Bearing in mind that in 2024 alone, Serbia paid EUR 1.2 billion<sup>261</sup> (and as much as EUR 2.7 billion in 2023) to contractors who were not selected by way of a tender, but directly agreed upon based on an intergovernmental agreement, the Government of Serbia should without delay publish all the contracts related to all such projects, and their annexes, as well as those related to projects that are implemented based on special laws instead of by applying the Law on Public Procurement. It is no less important that the citizens be presented with information on the basis of which the Government of Serbia, in the absence of competition, determined that the price requested by the pre-selected contractor was realistic.

Even though publishing of all the contracts, starting from December 2024, is one of the commitments of the Serbian government under the Reform Agenda, there has been no progress in that regard.

### **Investigative story 2: The collapse of the canopy and the state response raised allegations of serious issues**

The collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station on November 1, 2024, which took the lives of 16 people, triggered public outrage, fear, and an urgent search for accountability. In an episode of the narrative podcast Glasna žica, CINS explored how such a tragedy reshaped everyday life – how fear settled in, and what responsibility means when public safety fails<sup>262</sup>.

A geology engineer who worked on the station's reconstruction for two and a half years, spoke out about the problems he witnessed. As a stone consultant, he dealt with the station's wide range of stone materials. He chose to break his silence in response to political claims denying the reconstruction ever happened – claims he says are untrue and serve to mask serious construction issues. An architect interviewed in the podcast raised further concerns: the reconstructed station never received an occupancy permit (ensuring the structure is ready for use), despite being put into use.

The collapse caused fear among Serbian citizens, and a sense of grief and anger. A psychology professor from the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade explained for CINS that while fear stems from feeling unsafe, anger emerges when people are confused and denied answers and explanations for the terrible things that have happened. And because the public still doesn't know what exactly happened – mistrust continues to grow, and protests are ongoing.

260 For example: [https://media.srbija.gov.rs/medsrp/dokumenti/102%20Izve%C5%A1taj%20mese%C4%8Dni\\_jul%202024.pdf](https://media.srbija.gov.rs/medsrp/dokumenti/102%20Izve%C5%A1taj%20mese%C4%8Dni_jul%202024.pdf)

261 Public Procurement Office Annual Report, p.18

262 Stefan Marković. "The canopy", CINS, 25/11/2024

Following public demands, in addition to the investigation related to the technical and procedural wrongdoings in the case of the Novi Sad canopy collapse, the Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad opened an investigation into potential corruption in early February 2025.<sup>263</sup> Later on, Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime took over the case. Thus far, there is no information on the outcome of this investigation. In March 2025, it was published that the EU prosecutor (EPPO) is also investigating the case because of potential abuse of EU funds, although it is currently unclear whether EU funds were even used for the Novi Sad-Kelebija railroad reconstruction project.<sup>264</sup>

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government of Serbia should publish, without delay, all the contracts that were awarded based on interstate agreements, as well as those for projects that are implemented on the basis of special laws instead of by applying the Law on Public Procurement;
- The Government and the National Assembly should stop using interstate agreements and "special laws" such as the Law on Special Procedures for the Realisation of the International Specialised Exhibition EXPO 2027, which reduce transparency and competition in public procurement and public-private partnerships.
- The criminal offence related to the abuse in public procurement should be amended to facilitate criminal prosecution and enable prosecutors to act proactively.

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263 [The Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad is investigating whether there was corruption in the reconstruction of the Railway Station](#), Radio Free Europe, 3/02/2025

264 [We are investigating the embezzlement of EU funds in the reconstruction of the railway in Novi Sad](#), says Laura Koveši, BBC News in Serbian, 14/03/2025

## 4.3. Fundamental Rights

### 4.3.1. Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Media

*Freedom of expression and freedom of the media have been under serious threat in Serbia since November 2024, and are probably facing their biggest test to date. Provoked by the fall of the canopy of the railway station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, which caused the death of 16 persons, students and citizens started mass protests against corruption and general lack of accountability. With the support of citizens and journalists, students presented the true picture of the manipulations of government representatives who, through the public media service and tabloid media, tried to relativise the events and cover up the causes, thus diminishing the role of government representatives in corrupt activities. Dissatisfaction turned into a socio-political struggle at universities, schools and in the streets, primarily when students started blockades with clearly formulated demands.<sup>265</sup> Independent journalists and media found their role in all of this; besides the student movement, they too became the main source of information for citizens about events that are currently taking place in Serbia.*

*Public media services once again disappointed, proving that they are serving those in power and not the citizens. They relativised the situation and its consequences, and (with their reporting) even caused students to organise numerous mass gatherings, including blockades of the republic and provincial public media services. In such an atmosphere, representatives of the authorities are extremely violently intensifying their attacks and threats, and inciting others to attack journalists and students by labelling them as traitors, foreign mercenaries and enemies of the state. Journalists' and media associations gathered in the Coalition for Media Freedom and the Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) called on their colleagues to support the students who are protesting and fighting for democracy, justice and freedom of speech in Serbia.<sup>266</sup> As a result of the deterioration of the situation and the refusal of representatives of the authorities and institutions to fulfil the students' demands, journalists' associations (with the exception of UNS) have suspended cooperation with the state in any working groups and bodies in which they have participated until further notice.<sup>267</sup>*

### Unfavourable Assessments in the Reports of International Organisations

The European Commission's latest report, from October 2024, criticised Serbia's insufficient progress in key issues related to democracy, the rule of law, and alignment with the European Union's foreign policy. In its report, in the section on freedom of expression, the Commission singled out limited application of the law, insufficient protection of journalists, and non-transparency of media ownership and (co) financing of media as key problems.<sup>268</sup> It also noted that the regulations must be additionally changed and supplemented in order to be fully harmonised with the EU *acquis* and the European standards (improvement of measures to protect media pluralism and editorial independence, application of anti-monopoly rules, and concentration control rules that apply to the media sector). Despite new regulations aimed at strengthening the independence and efficiency of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), this body is not completely fulfilling its mandate and there are still official reasons for concern regarding its independence in practice. The competition for the allocation of the fifth national broadcasting frequency, announced in 2022, has not yet been completed, with no valid justification. The Law on Public Media Services has yet to be amended to eliminate the deficiencies identified in the Media Strategy. Serbia is still not aligned with the revised EU Directive on Audio-Visual Media Services, especially with its regulations on Audio-Visual Commercial Communications.

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<sup>265</sup> Studentski zahtevi [Students' demands], Students in blockade, November 2024

<sup>266</sup> Novinarska i medijska udruženja podržala studente [Journalists' and media associations came out in support of students], Coalition for Media Freedom, December 2024

<sup>267</sup> Skoro 30 nevladinih organizacija i medijskih udruženja prekida saradnju sa zakonodavnom i izvršnom vlašću [Almost 30 non-governmental organisations and media associations cut off cooperation with the legislative and executive bodies], Insajder, February 2025

<sup>268</sup> Freedom House profile Serbia, April 2025

The *Freedom House* report states that despite the legal framework guaranteeing freedom of the press, media freedom is undermined by the threat of lawsuits or criminal complaints filed against journalists for other criminal acts, lack of transparency in media ownership, editorial pressure from politicians and politically connected media owners, direct pressure and threats against journalists, and high level of self-censorship.<sup>269</sup> The media environment is characterised by extreme propaganda and manipulation of facts relating to certain topics. Serbia is seventh on the list of countries that experienced the most drastic changes in the last 10 years when it comes to political rights and civil liberties. In this context, it states that “under the leadership of President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Serbia is a clear example of how elected leaders can undermine media freedoms. Investigative journalists face discrediting campaigns, repressive tax investigations, threats from high-ranking politicians and arrests.”<sup>270</sup> Members of the ruling party use SLAPP lawsuits to intimidate independent media and journalists; they are brought by powerful individuals, lobby groups, corporations or government agencies, and their purpose is to censor, intimidate and silence critics.

On 10 March 2025, the *CIVICUS Monitor*, which monitors developments in the field of civil liberties, including freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in 198 countries and territories, announced that Serbia was added to the watch list of this platform “because the authorities are severely restricting civil space and inciting violence against tens of thousands of people protesting against corruption”.<sup>271</sup>

According to Reporters without Borders (*RSF*), Serbian journalism is being systematically oppressed, while European political leaders remain trapped in a state of culpable inaction.<sup>272</sup> *RSF* is calling on the European Parliament to ensure that the European Commission assumes its responsibilities in the face of serious violations of freedom of press in Serbia, the principle that must be respected if this country is to become a member of the European Union. Serbian authorities continue to struggle under the weight of mass protests sparked by the deadly collapse of the canopy of the train station in Novi Sad five months ago, and in response, are stepping up pressure on independent media and those who are critical of the government.

## Amendments and Supplements to Media Laws Are in Many Ways Controversial

As early as during the process of amending, supplementing and adopting the media regulations, it became clear that the laws that entered into force in November 2023 were incomplete, incompatible with EU directives, and that their revision would soon be necessary. The amended regulations were applied even less than before.<sup>273</sup> Despite earlier warnings and after more than a year of procrastination, the government representatives hastily made a decision to proceed with only some of the changes.<sup>274</sup> In September 2024, a Working Group was formed to prepare more detailed changes to the Law on Public Media Services. Working groups that dealt, as it later turned out, with only partial amendments to the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media, were established in December. The changes were based on the comments of the European Commission, which, although useful, are limited only to certain issues, such as increasing control over state media and editorial independence of the media, as well as the responsibility of REM. The Government of Serbia accepted only those changes that are considered a requirement for fulfilling the measures from the Reform Agenda and drawing funds from the European Union’s Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, not agreeing to any additional harmonisation. Media associations and experts understood this as the absence of a real intention to further improve media regulations. In addition to the changes to the above-mentioned regulations, one of the requirements that was specifically mentioned in the Reform Agenda was the establishment of the REM Council.<sup>275</sup>

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269 Freedom in the World 2025- Serbia, March 2025, Freedom House

270 Ibid.

271 “Serbian civil society under pressure as country sees biggest protests in decades”, *Civics Monitor*, 10/03/2025

272 *Report for Serbia, 2024 and 2025*, Reporters without Borders, January 2025

273 *Medijski zakoni nisu doneli ništa novo* [Media laws did not bring anything new], *Cenzolovka*, October 2024

274 *Održani sastanci radnih grupa za izmenu i dopunu medijskih zakona* [Meetings of working groups for amendments to media laws], Government of the Republic of Serbia, December 2024

275 *Rok za izbor članova Saveta REM-a pokrenut 4 meseca nakon proteka roka* [The deadline for the election of REM Council members started four months after its expiry], *Mediareform centre Niš*, November 2024

Work on amendments and supplements once again involved a recognisable scenario and actions of government representatives, such as hasty decisions and short deadlines, an appearance of inclusiveness and participation of all interested parties, exclusion of independent organisations and experts, non-transparency of work, limited time for analysis and discussion, and lack of strategic approach. The key recommendations of the European Commission were once again not acted upon, nor were the regulations fully harmonised. Also, the working groups included representatives of GONGO associations who, together with representatives of the ministries, made up the majority; in almost all decisions that were made, they outvoted members from associations who tried to harmonise the regulations with the Public Information Strategy (Media Strategy) as much as it was possible.

As regards the Draft Law on Public Media Services, after two months of intensive work of the Working Group, the Ministry of Information imposed a draft that also contradicted the Media Strategy. The process was interrupted before the work on the drafting of the law was fully completed, which showed the approach of the Ministry that is ordered-from-above, ignoring the democratic dialogue, and a string of serious shortcomings and omissions that directly go against the key guidelines defined by the Strategy.<sup>276</sup> No changes are envisaged in the way of financing public media services, which is the key to achieving their independence. The working group devoted due attention to the creation of models that would ensure the independence of public services; however, all their proposals were rejected. RTS and RTV remain institutions that are financed by state capital, which renders the institutional autonomy of public media services meaningless. The proposed Draft also rendered meaningless the efforts of the working group to shape the new institution of the Commissioner for the Protection of the Rights of Listeners, Viewers and Readers. However, the resulting solution – by which the Commissioner is elected and dismissed by the general director of the public media service – reduces the idea of a self-regulatory body to an administrative worker who will not have any essential independence in performing his/her job.

The Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Public Information and Media included only the statutory provisions that were mentioned in the comments submitted by the European Commission, which the representatives of the associations never got to see. The key recommendations of the Commission – those that the associations were aware of, such as the protection of media pluralism and editorial independence – were again not systematically addressed in the law. The provisions that allow the state to indirectly own the media are still in conflict with the goals of the Media Strategy. There were no representatives of associations or media experts in the Working Group for amending the Law on Electronic Media, so the procedure was not even minimally transparent. The supplements, also, included only the comments made by the European Commission.<sup>277</sup>

For years, state advertising has been one of the key obstacles for the free work of the media, because it enables the control of the media by the politicians in power. The Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Advertising failed to place state advertising within the legal framework. Media associations demanded that state bodies and companies be required to publicly disclose information on how much money they are spending for advertising, and to whom they are paying those funds. In the previous period, local public and utility companies most often allocated funds by “direct contracting with eligible media”, which means that they avoided the procedure of public procurement of media services. In their comments on the Draft Law, media and civic associations requested that the concept of state advertising be precisely defined, that criteria based on which advertising funds will be allocated be prescribed, that state advertising in the media that violates laws and standards of professional ethics be prohibited, and that, respecting the European Law on Freedom of the Media, audience measurement rules be envisaged.<sup>278</sup>

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276 Koalicija za slobodu medija: Ministar Dejan Ristić oktroisao izmene Zakona o javnim medijskim servisima [Coalition for Media Freedom: Minister Dejan Ristić ordered amendments to the Law on Public Media Services], Coalition for Media Freedom, December 2024

277 Ministar oktroisao izmene, a Vlada obesmisliła proces: Kako su „zbrzane” radne grupe za izmene medijskih zakona? [The Minister ordered changes, and the Government rendered the process senseless: How the working groups for changes to the media laws were quickly established], Danas, December 2024

278 Medijska udruženja, Novi Zakon o oglašavanju ne rešava pitanje državnog oglašavanja [Media associations, New Advertising Law does not solve the issue of state advertising], ASMEDI, December 2025



Finally, the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Electronic Media and the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Public Information and Media were submitted to the European Commission for comments on 21 December, while the Draft Law on Amendments to the Law on Public Media Services was submitted on 24 December 2024.<sup>279</sup> The participants in the amendment process did not have access to the European Commission's comments, the state's responses to them, or the final proposed versions of the Draft Law that were submitted for comments.

## Access to Information of Public Importance

Access to information of public importance was – partly due to negligence, and partly with a clear intention – first seriously undermined in practice, and then seriously systemically threatened. Although the amendments to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection were approached with the aim of solving the problems of mass abuse of rights by malicious information seekers and attorneys who were submitting thousands of requests, non-governmental organisations and the expert public assessed that the proposed amendments reduced the achieved level of the public's right to be informed, leaving room for authorities to excessively restrict rights. On 11 March, the outgoing Government of the Republic of Serbia withdrew the Draft Law from procedure. Access to information and the attitude of public authorities towards applicants is experiencing a serious decline and requires partial reform, especially in relation to public authorities.<sup>280</sup>

## Cheating the Procedure for the Election of New Members of the REM Council

The election of REM Council members within a year from the entry into force of the Law on Electronic Media has become an obligation. This obligation was obstructed and seriously violated by several actions of representatives of the government and accompanied by numerous controversies. First, the REM Council itself completely inappropriately submitted an initiative for the constitutional review of the provision that allegedly discriminates against them because it obliges them to a *de facto* limited term of office and establishes by law the election of a new composition of the Council. The initiative enabled the line ministry and the parliamentary committee to unjustifiably postpone the election of the new REM Council and take the initiative as an excuse not to initiate proceedings.

As a reaction to ignoring the statutory provisions, at the beginning of November journalists' associations and organisation CRTA filed a criminal complaint against Nevena Djurić, president of the Parliamentary Committee for Culture and Information,<sup>281</sup> accusing her of the crime 'abuse of official position' from Article 359, paragraph 1 of the Criminal Code. In the explanation, the applicants stated that the criminal complaint was filed because the president of the Parliamentary Committee for Culture and Information failed to comply with the provisions of the Law on Electronic Media, which entered into force on 4 November 2023, according to which she was obliged to announce a public call for nominations of REM Council members no later than by 4 August 2024.

Acting on the initiative of the REM Council, in its decision of 4 April the Constitutional Court concluded that the initiative of the former convocation of the REM Council to review the constitutionality of that provision of the law was unacceptable.<sup>282</sup> The Constitutional Court understood that one year was the "transition period", i.e. that it was how the "transitional regime" was arranged to enable the continuation or termination of the mandate of Council members who were elected under the old law, and that this was not a new reason for the termination of office, but rather a period that would enable the election of new Council members before the expiry of the old term of office.

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279 Marija Stojanović, *Dokle je Srbija stigla u sprovođenju Reformske agende, i kada će stići prva sredstva iz Plana rasta EU?* [How far has Serbia come in implementing the Reform Agenda, and when will the first funds from the EU Growth Plan arrive?], *European Western Balkans*, 07/02/2025

280 Read more about this in this Report's chapter on free access to information.

281 Slavko Ćuruvija fondacija, NUNS, NDNV i Crta podnele krivičnu prijavu protiv predsednice parlamentarnog odbora za kulturu i informisanje [The Slavko Ćuruvija foundation, NUNS, NDNV and Crta filed a criminal complaint against the president of the parliamentary Committee for Culture and Information], November 2024

282 Odluka Ustavnog suda povodom inicijative Saveta REM-a [Decision of the Constitutional Court regarding the initiative of the REM Council], REM, April 2025



Almost four months after the statutory deadline for starting the procedure expired, at the end of November 2024 the Committee for Culture and Information of the National Assembly of the RS (Committee) decided to announce a call for candidates for membership in the REM Council, a body that has not really existed since 4 November 2024, precisely due to violations of the law by the Assembly itself.<sup>283</sup> Given the clear shortcomings in the process, the proponents and the candidates' CVs, Civic Initiatives announced in its analysis that no less than 17 of the 34 candidates for the REM Council, as well as 32 of the 121 proponents,<sup>284</sup> did not meet the statutory criteria, while the analyses of ANEM and other associations pointed to irregularities that make it impossible to even continue the process, as well as the lack of adequate control by the Committee. Still, despite all the irregularities, the Committee approved the final list of candidates, after which the candidates were agreed upon within the groups of proponents. A list of proposed candidates was then compiled, and the public hearing of the agreed candidates was held before the Committee for Culture and Information on 23 January.<sup>285</sup> On that occasion, candidates Dušan Aleksić, Aleksandra Krstić and Saša Mirković asked the Parliamentary Committee for Culture and Information to "cancel the election process for REM Council members in 7 out of 9 categories".<sup>286</sup> Five days later, 7 of the 18 shortlisted candidates<sup>287</sup> withdrew their candidacies, which prevented the National Assembly from legally electing the regulator's Council. Two of the 9 groups of proponents had no candidates at all, while three had only one each; consequently, the deputies were able to choose between two candidates in only four categories. In this way, the basic conditions for further proceedings were no longer there, so to continue selection and voting for candidates for the REM Council would have been constituted an irregular procedure, which is why it was concluded that the process for selecting members should be repeated.

The inaction of the government representatives in this case showed that they are currently giving up on further obstruction of the regulations, so the procedure was never continued. At the end of April, information appeared on the agenda of the Assembly about scheduling a session of the Parliamentary Committee for Culture and Information where one of the topics would be the procedure for electing members of REM.<sup>288</sup> The session was officially requested by the parliamentary opposition, but the announcement of a new competition was also one of the demands of the students who had blocked Radio and Television of Serbia for two weeks.

### **Blockade of Public Broadcasters Due to Unprofessional Reporting**

The protesting students and the citizens who support them blocked the building of the Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) in the city centre and in the Košutnjak neighbourhood, as well as the RTV building in Novi Sad, for two weeks. Students from the blocked faculties in Belgrade and Novi Sad blocked the facilities of RTS in Belgrade and RTV in Novi Sad suddenly, at 10 p.m. on April 14. The reason for the blockade and protest was dissatisfaction with RTS' reporting on the months-long student demonstrations. On social networks, students wrote that "the public service is working against all of us".<sup>289</sup> They also highlighted the following demand: "The protest will continue until a new competition for REM is announced or until RTS is shut down". The demand was later changed to read as follows: "We are not calling for the shutdown of RTS. Instead, we are asking for something completely different – for RTS to become an independent public service, which reports objectively and respects legal regulations".<sup>290</sup> The police first attempted to bring RTS workers into the premises by use of force, but abandoned the idea after a few days.

283 Javni poziv za predlaganje kandidata za izbor članova Saveta Regulatornog tela za elektronske medije [Public call for nominating candidates for the election of members of the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media], National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, November 2024

284 Analiza posatupka izbora članova Saveta REM-a [Analysis of the procedure for electing REM Council members], Civic Initiatives, January 2025

285 Javno slusanje kandidata za Savet REM-a, [Public hearing of candidates for the REM Council,], National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, January 2025

286 *Ibid.*

287 Saša Mirković, Rodoljub Šabić, Dubravka Valić Nedeljković, Aleksandra Krstić, Dušan Aleksić, Željko Hubač and Muhedin Fijuljanin.

288 Sednica Odbora o izboru članova Saveta REM, koju je tražila opozicija, sazvana za 28. April [The meeting of the Committee on the election of members of the REM Council, requested by the opposition, convened for 28 April], *N1*, April 2025

289 Students in blockade, Javni servis radi protiv svih nas [The public service is working against all of us], *X*, April 2025

290 Studenti u blokadi [Students in blockade], *X*, April 2025

The students were joined by numerous citizens, and in the petition that was launched by RTS employees by the group “Our Protest”, which gathers public service workers who will support the students until their demands are met, it was pointed out that “the key to unlocking the entrance to the RTS buildings is actually in the hands of the Committee for Culture and Information of the National Assembly. By its inaction, it is in fact the parliamentary committee that is blocking both REM and RTS from functioning smoothly”.<sup>291</sup>

During that time, RTS broadcast a changed programme, without the usual shows. The news programme was reduced to broadcasting a series of recorded reports, without any announcers in the studio. It is clear that the technical capacities of RTS are much greater than it appears, given its numerous external contracts for the realisation of shows outside the television studios and dozens of dubious agreements, but the editorial team chose to treat the crisis this way. The blockade of public services was condemned by all regime politicians, who even called for the arrest of students.

What best showed the attitude of the government representatives towards the events in the society and the deterioration of freedom of expression, was the first address and invitation of the new Minister of Telecommunications and Information, who called on the state authorities to take measures and urgently make it possible for RTS journalists to work, thus almost calling for a violent end to the blockades. To him, the blockade of RTS by disgruntled students and citizens was unacceptable; he said that the students’ demands were political in nature, and that he expected a reaction of the competent authorities, primarily the police and the judiciary.<sup>292</sup>

On 28 April, the Committee of the Serbian National Assembly for Culture and Information unanimously adopted a decision to announce a new competition for the REM Council. This effectively fulfilled the students’ request, after which they withdrew from the public service buildings.<sup>293</sup>

## Amendments to the Criminal Law Legislation from the Journalists’ Point of View

The drafts of the criminal law regulations caused a serious reaction from the expert public, who assessed the proposed changes as populist.<sup>294</sup> Representatives of non-governmental organisations and expert lawyers believe that mass electronic monitoring of citizens is being introduced behind closed doors, with the aim of instilling fear of arrest if someone just posts a call to protest on social networks. Coercion of testimony, toughening of penalties, and the publication of materials advising the commission of a criminal offence are problematic provisions that could very easily apply to journalists as well.<sup>295</sup> Certain provisions carry the risk of mass surveillance of citizens, and numerous changes in these criminal matters lead to discretionary interpretations of the provisions.<sup>296</sup>

Journalists’ associations and media organisations submitted comments and proposals for changes to said laws, despite the fact that the deadline left for public debate was assessed as unreasonably short. Besides individual proposals, representatives of journalists’ and media associations in the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists also submitted joint proposals for changes to the Criminal Code, through the Media Coalition or joint proposals of individual associations. The proposals were drafted based on the legal opinions of three experts in the field of criminal legislation, with the aim of

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291 [Ovo nije televizija koju želimo: Peticija, protesti i medijska odgovornost](#) [This is not the television we want: Petition, protests and media responsibility], Radio Free Europe, April 2025

292 [Policija i pravosuđe kao rešenje za rad RTS-a](#) [Police and judiciary as a solution for RTS work], Nova S Portal, April 2025

293 [Deveta sednica Odbora za kulturu i informisanje](#) [Ninth session of the Committee for Culture and Information], National Assembly, April 2025

294 [Savović: Pooštavanje krivičnih kazni čist populistički akt](#) [Savović: The tightening of criminal penalties is a purely populist act], Cepris, April 2025,

295 [Šta sve do sada znamo o izmenama Krivičnog zakonika](#) [What do we know so far about the changes to the Criminal Code], Istinomer, October 2024

296 [Komlen Nikolić o Krivičnom zakoniku: Najveća opasnost od masovnog nadzora nad građanima](#) [Komlen Nikolić on the Criminal Code: The greatest danger is the mass surveillance of citizens], Yucom, October 2024

creating proposals that would improve the safety of media workers.<sup>297</sup> The proposals were related to the improvement of specific crimes that most often affect journalists, such as the criminal offence of 'light bodily injury committed against a media worker', for which criminal prosecution would take place *ex officio*, or the criminal offence of 'coercion', which, according to experts, should be changed to include media workers. In this way, those who commit a criminal act against a journalist would face a stricter punishment. Amendments to the criminal offence 'endangering security' were proposed as well. Most of the proposal was not adopted after a short public debate, and the Ministry of Justice announced that the debate on the proposed novelties would last throughout 2025.<sup>298</sup>

## The Code of Journalists of Serbia Has Been Improved

The Code of Journalists of Serbia has been amended once again. The Complaints Commission of the Press Council operates under a new self-regulatory act starting from January 2025.<sup>299</sup> Key changes relate to respect for dignity, artificial intelligence and social networks, independence of journalists, privacy and personal data, introduction of gender-sensitive language, and digital challenges. A new chapter "Respect for Dignity" was introduced into the Code. The amendments also include guidelines on reporting on minors and sensitive groups such as persons with disabilities, national minorities and LGBTIQ+ citizens. There is also a new provision, stating that "a journalist shall not report on burials, except in cases of high-ranking public figures".<sup>300</sup> Provisions governing the right to be forgotten, the use of artificial intelligence and the use of content from social networks are also included, as well as provisions providing for editorial control, but also responsibility for content created using artificial intelligence. It is the media's duty to label content created using such tools. Independence from corporate interests is emphasised in the chapter dealing with the independence of journalists. The privacy chapter has been significantly improved, and readers must now be informed whether pre- or post-moderation will be used.

### **Investigative story 3: REM Council President Failed to Report Property Deal with TV Channel Editor-in-Chief Amid Broadcasting Licence Decision**

In May 2021, the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), led by then-president Olivera Zekić, held an emergency session to, among other things, decide on granting a cable broadcasting license to the newly established Tanjug TV. The channel was co-owned by companies linked to Serbian pop singer Željko Joksimović, a journalist Manja Grčić, and businessman close to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party Radojica Milosavljević. Joksimović's wife, Jovana Joksimović, was appointed as editor-in-chief of the station. The Council unanimously approved the broadcasting license for Tanjug TV.

An investigation<sup>301</sup> revealed that Zekić had purchased an apartment and garage from Jovana Joksimović in the same month the license was granted. According to her asset and income report, which Zekić is required to submit to the Anti-Corruption Agency as a public official, her income from the budget is listed as 80,000 RSD. However, she did not report the apartment and garage she purchased from Jovana Joksimović, as well as a part of an apartment in her hometown of Kraljevo.

Zekić was obligated to report all assets and any potential conflicts of interest to the Anti-Corruption Agency. The Agency told CINS it will conduct a retroactive review to determine if proceedings should be initiated and to identify any potential violations of the Law on Prevention of Corruption.

297 Opinion of legal experts engaged by the Permanent Working Group for Security Zoran Stojanović, former professor of Criminal Law at the Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade, Igor Vuković, full professor of Criminal Law at the Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade, and attorney Slobodan Beljanski.

298 [O Krivičnom zakoniku i 2025. godine](#) [The Criminal Code will be debated in 2025 as well], Fonet, November 2025

299 [Stupio na snagu novi Kodeks novinara i novinarki Srbije](#) [The new Code of Journalists of Serbia has entered into force], NUNS, December 2024

300 [Kodeks novinara Srbije](#) [Code of Journalists of Serbia], Chapter 5, Article 5

301 [Ivana Milosavljević, Radmilo Marković. "Olivera Zekić Failed to Report Properties – Including an Apartment and Garage She Bought from Jovana Joksimović", CINS and BIRN, 01/04/2025](#)



## Project Co-financing and Media Financing: New Mechanisms for Abuses

The implementation of the new media laws has shaken up the resources that should represent the sources of co-financing of media projects. Instead of the law improving and strengthening the position of independent media that report in the public interest, it almost “forced” the republic, the province and local governments to resort to other methods and mechanisms to continue to allocate funds to the media that support them in the amounts from previous years. Providers of funds have consciously diverted funds to other forms of provision, such as public procurement or direct contracts with dubious foundations. Speaking about the year 2025, the Ministry announced that the most significant increase in the budget will be for the Public Information and Media Sector; compared to the previous year, these funds were increased by more than RSD 255 million.<sup>302</sup>

Research has also confirmed the trend of redirecting funds. Analysis of data on advertising contracts published on the public procurement portal shows that media with a tabloid editorial policy, which frequently violate the ethical code of journalists, were allocated more than RSD 268 million from the budget, under at least 307 contracts with a total value of almost RSD 1 billion.<sup>303</sup> Considering the way in which funds are directed, the analysis of spending raises the question of the expediency of public procurement of advertising and marketing services and their real social effect. In 2024, the City of Belgrade co-financed only 33 projects; however, a total of RSD 75 million was allocated to them, and the largest portion of the funds went to pro-regime media. This trend has continued, so it is assumed that the number of such procedures and contracts is actually much higher than a sample research can show. To justify actions, but also to remove their traces, they are using different activities similar to those that relate to the media.<sup>304</sup>

### ✖ ALARM: Safety of Journalists – Escalation of Threats and Attacks on Social Networks and in Real Life

Attacks on journalists have become more frequent, while threats and hate speech are almost a regular occurrence in the public space and the private lives of journalists, who are targeted because of their journalistic work or the media in which they are employed. Violence in the media has translated into actual violence against journalists, students and activists in the streets and on social networks. The overall situation – caused by the inaction of institutions and the relativisation of problems and events in society – has resulted in the withdrawal of media associations and non-governmental organisations from the process of work and cooperation in state bodies and commissions. The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (*NUNS*), the Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina (*NDNV*), the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation, the Media Association and ANEM have suspended their work in the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists for an indefinite period of time. The Association of Journalists of Serbia (*UNS*) continued to cooperate with the institutions.

The number of threats and attacks increased in the previous year, especially in the second half, while the first four months of 2025 were devastating with 116 attacks, threats and pressures on journalists and media workers.<sup>305</sup> *NUNS* included 117 different forms of threats and attacks in the *Safejournalists* database in 2024, while at least 66 more serious cases of threats and attacks were recorded as of the end of April 2025.<sup>306</sup> Incidents sometimes become known only weeks later, especially after protests, which are numerous and frequent, and journalists increasingly refrain from reporting or informing their associations about incidents.<sup>307</sup> The violent narrative and the increased number of incidents against journalists brought representatives of international journalist associations to Serbia, who conducted an observation mission as part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response platform.<sup>308</sup>

302 Značajno uvećan budžet Ministarstva za 2025. godinu [The budget of the Ministry for 2025 was significantly increased], Ministry of Telecommunication and Information, November 2025.

303 Transparentnost pod lupom: Javne nabavke za medijske usluge [Transparency under scrutiny: Public procurement of media services], BIRN Serbia, November 2024

304 *Ibid.*

305 [Baza napada i pritisaka na novinare](#) [Database of attacks and pressures on journalists], *NUNS*, April 2025

306 [Safejournalists database of attacks on journalists](#), April 2025

307 Medijska udruženja osuđuju napade na novinare na dan mitinga vlasti [Media associations condemn attacks on journalists on the day of the government rally], Cenzolovka, April 2025

308 [Serbia: MFRF media freedom mission to visit Belgrade and Novi Sad](#), MFRF, April 2025

On its website, the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office announced that in the last three months of 2024, 17 cases were reported that merited opening of cases by prosecutors.<sup>309</sup> Based on submitted criminal complaints/reports, public prosecutor's offices opened 20 cases in 2025 (4 in January, 7 in February and 9 in March) in connection with events that resulted in 22 injured persons, i.e. 21 individuals who perform tasks of public importance in the field of information. Of these, 13 injured persons were male (61.9%), and 8 were female (38.1%). Of the total number of cases, 10 (i.e. 50%) were opened by the Special Public Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime. The number of threats and attacks increased, but the number of journalists who no longer report cases, or even inform journalists' associations about them, increased as well. The largest number of cases are still in the investigative stages (almost 90%), and the prosecutors are still failing to prove the existence of criminal acts committed against journalists. In the case of the attack on journalist Vuk Cvijić, it took the police six months to submit the requested information to the public prosecutor's office; after they did, the prosecutor's office found that there were no elements of a criminal offence.<sup>310</sup>

Journalists are especially threatened on social networks and in comments on their media outlets' web portals, but threats via communication networks such as Telegram, Facebook Messenger, Viber or Whatsapp are not rare either. Physical attacks at protests, threats directed via the Internet, heavy political pressure and targeting that introduces and initiates serious attacks are part of the regular culture of violence in Serbia.<sup>311</sup> Journalists were intimidated primarily by the representatives of the government, led by the President of Serbia, the Speaker of the National Assembly and the Prime Minister (now resigned). By targeting and labelling them as enemies of Serbia and the Serbian people, and collaborators of foreign, especially Western countries that allegedly want to exert their influence on Serbia, populist points are scored among groups of voters and citizens who do not have access to independent television and media. Such heavy pressures represent an introduction to threats and attacks, which tend to increase after the appearance of representatives of the government on tabloid television stations.

Violence in the media, violence in society and tensions especially increased after the fall of the canopy at the railway station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, which initially took the lives of 14 people. Two more succumbed later. The death and murder of citizens triggered peaceful protests organised by students at Serbian faculties. This, in turn, caused a rise in tensions by government representatives – both towards students and citizens, and towards journalists. Media associations asked international organisations for support and protection for journalists, and especially for students who took on the role of journalists and citizens' services and became the main information service, along with independent media, by starting to publish information about the devastating consequences of corruption in Serbia at all levels.<sup>312</sup>

Attacks on journalists most often occurred during protests, demonstrations and other public gatherings. Although the police were present, they mostly failed to react.<sup>313</sup> Media workers were treated as political opponents, hindered in their work, and exposed to physical attacks and injuries. Some political representatives and councilors of the ruling party also played the role of attackers.<sup>314</sup> Dozens of threats were made against Ana Lalić and professor Dinko Gruhonjić, and almost all journalists and teams reporting from the protests and blockades in Novi Sad and Belgrade were physically attacked. Jelena Mirković from N1 had to have her neck immobilised after two physical attacks at a protest at Belgrade Waterfront. She was attacked by hooligans who had gathered to cause incidents at a peaceful protest.

309 Statistički podaci o postupanju javnih tužilaštava [Statistical data on the acting of public prosecutor's offices], Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, January 2025

310 Vuk Cvijić o odluci Prvog osnovnog javnog tužilaštva: Jedina dobra stvar je što su morali da konstatuju da ja jesam napadnut [Vuk Cvijić on the decision of the First Basic Public Prosecutor's Office: The only good thing is that they had to state that I was attacked], *Insajder TV*, March 2025

311 As the noose tightens around Serbia's journalists, the European Union can no longer look away, *RSF*, April 2025

312 Studenski protesti, vladajuća stranka i RTS: Šta je posao javnog servisa? [Student protests, the ruling party and the RTS: What is the job of a public service?], *VOA*, February 2025

313 Dozens of threats to Ana Lalić and Dinko Gruhonjić continued, as did physical attacks on the journalist of Television N1 Žaklina Tatalović and cameraman Nikola Popović; *Euronews* cameraman Mirko Todorović, the *Radio 021* media team, *Fonet* agency cameraman and journalist Marko Dragoslavić; Miloš Ljiljanić, journalist of the *Kovinskeinfo.rs* portal; *Bečejski Mozaik* journalist Kristina Demeter Filipčev; Ana Marković, journalist of the *Nova.rs* portal; TV N1 journalist Jelena Mirković and cameraman Aleksandar Cvrkotić; journalist Vojin Radovanović of the daily newspaper *Danas*, and others.

314 Medijska scena Srbije u novembru 2024 [Serbia's media scene in November 2024], *Safejournalists*



At the gatherings organised by SNS, almost every journalist team from independent media suffered threats and was subjected to physical incidents. In Sremska Mitrovica, Ksenija Pavkov experienced direct death threats.<sup>315</sup> The KTV team from Zrenjanin was physically attacked at a rally in Belgrade.<sup>316</sup> Zoran Kesić was targeted with at least 200 (counted) hate speech and targeting graffiti. Brankica Stanković and the editorial office of Cenzolovka, as well as the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation, were threatened as well. The police and gendarmerie physically harassed several journalists in front of the City Hall in Novi Sad. The premises of *NDNV* were entered during the night by several masked persons, with the obvious intention of intimidating journalists.<sup>317</sup> An *Istinomer* journalist was physically attacked in front of the National Assembly while she was reporting, and journalist Zoran Strika had his telephone stolen and thrown into the river by unknown persons at an SNS rally in Novi Sad.

The Coalition for Media Freedom asked the European media to inform their citizens about the fight for freedom that is being waged in Serbia, and this attitude towards the events was condemned by the relevant Ministry.<sup>318</sup> After visiting Belgrade, the international organisation Reporters without Borders called on the Government of the Republic of Serbia to fight for media freedom and against propaganda. It was also announced that at least four newsrooms (*Euronews*, *TV N1*, *Radio 021* and *FoNet*) were attacked while reporting from the anti-government protest in Novi Sad.<sup>319</sup>

In mid-December 2024, *Amnesty International* published a report on the surveillance and repression of civil society in Serbia.<sup>320</sup> The study presented evidence of the activities of members of the police and the Security Information Agency (BIA), who illegally installed spyware (called *NoviSpy* in the report, believed to have been developed in Serbia) into the smartphones of at least four activists, journalists and members of civil society.<sup>321</sup>

According to the available information, the application of these tools has been confirmed in case of journalists Slaviša Milanov and Ljubomir Stefanović. Slaviša Milanov submitted a criminal report to the competent prosecutor's office, and a complaint to the Mol's Internal Control Sector, but the competent institutions failed to react. The internal control procedure was not even initiated, as the police assessed that their officers did not act in an unlawful manner. The public prosecutor's office opened a case, but without a clear attitude towards the committed attack. According to the information available to *NUNS*, the *Cellebrite* tool, which opened up the possibility of installing *NoviSpy* spyware, was used in the case of Ljubomir Stefanović, the author of the *YouTube* channel *Slavija Info*. The BIA also spoke out about *Amnesty International*'s report, claiming that the agency operated exclusively in accordance with the laws of the Republic of Serbia, and that they are not able to "even" comment on the "meaningless statements contained in the text".<sup>322</sup> Security experts at Google confirmed *Amnesty International*'s findings; they identified an additional number of compromised devices and removed spyware from them.

In the meantime, it was discovered that two female journalists from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) were targets of the *Pegasus* spyware in January 2025.<sup>323</sup> They received suspicious messages through the *Viber* application from an unknown Serbian number registered as part of the network of the state telecommunications operator, *Telekom Serbia*. *Amnesty International* concluded that, based on the nature of the attempt, this message, too, was an attempt at a *Pegasus* attack via a link that requires user interaction (1-click attack). Such attacks require the user to click on a malicious link in order for the device to be infected.

315 Pretnje smrću i fizičkoj sigurnosti Kseniji Pavkov [Threats on the life and physical safety of Ksenia Pavkov], *NUNS*, March 2025

316 Neprihvatljivi napadi na ekipu KTV [Unacceptable attacks on the KTV crew], *N1*, April 2025

317 Provaljeno u prostorije NDNV-a u Novom Sadu [Burglary of NDNV premises in Novi Sad], *Cenzolovka*, February 2025

318 Ministarstvo osuđuje političko delovanje Koalicije za medije [The Ministry condemns the political activities of the Media Coalition], Ministry of Telecommunication and Information, December 2024

319 Reporters without Borders, [Public service is not a propaganda tool and should ensure impartial reporting, whether the government likes it or not](#), *X*, January 2025

320 *Digital Prison: Surveillance and Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia*, *Amnesty International*, December 2025.

321 See more in this Report's chapter on personal data protection.

322 „Saopštenje BIA“ [BIA Press Release], BIA, 16/12/2024.

323 *Serbia: BIRN journalists targeted with Pegasus spyware*, *Amnesty International*, 27/03/2025



These were not the only cases of suspected unauthorised access to journalists' devices, as there are suspicions that several other journalists were also monitored in this or another similar way.<sup>324</sup> Invitations to journalists and media workers of the Radio and Television of Serbia to come to the BIA for information-gathering interviews are a new form of worrisome pressure and intimidation against journalists. Journalists responded to those invitations, independently or accompanied by their attorneys, but it remained unclear why they were invited. The phone calls came after the meeting of RTS journalists and media workers that was organised by the informal group "Our Protest".<sup>325</sup>

At the end of February 2025, an unannounced large group of armed members of the criminal police entered the premises of the citizens' association CRTA (and therefore also those of the research portal *Istinomer*, which is part of the same association), and four other organisations, demanding to be allowed to see and copy financial documents in connection with the alleged investigation of the misuse of funds of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).<sup>326</sup> Representatives of non-governmental organisations learned about the raid from the tabloids.<sup>327</sup> (Read more about this in the chapter on the position of civil society)

## Violent Narrative in the Media and Violation of Journalistic Ethics

The violent narrative present in the pro-regime and tabloid media, which attacks and targets students, journalists, activists and citizens who support student protests in Serbia or criticise the work of the government in any way, is extremely frightening. The identities (names and surnames, as well as addresses) of female and male students were revealed on several occasions, while *Informer TV* even called female students on the phone in live programme. As a result of such disclosure of personal data, several students said that their names were mentioned on *TV Informer*, especially by the editor of that media outlet, which is when they began to receive numerous threatening messages.<sup>328</sup>

Serbian media report on tragedies and current trials in a sensationalist manner, frequently publishing disturbing photos from the scene, the statements of the parties in the proceedings and comments from social network acquaintances.<sup>329</sup> They especially violate children's rights and their protection in criminal and other proceedings.

In January 2025, pro-regime tabloids had to remove more than 110 articles from their portals. This happened after foreign companies that host servers of the tabloid websites were notified about the contents of the texts and the fact that they had published photos of students' documents, their personal data, data on their alleged health status, and the like. In the meantime, almost 90% of tabloid portals have changed server providers and moved to the servers of *Telekom Serbia* and the state-owned company Data Cloud Technology.<sup>330</sup> At least 230 cases of privacy violations in the regular reporting of 7 domestic online media outlets have been identified, while additional 933 cases were identified in a special case study that dealt with the media coverage of participants and activists at protests against lithium mining and those that were caused by the events of 1 November 2024.<sup>331</sup>

## New Record Number of SLAPP Lawsuits against Journalists

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324 [Database of attacks and pressures on journalists](#), NUNS, January 2025

325 NUNS: Zabrinuti smo zbog pozivanja zaposlenih sa RTS-a na informativne razgovore [NUNS: We are concerned about RTS employees being invited to information-gathering interviews], NUNS, April 2025

326 Policijska racija u Gradjanskim inicijativama [Police raid of Civic Initiatives], Civic Initiatives, February 2025

327 Osude upada policije u nekoliko organizacija civilnog društva: Vlast nastavlja represiju nad NVO [Condemnation of police raids on several civil society organisations: The government continues repression of NGOs], European Western Balkans, February 2025

328 Prorežimski mediji objavili identitet i mesto gde živi: Studentu Milošu su počele da stižu jezive pretnje [Pro-regime media apublished the identity and address, as a result of which student Miloš started receiving gruesome threats], N1 portal, January 2025

329 Prisutnost govora mrznje u medijima u Srbiji [Hate speech in Serbian media], Prof. Dr Ivana Krstić, Council of Europe

330 Tabloidi koji su morali da brišu tekstove u kojima blate studente prelaze na servere u vlasništvu srpske vlade [Tabloids that had to delete articles smearing students are moving to servers owned by the Serbian government], Cenazolovka, February 2025

331 Privatnost na udaru [Privacy under attack], BIRN, January 2025

There were at least 21 lawsuits against the media with SLAPP elements in 2024, so far the largest number of individual lawsuits filed against the media in one year in Serbia. The Coalition against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) and the Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation published a report that shows that Serbia is one of the countries with a significant number of such initiated proceedings.

Predrag Koluvija filed a third lawsuit against a journalist of the research portal KRIK because he allegedly violated his personal dignity by publishing the article "Operation Zeppelin: Koluvija was suspected of producing marijuana even before the 'Jovanjica' case". Regarding the lawsuits filed by judge Dušanka Djordjević and her attorney husband, the MFRR platform expressed its belief that the case was part of a wider campaign aimed at silencing KRIK due to the investigative journalism it engages in, and that the outcome of the case will be a test for the independence of the Serbian judiciary and commitment to the rule of law.<sup>332</sup> It will also be a test of the judiciary's ability to ensure a fair trial and that presiding judges are not unduly influenced in their decision-making. A conviction would have a chilling effect on the media and would potentially spell the end of investigative journalism in the public interest in the country.

Former minister and one of the defendants in the case of the fall of the canopy in Novi Sad, Jelena Tanasković, filed two lawsuits against KRIK within a month – first, because they published the story on how no criminal charges were filed against her thanks to her friend's husband, chief of the criminal police, and then because they informed the public about that lawsuit.<sup>333</sup>

The "Starting" company, which reconstructed the railway station in Novi Sad, whose canopy collapsed on 1 November last year killing 16 people, filed a private criminal lawsuit for "damaging business reputation and credit-worthiness" against a total of seven people, including KRIK journalist Sofija Bogosavljev.<sup>334</sup>

The Commercial Appellate Court in Belgrade confirmed the first-instance decision and rejected the lawsuit that the publisher of *Kurir* filed against KRIK in 2021, accusing the research portal of unfair competition and ruining the reputation of this tabloid. The publisher of *Kurir* filed a lawsuit after KRIK's portal *Raskrikavanje* established that this tabloid had published more than 100 false, unfounded or manipulative news on its front pages in 2020.<sup>335</sup>

An astonishing amount of inaccurate and malicious information was published in the tabloid media in 2024, affecting the public and citizens. Namely, at least 1,447 manipulative news appeared on the front pages of dailies such as *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf*, *Alo*, *Večernje novosti*, *Kurir* and *Politika*.<sup>336</sup> Not only were these media not held accountable for violations of the Law on Public Information and Media, the Law on Personal Data Protection and criminal law regulations, but they were awarded almost EUR 1.4 million of budget funds in 2024 through tenders and contracts with public institutions.<sup>337</sup>

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332 Serbian judge's lawsuits set to chill press freedom, International Press Institute, October 2024

333 Tanasković ponovo tužila KRIK – jer smo objavili da nas je tužila [Tanasković sues KRIK once again – because we said that she sued us], KRIK, February 2025

334 B. N. Ninić otkrio koga je sve „Starting“ tužio zbog „narušavanja poslovnog ugleda i kreditne sposobnosti“ [Ninić reveals who was sued by "Starting" for "damaging its business reputation and creditworthiness"], *N1*, 24/04/2025

335 Isidora Martać, Odbijena tužba Kurira protiv KRIK-a [Kurir's lawsuit against KRIK has been rejected], KRIK, 16/04/2025

336 Marija Vučić, Milica Ljubičić, Stefan Kosanović and Vesna Radojević, Šest novina, više od 1.400 manipulacija: Kako su izgledale naslovnice 2024. godine [Six newspapers, more than 1,400 manipulations: What the covers looked like in 2024], *Raskrikavanje*, 24/04/2025

337 Milica Blagojević, "Skoro 1,4 miliona evra iz budžeta prošle godine dodeljeno medijima koji šire lažne vesti – kroz konkurse i ugovore" [Almost EUR 1.4 million from the budget was allocated last year, through tenders and contracts, to the media that spread fake news], *Raskrikavanje*, 24/04/2025

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is necessary to make additional and complete amendments and supplements to the adopted media laws, which must remain in line with the rights acquired and guaranteed by valid regulations, as well as with the Media Strategy. Amendments to the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media must not be limited to individual comments of the European Commission; instead, they must comply with the requirements and recommendations from the Strategy and be aligned with the missing provisions from the Directive on Audiovisual Media Services. The Draft Law on Public Media Services must be revised and adopted in a procedure that includes all relevant participants. Comments and suggestions of the European Commission must be made available to all the members of the working groups, and the state must report clearly and transparently to all the parties in the proceedings.
- The actions of institutions that apply media laws must be in line with the prescribed procedures. They must ensure the protection of competitive co-financing provided by law, as well as responsibility for violation of procedures and misuse of funds.
- It is necessary to carry out appropriate controls of all procedures by which funds are allocated to media and production companies, especially of irresponsible procedures of public and other procurements that divert funds intended for topics that can only be realised through competitive co-financing.
- REM's work must be improved in practice by implementing greater control and raising the level of accountability of decision makers. All the activities from the sessions of the REM Council, including proposals and recommendations of the expert service, must be regularly published on the Regulator's website.
- Media monitoring during election campaigns must be precisely and clearly organised in a methodological fashion, with objective observations and reports.
- It is necessary to start a new process of electing new members of the REM Council as soon as possible, while in the meantime it is important to determine the responsibility for the mistakes that were made in the initiation and implementation of the previous procedure. The competent committee of the National Assembly must act in accordance with its entrusted competences, which also include the determination of irregularities with the proponents and in received candidacies.
- The election of members of the Programme Councils of public media services should begin as soon as possible, within the legally prescribed period.
- Government representatives must act responsibly, call for a reduction in tensions and urgently condemn any events that threaten the safety of students, journalists and citizens, in order to convey the message of unacceptable behaviour.
- Competent authorities must conduct investigations of all campaign activities involving hate speech and incitement to violence in society by representatives of the authorities and powerful individuals, and resolve cases of threats and attacks against journalists, students and activists, including misuse of tools to monitor the phones of journalists, students and activists by members of the police and BIA.
- It is necessary to continue with the training of police officers, public prosecutors and judges, especially on the topics of freedom of expression and freedom of the media, with the aspect of developing sensitivity towards threats addressed to journalists and preventing secondary victimisation of the injured parties.

### 4.3.2. Freedom of Assembly

*Between November 2024 and April 2025, Serbia experienced an unprecedented wave of peaceful student-led protests, triggered by the tragic collapse of a railway station canopy in Novi Sad, which resulted in 16 deaths. Initially an expression of mourning and call for accountability, these demonstrations quickly evolved into a nationwide civic mobilisation addressing systemic corruption, governmental negligence, and the erosion of the rule of law. Students, supported by professors, teachers, farmers, pensioners and other social groups, coordinated extensive daily blockades and demonstrations in numerous cities, which culminated in a massive rally of approximately 300,000 protesters in Belgrade on 15 March 2025 – the largest since 2000. Despite initial government concessions, including resignations and criminal charges brought against officials, Serbian authorities resorted to ambivalent and often antagonistic responses, marked by stigmatisation of demonstrators as foreign-backed actors and inadequate protection of peaceful assemblies. Documented cases of violent third-party attacks, state harassment, and allegations of excessive force – including the suspected deployment of sonic weapons – highlighted significant shortcomings in Serbia's adherence to international and domestic obligations to safeguard the right to peaceful assembly. This environment of intimidation and impunity posed severe risks not only to civic freedoms, but also undermined Serbia's compliance with EU accession criteria, necessitating urgent remedial measures.*

Serbia experienced a wave of student-led peaceful protests that started in November 2024, marking one of the largest civic mobilisations in recent memory.<sup>338</sup> The trigger was the 1 November 2024 collapse of a newly renovated railway station canopy in Novi Sad that tragically killed 15 people (the number later increased to 16).<sup>339</sup> Outrage over this disaster – widely blamed on corruption and negligence – quickly sparked mass demonstrations demanding justice and accountability. What began as solemn memorial gatherings (with 15 minutes of silence for the 15 victims) evolved into a broader movement against systemic misgovernance and the erosion of the rule of law.<sup>340</sup>

From November through April, university students spearheaded daily protests and blockades across Serbia, with slogans like “Demands have not been met” and “Your hands are bloody,” accusing authorities of causing the tragedy.<sup>341</sup> By early 2025, the movement had spread to hundreds of towns and cities, drawing support from professors, teachers, farmers, pensioners and other citizens. Notably, on 15 March 2025, tens of thousands rallied in Belgrade – possibly up to 300,000 people – making it the largest demonstration since 2000.<sup>342</sup> These protests remained overwhelmingly *peaceful* and *issue-focused*, centred on four students’ demands (truthful disclosure of the Novi Sad project documentation and prosecution of the responsible people, prosecution of those responsible for attacks on students and professors, dismissal of criminal charges against students who were arrested and detained during the student protests, and increasing the budget for university education by 20%).<sup>343</sup>

State responses to these assemblies were mixed. On the one hand, authorities made some concessions under pressure – for example, by late December prosecutors charged 13 officials (including one former minister) over the Novi Sad collapse,<sup>344</sup> and by February the Prime Minister and two other ministers resigned amid public anger.<sup>345</sup> President Aleksandar Vučić at times urged dialogue with the students and advocated for “lowering the tensions”.<sup>346</sup> On the other hand, officials often reacted defensively, framing the protests as a threat to stability or a foreign-induced plot and a “colour revolution”.<sup>347</sup> Throughout the

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338 “Repression Intensifies in Serbia Following Mass Protests: BCSDN Reiterates Call for EU Support to Civil Society”, BCSDN, 25/03/2025

339 *Ibid.*

340 “Protests Held Across Serbia As Students Continue To Demand Accountability In Deadly Canopy Collapse”, RFE/RL, 26/01/2025

341 Katarina Baletić and Milica Stojanović, “Serbian Students Block Highway as Novi Sad Disaster Protests Continue”, *Balkan Insight*, 10/01/2025

342 Guy De Launey, “Serbia’s largest-ever rally sees 325,000 protest against government”, *BBC*, 16/03/2025

343 Grujica Andrić, “Studentske blokade i institucije: Ko je nadležan za ispunjenje zahteva” [Student blockades and institutions: Who is responsible for fulfilling requests], *BBC News in Serbian*, 13/02/2025. In March 2025, students added two more demands: 5. A detailed investigation by the competent authorities to determine all circumstances and responsibilities related to the phenomenon that caused fear and panic on 15 March 2025, and 6. Responsibility and patient protection. See the demands here: <https://blokade.org/en/zahtevi/>

344 Ivana Šekularac, “Thousands rally in Serbia as anger over corruption swells”, *Reuters*, 16/02/2025

345 “Vučićević resigns as Prime Minister”, *Government of the Republic of Serbia*, 28/01/2025

346 “Serbian farmers join striking university students’ 24-hour traffic blockade in Belgrade”, *VOA*, 27/01/2025

347 Marija Stojanović, “In the midst of mass protests, Serbian officials are recycling the narrative of a colour revolution”, *European Western Balkans*, 20/02/2025

period, civil society groups documented persistent stigmatisation of protesters and failures by the state to safeguard peaceful assemblies,<sup>348</sup> including instances of harassment, violent attacks by third parties, use of excessive force<sup>349</sup> and novel crowd-control devices by the authorities.<sup>350</sup>

## Failure of the State to Uphold Positive Obligations for Peaceful Assembly

Under international standards (and Serbia's own laws), authorities have a positive obligation to facilitate peaceful assemblies and protect participants from violence. During the period November 2024-April 2025, there were multiple instances where the state fell short of these obligations, leading to a palpable "chilling effect" on the freedom of assembly. During this period, the Serbian state failed to fully uphold its obligations to enable safe and unencumbered peaceful assembly. Protesters were stigmatised as enemies, left exposed to aggression, and even reportedly subjected to experimental crowd-control measures. All this contributed to an environment of uncertainty and fear. These systemic issues are threatening to erode the fundamental freedom of assembly, which is the cornerstone of the EU accession Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) and the Copenhagen political criteria.

In the first months of protests, demonstrators were left vulnerable to hostile acts by third parties. On multiple occasions, drivers deliberately rammed their cars into groups of student protesters in Belgrade and Novi Sad, seriously injuring several people.<sup>351</sup> Protesters noted that these incidents occurred in plain sight, suggesting that police traffic control was either inadequate or absent. At the beginning of the traffic blockades, the President of the Republic commented on the incident in which a protester ended up on the hood of a car with the following words: "You stood in someone's way, acting like you're God... And he drove on. The man just passed through. And now you're saying, 'Arrest the driver!' How the hell do you arrest a man who didn't break the law? He was just going his way...".<sup>352</sup> Although prosecutors did charge the drivers with attempted murder,<sup>353</sup> the fact that such attacks could happen at all – and that the students themselves felt the need to organise protection – indicates a failure in preventive safety measures. The time and venue of everyday students' 15-minute traffic blockades were well-known to the authorities.

During a 24-hour blockade of a major Belgrade intersection on 27 January 2025, farmers drove their tractors and volunteer bikers formed convoys to shield the crowd from any possible vehicular assaults.<sup>354</sup> While the police did eventually deploy to help secure some of the protests (for instance, traffic police guarded the 27 January blockade after it began, as well as the 15 March protest),<sup>355</sup> earlier inaction and slow response had already undermined protesters' confidence. In Novi Sad, students marked three months since the tragedy by blocking all three Danube bridges for 24 hours on 1 February 2025, in a rally dubbed "Three Months – Three Bridges". This protest drew tens of thousands of people who demanded accountability and an end to corruption.<sup>356</sup> Two weeks later, on Serbia's Statehood Day (15 February), the city of Kragujevac came to a standstill as thousands of protesters, led by university students, blocked the main boulevard from morning until midnight in another day-long peaceful demonstration demanding justice and government transparency.<sup>357</sup>

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348 "Saopštenje" [Press release], *Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights*, 16/01/2025

349 "The Serbian Security Sector Must Act According to the Law, Not Political Arbitrary Power", *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, 11/03/2025

350 "Organizacije civilnog društva: Podneta krivična prijava za terorizam zbog incidenta 15. marta, sada dostupna baza sa svedočenjima o posledicama zvučnog udara" [Civil society organisations: Terrorism charges filed over the 15 March incident, database of evidence of the consequences of the sound blast is now available], *Belgrade Centre for Human Rights*, 09/04/2025

351 See two texts summarising incidents as of 31 January 2025: Ivana Milosavljević, Stefan Marković and Teodora Ćurčić, "MAPA: Napadi na učesnike protesta i blokada" [MAPA: Attacks on protest participants and blockades], *CINS*, 23/01/2025; "FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY IN SERBIA: Attacks on Protestors", *Preugovor*, 04/02/2025

352 D.D., "Kreni-Promeni podneo krivičnu prijavu protiv Aleksandra Vučića zbog gaženja članova Beogradske filharmonije" [Kreni-Promeni filed a criminal complaint against Aleksandar Vučić for hitting members of the Belgrade Philharmonic with a car] *Danas*, 13/12/2024

353 "Podignuta optužnica za pokušaj ubistva protiv devojke koja je kolima udarila studentkinju" [Indictment for attempted murder brought against the girl who hit a student with her car], *Danas*, 25/03/2025

354 Katarina Baletić and Milica Stojanović, "Serbian Students Block Highway in Capital as Protests Roll On", *Balkan Insight*, 27/01/2025

355 "Serbian farmers join striking university students' 24-hour traffic blockade in Belgrade", *VOA*, 27/01/2025

356 "Tri meseca nakon tragedije sva tri mosta u Novom Sadu bila blokirana tri sata, Most slobode ostaje blokirano do odluke građanskog plenuma" [Three months after the tragedy, all three bridges in Novi Sad were blocked for three hours, the Freedom Bridge remains blocked until the decision of the civic plenum], *Radio-television of Vojvodina*, 01/02/2025

357 Z. Mišić, "UŽIVO: Završen 15-očasovni protest 'Sretnimo se na Sretenje'" [LIVE: 15-hour protest 'Let's meet at Sretenje' has ended], *Danas*, 15/02/2025



The city of Niš saw a similarly large protest on 1 March, when tens of thousands of student-led demonstrators held an 18-hour blockade of the city centre to honour the 15 victims and call for officials' accountability.<sup>358</sup> CRTA estimated that at least 1,697 protests were held in 378 different Serbian towns and cities in March 2025.<sup>359</sup> Similarly, they estimated that 925 protests were held in the first two weeks of April.<sup>360</sup>

On 10 April, a group of students in Niš barricaded the entrance to the University's Medical Faculty with benches, as a form of a sit-in protest. That afternoon, plainclothes police officers entered the Niš Medical Faculty and, according to local reports, officers demanded IDs and issued summonses to some 30 students and several professors to appear for questioning, citing a complaint lodged by the Faculty administration.<sup>361</sup> In mid-April, students organised a two-week overnight blockade of the two public broadcasters: RTS and RTV.<sup>362</sup> Hundreds of students and supporters encircled the main TV buildings, peacefully preventing journalists and staff from entering for the morning shift. The aim was to press for the removal of politically appointed editors, and to demand that the long-defunct national media regulator (REM) finally be constituted. The authorities' response to this was relatively restrained: rather than use force, the police in Belgrade escorted RTS employees through side entrances and even through a nearby fast-food restaurant to bypass the demonstrators.<sup>363</sup>

### ✕ ALARM: Excessive or Improper Use of Force

The reports that authorities may have resorted to dangerous crowd-control tactics were even more disturbing. The most notable case occurred during the enormous 15 March 2025 rally in Belgrade.<sup>364</sup> Towards the end of a peaceful mass gathering (during a planned 15-minute silence), protesters were suddenly struck by a powerful shockwave and a high-pitched sound, which caused panic, nausea, fainting and other acute symptoms.<sup>365</sup> Witnesses and independent experts suspect that this happened as a result of the deployment of a Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD) or a similar sonic weapon. If true, this constitutes a grave violation of the right to peaceful assembly. Serbian authorities initially denied the use of such devices, but later admitted that an LRAD was present on site (while insisting that it was not used as a "sound cannon").<sup>366</sup> Human rights organisations have pointed out that even bringing such a device to a protest contradicts prior legal decisions – a vortex cannon technology associated with LRAD was explicitly excluded from lawful police equipment in 2022.<sup>367</sup> The lack of transparency and accountability regarding this incident has reinforced fears of impunity. The European Court of Human Rights has asked the Government of the Republic of Serbia for answers to questions about the possible use of sonic weapons.<sup>368</sup>

## Handling of Crowd Incidents

In general, the policing of the protest movement alternated between completely passive and heavy-handed. Aside from the 15 March event, the main example of force occurred early on 5 November 2024 in Novi Sad. There, an initially peaceful protest at the City Hall – fuelled by anger over the collapse of the canopy – turned unruly when some demonstrators (allegedly fringe elements, including masked

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358 "Veliki protest studenata u Nišu: 'Cela Srbija je ovde'" [Big student protest in Niš: 'All of Serbia is here'], *BBC News in Serbian*, 01/03/2025

359 "Najmanje 1697 protesta u martu" [There were at least 1,697 protests in March], *CRTA*, 01/04/2025

360 See CRTA posts on X: <https://x.com/CRTArs/status/1908815752481685904> and <https://x.com/CRTArs/status/1911713817764978947>

361 Ljubica Jocić and Nikola Djukić, "Policija ušla na niški Medicinski fakultet, legitimisala studente i profesore i pozvala ih da daju izjave" [Police entered the Faculty of Medicine in Niš, asked students and professors for their documents, and summoned them to give statements], *Južne vesti*, 10/04/2025

362 "Students call end to RTS blockade", *N1*, 28/04/2025

363 "Studenti i dalje ispred RTS-a, policija, uz garanje sa demonstrantima, uvela zaposlene u zgradu" [Students still in front of RTS, the police, jostling with the demonstrators, brought the employees into the building], *N1*, 16/04/2025

364 See also sections on the civic space, prohibition of torture and fight against terrorism in this Report.

365 "Repression Intensifies in Serbia Following Mass Protests: BCSDN Reiterates Call for EU Support to Civil Society", *BCSDN*, 25/03/2025

366 Boban Karović, "Dačićeva krivudanja: Od Srbija nema 'zvučni top' do 'stoji u kutijama u magacinu'" [Dačić's meanderings: From 'Serbia does not have a sound cannon' to 'It's sitting in boxes in the warehouse'], *NIN*, 17/03/2025

367 "A War Against Citizens: Who Authorised the Use of Illegal Weapon?", *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, 16/03/2025

368 "European Court of Human Rights Requests Serbia to Provide Respond Regarding the Alleged Use of Sonic Weapons at the Protest in Belgrade on March 15", *Belgrade Centre for Human Rights*, 25/03/2025. Read more in the section on prohibition of torture in this Report.

football hooligans) threw flares and paint at the building. Police responded with tear gas to disperse the crowd.<sup>369</sup> While property damage and violence by a few did justify some police action,<sup>370</sup> eyewitnesses questioned whether provocateurs were involved (given that certain hooligan groups are known to have ties to the ruling party).<sup>371</sup> No thorough inquiry into those events was ever made known to the public.

Apart from that Novi Sad incident, the protest organisers themselves took great care to remain peaceful and even to de-escalate tensions – for example, student stewards at rallies urged people to remain calm and insisted on non-violence. By March, protesters faced continuous psychological pressure, including new tactics of intimidation: activists reported increased surveillance, while some received ‘friendly calls’ from the Security Information Agency (BIA) warning them to stay away from rallies.<sup>372</sup> In the aftermath of the 15 March crackdown, authorities even floated the idea of charging certain activists with “inciting panic” by speaking about the incident.<sup>373</sup> These actions and failures by the state have created a chilling effect – many citizens now fear that joining protests could expose them to danger or legal trouble.

On 28 April, a tense showdown took place at the University of Novi Sad’s Faculty of Sport and Physical Education (DIF). Students and citizens had blocked the faculty for days, protesting perceived corruption and supporting the wider movement. Dean Patrik Drid arrived escorted by the police, but the special gendarmerie units in full riot gear forcefully pushed back the crowd with their shields, then escalated to using batons and chemical irritants to disperse the mass. Several protesters were injured. An ambulance was called for Drid after demonstrators doused him with water and jostled him when he attempted to enter. The police withdrew around midday without securing Drid’s entry, and the blockade continued.<sup>374</sup> The images of armed officers manhandling unarmed students at a university campus sparked nationwide condemnation. This was the first time that the months-long student movement, which had largely been allowed to hold peaceful blockades, was disrupted by outright police aggression, and it signalled a worrying readiness of the authorities to trample the right to peaceful assembly on campus, endangering university autonomy. Interior Minister Ivica Dačić defended the police action as minimal force used only after officers were attacked, insisting that it was justified to prevent violence against the dean and carried out at his request.<sup>375</sup> Human rights organisation YUCOM called it excessive and illegal police use of coercive means against peaceful protesters engaging in passive resistance. They emphasised the inappropriate use of gendarmerie as a special police unit and demanded an investigation and urgent supervision of police behaviour.<sup>376</sup>

## Stigmatisation, Harassment and Threats against Peaceful Protesters

Despite their peaceful character and broad public support, the student-led protests were frequently demonised by Serbian officials and pro-government media. President Vučić and his allies portrayed the demonstrations as orchestrated attempts at a “coloured revolution” – a term that invokes foreign-backed uprisings – and accused student organisers of being paid agents of Western intelligence.<sup>377</sup> In one instance, Serbia’s Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin publicly thanked Russia’s spy agencies

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369 “Fekalije, suzavac i minut ćutanja: Kako je izgledao protest u Novom Sadu” [Feces, tear gas and a moment of silence: What the protest in Novi Sad looked like], *BBC News in Serbian*, 05/11/2024

370 “Protest u Novom Sadu: Fekalijama na gradsku kuću, skup podrške pritvorenima” [Protest in Novi Sad: Faeces thrown on the city hall, rally in support of detainees], *BBC News in Serbian*, 05/11/2024

371 “Novosadska opozicija: Vlast spremila provokatore na protestu, ali im ideja neće proći” [Novi Sad opposition: The government prepared provocateurs for the protest, but their idea will fall through], *N1*, 05/11/2024

372 “N1 saznaje: BIA pozvala studenta u policiju na ‘prijateljski razgovor’ o protestu na fakultetima” [], *N1*, 25/12/2024; “BIA pokušala da zastraši studentkinju iz Novog Sada” [BIA has invited a student to the police for a ‘friendly conversation’ about the protest at the faculties], *N1*, 18/11/2025

373 Vuk Jeremić, “Igre prestola oko zvučnog topa: Kako je jedno obavezno uputstvo otkrilo sve nelogičnosti tužilačke istrage događaja od 15. marta?” [Games of thrones with the sound cannon: How one mandatory instruction revealed the illogical nature of the prosecutor’s investigation of the events of 15 March?], *Insajder*, 08/04/2025

374 “Police withdraws: Batons and pepper spray in front of the DIF in Novi Sad, several injured, dean pushed away from the entrance”, *NIN*, 28/04/2025

375 “Dačić o dešavanjima u Novom Sadu: Policija je napadnuta, intervenisali smo u najmanjoj mogućoj meri” [Dačić on the events in Novi Sad: The police were attacked, we intervened as little as possible], *Danas*, 28/04/2025

376 “Upozoravam javnost na prekomernu i nezakonitu upotrebu sredstava prinude od strane žandarmerije u Novom Sadu!” [We are warning the public about the excessive and illegal use of coercive means by the gendarmerie in Novi Sad!], *YUCOM*, 28/04/2025

377 “Vučić tvrdi: ‘Pokušaj obojene revolucije u Srbiji, kako ne bi mogla da čuva KiM i pomaže RS’” [Vučić claims: ‘This is an attempt at a coloured revolution in Serbia, so that it won’t be able to guard Kosovo and help the Republic of Srpska’], *Insajder*, 29/03/2025



for helping to “put down” the protests and boasted about cooperation in fighting these so-called colour revolutions.<sup>378</sup> Such rhetoric explicitly portrays peaceful civic activists as traitors or proxies in great-power games, creating a chilling atmosphere. Vučić claimed that protesters “were backed by unspecified Western countries” and that “their goal is not to topple Vučić, but to bring down Serbia,” equating dissent with treason.<sup>379</sup> This stigmatisation by high-ranking officials de-legitimises genuine grievances and may embolden extremist elements against protesters.

In an extraordinary development, Serbian authorities began expelling foreign nationals who voiced support for the protests. Over a period of one month, at least 16 Croatian citizens residing in Serbia (many married to Serbians or long-term residents) received sudden orders to leave the country, after being deemed “threats to national security”, mostly for sharing pro-protest statements on social media or participating in the protests themselves.<sup>380</sup> Similarly, an Italian pianist who played in Niš during the blockade of bridges was expelled as “there [was] a well-founded suspicion that he will not be using his stay for tourist purposes”.<sup>381</sup>

Finally, the Rector of the University of Belgrade, Vladan Djokić, was summoned by the police for interrogation on 18 April as part of an “abuse of office” inquiry, essentially because he had not forcefully stopped the student strike at his university, after weeks of media smear campaigns against him.<sup>382</sup>

### Other Protest Movements (Pensioners, Farmers, Teachers, etc.)

On 1 November 2024 (the day of the Novi Sad tragedy), Serbian teachers’ unions held a strike and a protest in Belgrade, demanding higher wages and better working conditions.<sup>383</sup> The rally was peaceful and was not subjected to any interference. In the following months, many teachers showed solidarity with the student movement. Teachers, and even some parents, held local school-yard protests and joined student rallies despite pressure from authorities to resume teaching.<sup>384</sup> These education-sector protests were largely tolerated – there were no reports of police crackdowns on striking teachers – but educators did face political pressure. For example, the then Prime Minister Miloš Vučević downplayed the scale of the strike, and some teachers alleged they were warned by school inspectors not to participate.<sup>385</sup>

Serbian farmers have a history of protesting (often over crop prices or subsidies), but in this period they became notable allies of the student protests. In mid-December 2024, farmers from central Serbia drove their tractors onto the roads as part of anti-corruption demonstrations, even blocking a major highway in one action.<sup>386</sup> Their involvement intensified after the January car attacks on protesters. By late January, farmers’ associations explicitly coordinated with student leaders to protect gatherings, using tractors to block traffic at protest sites. Thus, in this period farmers were not treated as a security problem, but as part of the broader protest coalition – illustrating that when demonstrations remain peaceful and command public sympathy, the state tends to refrain from heavy repression (while still engaging in behind-the-scenes tactics as described).

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378 “Serbian deputy prime minister says Russian spies help put down protests”, *Reuters*, 21/03/2025

379 Ivana Šekularac, “Thousands rally in Serbia as anger over corruption swells”, *Reuters*, 16/02/2025

380 Marija Janković, “Vučić kao apgrejdovani Šešelji: Podržavaš proteste – marš nazad u Hrvatsku” [Vučić like an upgraded Šešelji: You support protests – get back to Croatia!], *Vreme*, 09/04/2025

381 “Italian pianist expelled from Serbia”, *Vreme*, 06/04/2025

382 “Support for Rector Prof. Dr. Vladan Djokić”, *University of Belgrade – Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory*, 17/04/2025

383 “Ne odustajemo: Protest prosvetara ispred Skupštine Srbije, štrajk u školama” [‘We will not give up’: Protest of educators in front of the Serbian Parliament, strike in schools], *NIN*, 01/11/2024], *NIN*, 01/11/2024

384 Katarina Baletić and Milica Stojanović, “Serbian teachers strike as support for student protests grows”, *Balkan Insight*, 20/01/2025

385 *Ibid.*

386 Jovana Gec, “Traffic blockades held throughout Serbia against populist government over roof collapse tragedy”, *AP News*, 13/12/2024

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Serbian authorities must fully investigate and transparently disclose details about the suspected use of novel crowd-control equipment, such as the Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), ensuring accountability for any violations and prohibiting future unauthorised uses.
- Authorities should continue to proactively facilitate peaceful assemblies by providing adequate police protection against third-party violence, ensuring timely intervention and enhancing coordination with protest organisers.
- Senior officials, including the President and government ministers, must publicly refrain from stigmatising protesters as foreign-backed actors or traitors, thereby reducing the chilling effect on civic participation and protecting activists from undue political pressures.
- All attacks on demonstrators (by private individuals or groups) should be promptly investigated and perpetrators prosecuted. Any excesses by security forces require an independent investigation and, if confirmed, appropriate sanctions. Impunity for police misconduct or negligence in duty of care must end; officers found to have abused protesters' rights or failed to perform protective duties should face disciplinary action.
- The authorities need to send a clear message that harassment of activists will not be tolerated. This means ensuring that student leaders, professors, unionists and others who speak out are not subject to surveillance, threats or academic/career penalties.
- The government should initiate consultations with civil society and legal experts to review crowd-control protocols and align policing practices with international human rights standards.

### 4.3.3. Prohibition of Torture, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment

*Just like the previous ones, this reporting period was marked by numerous and severe cases of torture and ill-treatment of citizens, most often by the police, and by the officers' impunity for these acts. There have been no developments in the normative framework and practice in this area for years. On the contrary, the deterioration of the legal framework for the prohibition of torture and other forms of ill-treatment, embodied in two drafts that were the subject of public debates – the Draft Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code and the Draft Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Procedure Code – was in fact avoided in this reporting period. Investigations into cases of torture and ill-treatment of citizens that were recorded during the reporting period were conducted extremely inefficiently: they were slow, not thorough enough, insufficiently transparent and without the prospect that they would lead to the sanctioning of those responsible.*

#### Public Debates on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code

From 1 October to 1 November 2024, the Ministry of Justice held a public debate on the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code (Draft LAS CC) and the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Procedure Code (Draft LAS CPC). Four round tables – in Niš, Kragujevac, Novi Sad and Belgrade – were organised during the public debate.

The Draft LAS CC contained a large number of disputed solutions that provoked a strong reaction of the professional legal community. Some of them related to the criminal legal framework for the prohibition of ill-treatment, which the adoption of those provisions would have deteriorated. Namely, the Draft provided for the deletion of the criminal offence of extorting testimony from Article 136 of the CC and the expansion of the list of criminal offences that would be punishable by life imprisonment and include a simultaneous prohibition of parole.

As regards the deletion of the criminal offence of extortion of testimony, it was stated in the explanation of the Draft LAS CC that the basic forms of that criminal offence and the criminal offence of ill-treatment and torture from Article 137 of the CC are the same, which leads to uneven practice in the qualification and issuance of punishments, and that the deletion of the extortion of testimony would be in line with the Concluding Observations of the Committee against Torture regarding the need to formulate a single legal description that would include both criminal offences. These arguments of the Working Group of the Ministry of Justice – whose composition was not known to the interested public<sup>387</sup> – are not entirely correct. Although there is an overlap of the legal descriptions of the above-mentioned criminal acts in one part, it is not even close to full; therefore, the (mere) deletion of extortion of testimony cannot achieve satisfying results in terms of comprehensive criminalisation and sanctioning of acts of torture and other forms of ill-treatment. Second, the Committee against Torture did not in any of its documents ask the Serbian authorities to delete the criminal act of extorting testimony from the criminal legislation, but to *fully* implement in it the definition of torture, i.e. ill-treatment contained in Article 1 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Incidentally, the Committee against Torture has been recommending this to the authorities in Serbia for almost two decades now.

In the explanation of the Draft LAS CC, it was also stated that special emphasis was placed on tightening the penal policy in relation to crimes against sexual freedom and the criminal act of domestic violence, in line with the initiative of the President of the Republic. It was further stated that the Government considered the initiative of the President of the Republic and found it necessary to amend the Criminal Code so as to expand the list of criminal offences for which a sentence of life imprisonment would be prescribed with a simultaneous prohibition of parole for persons convicted of such crimes, “in order to [...] deter potential perpetrators from committing the criminal offence” and to achieve the purpose of general and special prevention. The Draft LAS CC provided for life imprisonment and a simultaneous prohibition of parole for the criminal offence of murder, as well as for several basic forms of criminal offences against sexual freedom – rape, sexual assault of a vulnerable person, and sexual assault of a child.

The sentence of life imprisonment and the simultaneous prohibition of parole for those convicted of certain crimes punishable by that sentence were introduced into the criminal legislation of Serbia at the end of 2019. Immediately after those amendments to the CC entered into force, civil society organisations that deal with the protection of human rights and representatives of the professional public submitted to the Constitutional Court an initiative to start a procedure for assessing the constitutionality and compliance with confirmed international treaties of the provisions of the CC related to the prohibition of parole for crimes punishable by life imprisonment. The initiators believed that these provisions of the CC were inconsistent with the prohibition of torture, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment guaranteed by the Constitution, the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Constitutional Court has not yet decided on this initiative. In the meantime, the Committee against Torture and other international bodies dealing with the prohibition of torture recommended to Serbia to amend the CC in the direction of abolishing the prohibition of parole for those sentenced to life imprisonment, but the Ministry of Justice was obviously of the opinion that the CC should be amended in the completely opposite direction.

Finally, the Draft LAS CC did not propose solutions on how to act regarding other important recommendations of international bodies referring to the prohibition of torture and other forms of ill-treatment. These refer to the increase of penalties for the crime of torture, the abolition of the statute of limitations for criminal prosecution and execution of sentences, the prohibition of amnesties and pardons of those accused and convicted of torture and other forms of ill-treatment, as well as the mandatory imposition of security measure prohibiting employment, activities and duties to officials convicted of those crimes.

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387 At the round tables that were organised during the public debate, representatives of the Ministry of Justice said that the Working Group charged with drafting the Draft LAS CC was chaired by a retired professor of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade, Dr. Zoran Stojanović, who later publicly denied that he had participated in the work of the Working Group. See: [Members of the Working Group claim that they did not participate in drafting the amendments to the Criminal Code](#), *Danas*, 31/10/2025

On the other hand, the Draft LAS CPC did not envisage mandatory audio-visual recording of interrogations of suspects and collection of information from citizens in the police, although this was another recommendation the international bodies gave Serbia on several occasions (CPT, Committee for Human Rights). At the round tables that were held as part of the public debate, the members of the Ministry's Working Group stated that they will reconsider the recommendation, stressing that there are financial and technical obstacles that prevent its implementation.

Due to the dissatisfaction of a large part of the legal public with the short duration of the public debate on these two drafts, the Ministry of Justice announced at the end of November 2024 that, after consultations with the European Commission, it had decided to continue the public debate on the proposed amendments to these two laws in 2025, and that the Ministry would inform all interested parties about it in a timely manner after the competent committee of the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopts the conclusion on conducting the public debate.<sup>388</sup> Information about the round tables and the course of the extended public debate has not been announced to date.

## Most Significant Cases of Torture and Ill-Treatment in the Reporting Period

### ***Torture of a 74 years old man from Novi Sad by police officers***

On 21 November 2024, 74 years old Ilija Kostić was taken to the Police Administration (PA) in Novi Sad on suspicion that he attacked a police officer during the blockade of the court in Novi Sad by spraying him in the face with pepper spray. Three days later, news spread in the media that the man was exposed to torture by police officers in the police building. According to Kostić's statement, at the beginning he was in the inspector's office with three plainclothes police officers. Later, two more officers entered the room and each punched him in the head – above the ears and in the facial area. One of them then ordered him to stand up and hit him in the crotch with his knee, cursing him. While detained in the police, Kostić was examined several times by a physician who noticed a swelling of Kostić's testicles during one of the examinations. The next day, 22 November, Kostić was taken to be interrogated at the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office (BPPO) in Novi Sad, where he reported that he was tortured and said that he could recognise the policemen who mistreated him. He was ordered house arrest, but on Sunday 24 November he was admitted to the Medical Emergency Department of the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina, where his testicle was amputated.<sup>389</sup>

The case involving the torture of Ilija Kostić was transferred to the BPPO in Sremska Mitrovica, which issued an order to conduct an investigation against two unknown perpetrators in relation to the criminal acts of ill-treatment and torture and causing serious bodily injury. Claims were made in the media that the head of the PA in Novi Sad was involved in the torture of Kostić; however, at the beginning of January 2025 the BPPO in Sremska Mitrovica informed the journalists that the head of the Novi Sad Police Administration had no capacity in this case and that he was therefore not questioned.<sup>390</sup> On 28 November, Kostić was questioned regarding torture in the BPPO in Novi Sad, and on 17 December 2024 in the BPPO in Sremska Mitrovica. By order of the Novi Sad Prosecutor's Office, the Internal Control Sector of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) obtained footage from surveillance cameras from the police building where torture took place,<sup>391</sup> but it is not known whether said torture could in fact be seen on them. By 9 April 2025, 29 witnesses were questioned in this case, most of them police officers and physicians. According to Ilija Kostić's attorney, the identification of the suspects by the injured party has not yet been organised, which is why no suspects have been identified in the case even though four and a half months have passed since the torture.<sup>392</sup>

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388 [The public debate on amendments and supplements to the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code will continue](#), Ministry of Justice, announcement of 29/11/2024

389 [Ilija Kostić describes to the prosecutor how he was beaten in the police station: "He told me to get up, and then he hit me in the testicles with his knee"](#), *Danas*, 25/11/2025

390 [Criminal charges filed against police officers for beating Ilija Kostić: The head of the PA in Novi Sad was not questioned](#), 021, 07/01/2025

391 Response of the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Sremska Mitrovica to the request for access to information of public importance submitted by the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, PI 18/2024, dated 25/12/2024

392 [29 witnesses were heard, but it still unknown who beat up Ilija Kostić: Awaiting identification](#), *N1*, 10/04/2025

### ***Torture of anaesthesiologist from Novi Sad by members of the MOI's Unit for the Security of Specific Persons and Buildings***

In mid-December 2024, the public was informed that on 3 November in Novi Sad, four members of the MOI's Unit for the Security of Specific Persons and Buildings and two unidentified persons beat up Nikola Radić, an anesthesiologist from Novi Sad. The event took place in front of the restaurant where the owner of Happy Television, Predrag Ranković Peconi, was sitting surrounded by the above mentioned security detail, after Radić complained about an illegally parked official vehicle that was blocking the sidewalk. One of the policemen told him to jump over the vehicle if it bothered him that much, which is what the doctor did. At that moment, plainclothes police officers, together with two unknown persons, brutally attacked him. After the first blows Radić fell to the ground, but the attackers continued to hit him, causing him serious bodily injuries. When a police patrol came to the scene following citizens' reports, the plainclothes police officers who beat up Radić presented their IDs; they said that Radić had attacked them, and that they overpowered him in order to stop him from further assaulting them. The police patrol took Radić to the police station in Klis, on the charge that he attacked the policemen. Since he complained of severe pain, the paramedics examined him and referred him to an X-ray.

That same evening, the prosecutor-on-duty at the BPPO in Novi Sad was informed about the incident and she ordered the following: find out whether there were video surveillance cameras covering the scene, find the citizens who had reported the incident, carry out the crime scene investigation, and photograph the visible injuries that Radić had on his body and the sweatshirt of the officer who claimed that it was Radić who had ripped it. The next day, the case was taken over by another prosecutor of the BPPO in Novi Sad. Radić was examined at the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina, where severe physical injuries were found, namely contusions of the chest and abdomen, a fracture of the left forearm, and multiple rib fractures on both sides of the chest. A video recording of the event, recorded by the security cameras at the seat of the local SNS committee, was obtained that same day, while a video recording of the event from a nearby store also appeared a bit later.<sup>393</sup> The day after information about this event was published, the Minister of the Interior stated that the police officers who beat up the Novi Sad anesthesiologist were suspended, that their official IDs and weapons were confiscated, and that they were brought before the prosecutor of the BPPO in Novi Sad on 19 November 2024,<sup>394</sup> along with a criminal complaint for inflicting serious bodily harm. It remained unclear why the suspected police officers were brought to the Prosecutor's Office no less than 16 days after the event. After questioning all the suspects, the public prosecutor proposed ordering custody, but the court issued a decision prohibiting them [the officers] from leaving their apartments (i.e. the so-called house arrest). The public does not know how long this measure imposed on the four Mol members is to last,<sup>395</sup> or what happened in the case since then.

### ***One year after the brother of one of the suspects in the murder of Danka Ilić died in the PA in Bor, the investigation is at a standstill***

On 7 April 2024, the Mol announced that Dalibor Dragijević, brother of one of the suspects in the murder of the little Danka Ilić, died after his health took a turn for the worse while he was held in detention for up to 48 hours in the premises of the PA in Bor. The Mol statement said that the coroner determined that he died of natural causes.<sup>396</sup> A few days later, on 19 April 2024, investigative journalists published the information that Dalibor Dragijević died a violent death in the police, i.e. as a result of torture, and that this was the conclusion of forensic medicine specialists of the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Belgrade who performed an autopsy and documented and described in detail the injuries on his body. According to investigative journalists, the findings from the autopsy were immediately forwarded to the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office (HPPO) in Zaječar.<sup>397</sup> Later, that prosecutor's office requested from the Appellate Public Prosecutor's Office in Niš that the case related to the investigation of the death of

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393 [Police officers guarding Peconi brutally beat up the anaesthesiologist from Novi Sad](#), *Danas*, 13/12/2024

394 [Dačić tells \*Danas\*: The police officers who beat up the doctor were suspended, Peconi has been guarded by the police since 2017](#), *Danas*, 14/12/2024

395 [The anaesthesiologist from Novi Sad was not beaten only by the policemen guarding Peconi](#), *Danas*, 04/01/2025

396 [The anaesthesiologist from Novi Sad was not beaten only by the policemen guarding Peconi](#), *Danas*, 04/01/2025

397 [Brother of the man suspected of little Danka's murder dies a violent, not natural death](#), *Radar*, 19/04/2024



Dalibor Dragijević be delegated to another public prosecutor's office to protect the impartiality of the investigation. The case was thus assigned to the Public Prosecutor's Office in Niš.<sup>398</sup>

In 2024, the attorneys of the father of deceased Dalibor Dragijević and the media tried several times to get information from the HPPO in Niš about the actions that were taken in this case, with no success. In September 2024, journalists announced that the HPPO informed them that the prosecutor in charge of this case had given an order to the Mol Internal Control Sector (ICS) to take certain actions, that the ICS had submitted incomplete reports on the actions taken, which is why the HPPO in Niš gave a new order to the ICS at the beginning of September 2024, and that the HPPO in Niš was actively taking other actions and measures in accordance with the law to gather evidence and shed light on the circumstances under which Dalibor Dragijević died.<sup>399</sup> Until the end of 2024, not even Dragijević's father received any official information about the cause of his son's death. The father's request to be provided with a copy of the autopsy report was rejected with the explanation that this is not possible until he is questioned by the prosecution. The question that has not been answered to this day is: why the father was not called to the HPPO in Niš and questioned more than a year after his son's death?

The HPPO in Zaječar and the HPPO in Niš refused to either confirm or deny the allegations of the journalists that Dalibor Dragijević's death was a result of torture. At the beginning of December 2024, the media published Dragijević's autopsy report compiled at the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Belgrade. The report described numerous injuries – dozens of hematomas, skin injuries, serial rib fractures, testicle injuries, disfigured feet, etc. It was concluded that it was a violent death that occurred due to respiratory and circulatory disorders caused by multiple soft tissue contusions and bone fractures. The content of the autopsy report clearly indicates that Dalibor Dragijević was a victim of police torture.<sup>400</sup>

In January 2025, the HPPO in Niš rejected a request for access to information of public importance submitted by the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, which asked for the name and surname of the public prosecutor in charge of this case, whether statements were taken from police officers and other witnesses, when they were taken and by whom (prosecutors or members of the Mol), and whether video surveillance footage from the time when Dragijević was in custody was obtained from the PA in Bor. In the decision rejecting this request, the HPPO in Niš assessed that the name and surname of the public prosecutor in charge of the case does not constitute information of public importance, and that providing the requested information would "jeopardise, hinder and complicate the preliminary investigation procedure".<sup>401</sup> What emerges from this decision of the HPPO in Niš, and from all the previous information that was provided by that prosecutor's office, is that the prosecution fully relies on the ICS and expects the officers from that sector to discover the suspects and gather all the evidence about the circumstances under which Dalibor Dragijević died. Another, equally worrying, piece of information is that no order was issued to conduct an investigation until the above decision was made, i.e. that the case is still in the phase of preliminary investigation.

Although the information about the death of Dalibor Dragijević was released to the public on the same day, on 7 April 2024, the Protector of Citizens started the procedure of controlling the work of the police in connection with this case only on May 31. The attorneys of the late Dragijević's father repeatedly asked the Protector to inspect the case, but he refused claiming that it is not possible to inspect the case file while the proceedings are still under way. Although according to the Law on the Protector of Citizens, it is the Protector's duty to complete the procedure he is conducting within a period of three months, and to inform the complainant if, due to the complexity of the case, it is necessary to extend the duration of the procedure for controlling the work of the administrative body, neither was done. In the annual report for the year 2024, the Protector of Citizens stated that he will be suspending the investigation procedures related to the ill-treatment of the suspect in the murder of Danka Ilić and the death of Dalibor Dragijević in the PA in Bor, and that "any further action will depend on the court proceedings".<sup>402</sup>

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398 [Announcement of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Niš](#), 26/04/2024

399 [The HPPO in Niš tells \*Insajder\*: The Internal Control Sector is continuing to submit partial reports on the death of Dalibor Dragijević](#), *Insajder*, 04/09/ 2024

400 [Cover-up of a brutal police killing](#), *Radar*, 10/12/ 2024

401 Decision of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Niš, PI no. 275/24, dated 03/01/2025

402 [Regular Annual Report of the Protector of Citizens for 2024](#), pp. 57-58



All available information suggest that the investigation into the torture and death of Dalibor Dragijević is ineffective and will not lead to the punishment of those who were responsible for it. The most likely reason for this is that his statement is one of the main pieces of evidence in the indictment of the HPPO in Zaječar and the proceedings that are pending in connection with the death of Danka Ilić. Besides Dalibor's statement, the indictment is based on evidence in the form of the statements of his brother Dejan Dragijević and the other suspect, Srdjan Janković, given to the police, in which they admitted that they killed little Danka Ilić and hid her body. However, as stated in the indictment itself, they both changed their statements and later claimed at the Zaječar prosecutor's office that they confessed to the crime under torture. The public does not have a single piece of information about the investigation into the torture of Dejan Dragijević and Srdjan Janković, and the decision confirming the indictment of the HPPO in Zaječar was annulled twice by the Appellate Court in Niš, in December 2024 and March 2025.<sup>403</sup> In the last decision of the Niš Appellate Court, it was ordered that the case be returned to the prosecution so that it could complete the investigation and reconstruct the event.

### ***Cases of Ill-Treatment of Women in OBGYN Clinics***

In 2024, there were several reports of ill-treatment of women in gynaecological-obstetrical clinics in Serbia. For example, in January 2024, Marica Mihajlović from Šid publicly spoke about the inadequate treatment by a doctor she suffered during childbirth earlier that month, which caused her baby to die soon after. The OBGYN from Sremska Mitrovica was soon arrested by order of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Sremska Mitrovica and ordered to be detained. On 15 October 2024, this prosecutor's office filed an indictment against him due to the existence of justified suspicion that he had committed a serious crime against human health in connection with the criminal offence of negligent provision of medical assistance and the criminal offence of ill-treatment and torture. The indictment was confirmed at the end of November 2024.<sup>404</sup>

In mid-November 2024, Kristina Petrović from Belgrade informed the public that she was admitted in September of the same year, in the 41st week of pregnancy, to the Clinic for Gynaecology and Obstetrics "Narodni Front" after her due date had passed. She spent seven days in the hospital prior to being admitted to the ward for labour induction at the end of September. According to her, the birth lasted 31 hours, with medically induced contractions. Despite her pleas to end the delivery with a caesarean section, the doctors insisted on a natural birth, explaining that she had already given birth this way and that there were no medical reasons to perform a caesarean section. Her baby was delivered by vacuum extraction, against her will. According to her, her doctor made the decision to use the vacuum despite the fact that she expressly refused that method. None of the medical staff reacted to her indignation and clearly expressed disagreement. Four people physically held her while she shouted, kicked and called for help. The baby was not breathing at birth and had to be resuscitated.<sup>405</sup> Until the middle of April 2025, in the proceedings initiated before the Protector of Citizens and the Public Prosecutor's Office, she was not informed about a single action that was taken and was not even called to provide a statement.

### ***Cases of ill-treatment by police officers in front of the building of Radio and Television of Serbia (RTS) on 10 March 2025***

In the evening hours of 10 March 2025, students began a 22-hour blockade of the building of the Radio and Television of Serbia (RTS), dissatisfied with its reporting. Later that evening, in Aberdareva Street, for no reason at all a uniformed police officer punched a plainclothes citizen in the face, i.e. eye, with a closed fist. The attacked person, however, turned out to be another police officer.

Despite the fact that videos of this event soon started circulating on social networks,<sup>406</sup> the Ministry of the Interior issued a statement saying that the Gendarmerie was "obstructed and attacked" while arriving

403 Decision of the Appellate Court in Niš, Kž2. no. 991/2024 of 30/12/2024, and the Decision of the same court Kž2. no. 157/25 of 25/03/2025

404 [The indictment of the HPPO in Sremska Mitrovica, brought against the defendant Marko Maksimović from Ruma, has been confirmed](#), announcement of the Higher Court in Sremska Mitrovica of 29/11/2024

405 [During the induction that lasted 31 hours, four people were pressing on her stomach: "I experienced a horror story, my baby was forcibly extracted with a vacuum"](#), N1, 14/11/2024

406 [VIDEO: The videos clearly show that the policeman who was injured in front of the RTS was hit by a gendarme](#), N1, 11/03/2025

on duty, and that "on that occasion, a member of the Gendarmerie was injured and transported to the Emergency Centre with an eye injury".<sup>407</sup> The President of the Republic published a photograph with the injured policeman, saying that he was "hit with a boxer" by "Bolshevik plenum members" in front of the RTS building.<sup>408</sup>

According to information provided to journalists by the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade in mid-April 2025, the MoI Internal Control Sector has still not submitted a report, upon the request of the Prosecutor's Office, to identify the persons who attacked members of the Gendarmerie in front of RTS on 11 March of this year and the persons who attacked a plainclothes police officer on duty and injured his eye.<sup>409</sup>

In the course of the evening of 10 March, there were several more incidents where unidentified police officers used illegal, excessive force. Thus, in Aberdareva Street, a police officer hit a woman who was standing next to him in the head with his helmet, once again without any reason. In another case that occurred at the same location, several unidentified police officers hit one of the gathered citizens in the back with their batons several times, and one of them then hit another citizen in the head with a baton.<sup>410</sup> No one has been found to be responsible in any of these cases to date.

### ✖ **ALARM: Use of Sonic Weapons against Citizens at a Protest Held on 15 March 2025 in Belgrade**

During a big protest that was held in Belgrade on 15 March, around 7:11 p.m., during a 15-minute silence, a large number of gathered citizens reported the use, by unidentified persons, of an unknown sonic weapon or a similar device for crowd control and suppression from one or more locations. It produced a strong sound and an air wave that caused serious panic, but also injured citizens. The damage to the physical and mental health of the citizens was twofold: on the one hand, it came from the immediate effect of the used sonic weapon or dangerous device, and on the other, from the stampede that ensued. Most of the citizens felt an intense instinctive fear and shock, accompanied by rapid heart rate, tremors, disorientation and the feeling of loss of control. Some experienced a headache, pressure in the ears, buzzing and hearing problems, nausea, vomiting, great pressure in the head and a feeling of heat on the body. Many experienced panic attacks, anxiety, tachycardia and prolonged agitation, while some lost consciousness and suffered physical injuries such as hematomas, sprains, dislocations, cuts and fractures from falling in the stampede.

More than 4,000 Serbian men and women who witnessed the incident contacted civil society organisations and reported what happened and the consequences they suffered. The collected data show that the largest number of those who were exposed to the effect of an unknown sonic weapon or a dangerous device for controlling and suppressing crowds was standing along Kralja Milana Street, between Andrićev Venac and the Slavija Square. However, there were also those who felt and suffered the effects of that weapon or dangerous device in the surrounding streets.<sup>411</sup>

The seriousness of risks to the lives and health of citizens can be observed from the testimonies reported in the media, which suggest that some chronic heart patients, who were in Kralja Milana Street during the 15-minute silence, suffered an exacerbation of their clinical symptoms. For example, the former volleyball national team player, who has an implanted ICD (implantable cardioverter defibrillator) and was standing in the area of the sonic boom, experienced a condition that caused multiple activations

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407 Members of the MoI have not and will not intervene against blockers unless there is a violent entry into state institutions, MoI statement of 11/03/2025

408 [Vučić posts a photo with the policeman: He was attacked by plenum Bolsheviks](#), N1, 11/03/2025

409 [The video exists, but there is no report: The MoI fails to respond to the request of the Prosecutor's Office concerning the Bačić case](#), *Insajder*, 15/03/2025

410 Four criminal charges were filed due to the police attack in Aberdareva Street and the incident in the Pioneers Park in Belgrade, announcement of the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 11/03/2025

411 For additional information, see: <https://zvuk.labs.rs/>

of his ICD. He was hospitalised in the Emergency Centre in Belgrade because of this.<sup>412</sup> In the days after March 15, many citizens spoke in the media and on social networks about their experiences.<sup>413</sup>

Already during the evening of 15 March, the public asked whether the police used a sonic device known as sound cannon. The Mol immediately denied those allegations with a statement that the Mol "has never used, and does not use, devices that are not permitted by law."<sup>414</sup> The same evening, President Vučić addressed the public claiming, among other things, that the sound cannon was not used during the protest. The prosecutor's office and the police remained silent regarding the investigation of the event. The next day, on 16 March, the President of the Republic attended the Government session and asked the Minister of Justice that "those who lie and mislead the people about sound cannons" be prosecuted: "Let it be verified, let the proceedings be initiated, but then let them also prosecute all those who went public with that notorious lie." The President then asked the ministers of health, defence and police, as well as the director of the Security Information Agency, to inform the citizens "about the lie."<sup>415</sup> Soon after, on the same day, the institutions of the executive began to act on the orders of the President of the Republic, given outside of his jurisdiction, condemning citizens for spreading panic.<sup>416</sup> The HPPO in Belgrade issued a statement that ordered the First BPPO in Belgrade to open a case and order the identification of persons who spread untrue information in the public, due to the existence of grounds for suspicion that the criminal offence of causing panic and disorder had been committed,<sup>417</sup> while the First BPPO in Belgrade submitted a statement to the media that it had opened a case and ordered the Mol to establish "whether a pyrotechnic device, weapon or other generally dangerous device that could endanger the lives and bodies of gathered citizens had been used".<sup>418</sup>

The Minister of Health claimed that "people were ordered to go to the Emergency Centre and health centres and report certain complaints".<sup>419</sup> The media reported that 56 patients were admitted to the hospital in Zemun on Monday and that 30% of them were diagnosed with hearing impairments. A journalist's source claimed that the hospital was ordered to send the medical documentation of these citizens to the Security Information Agency (BIA).<sup>420</sup>

After the President of the Republic announced on 17 March that "the investigation [...] will be fully completed within 48 hours" and that "all those responsible for such brutal fabrications and lies will be held accountable",<sup>421</sup> on 18 March the First BPPO in Belgrade issued a statement to the media saying that the Office had received information from the Mol, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Health and BIA, and that the reports of these institutions "unequivocally establish" that none of their members "heard, saw or used the so-called sound cannon on 15 March".<sup>422</sup>

Meetings of the Parliamentary Committee for Control of Security Services and the Committee for Defence and Internal Affairs were held on 18 March. At the meeting of the Committee for the Control of Security Services, the BIA director claimed that no one had noticed a sound cannon on the streets of Belgrade, adding that the stampede at the protest was caused by people's panicked reaction. The Committee concluded that the security services had acted exclusively within their competences, that they do not

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412 Marko Samardžić from the hospital: The pacemaker reacted, students are wonderful! *Sportklub*, 19/03/2025

413 See, for example: After the protest, the full waiting room of the medical centre in Novi Sad, citizens complain of dizziness, nausea..., *N1*, 16/03/2025; Radovanović on the sound cannon: I heard a terrible sound, like a threat approaching at an incredible speed, *N1*, 16/03/2025; Rapid heartbeat, panic attacks, persistent anxiety – students' testimony after the incident that took place on Saturday, *N1*, 17/03/2025; Girl who was injured in protest stampede: We heard something that sounded like 20 cars coming towards us, *N1*, 17/03/2025; "I have inner ear trauma": Film director Bešević Gajić announced a criminal complaint because of the "sound cannon", *N1*, 17/03/2025; A woman about the incident at the protest: I had redness on my skin, the psychiatrist also noted acute stress, *N1*, 17/03/2025.

414 The Mol denies misinformation that a sound cannon was used at tonight's protest, Mol statement of 15/03/2025

415 Vučić: Someone must be held criminally responsible for spreading lies about sound cannons, *Politika*, 16/03/2025

416 See the announcements of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Defence, the Minister of Justice and the Emergency Department of the Clinical Centre of Serbia from 16/03/2025

417 Announcement of the HPPO in Belgrade from 16/03/2025

418 Announcement of the First BPPO in Belgrade from 16/03/2025

419 Lončar: The sound cannon was not used and there were no characteristic health issues, *RTS*, 17/03/2025

420 56 people were admitted to the Zemun Hospital, doctors were placing the mark "P" – protest patient – on medical documentation, *N1*, 18/03/2025

421 Vučić: The Army and the Cobras do not have a sound cannon, the investigation into the lies will be completed in 48 hours, *N1*, 17/03/2025

422 Experts: The Prosecutor's Office is acting on the orders of the President of Ćaciland, *Radar*, 19/03/2025

possess a technical device called “sound cannon” and therefore could not have used it, and that the allegations about the use of the “sound cannon” are not reliable and there are no relevant facts and evidence to support them. The Committee called on citizens and the media to “refrain from publishing unverified information that can cause unrest among citizens and undermine the security system of the Republic of Serbia, and on the competent institutions to respond to such occurrences in accordance with the law”.<sup>423</sup>

At the meeting of the Committee for Defence and Internal Affairs, the Minister of the Interior reiterated that the MoI does not use unlawful devices; however, after the opposition deputies asked questions, he said that “some less powerful devices” were acquired in 2021, such as acoustic devices, but that they were not included in the MoI’s weapons system and are not being used. He admitted that these acquired devices, apart from being used to communicate, can also cause “some other effect that is not allowed under our laws, which is why they are not being used”. The Committee adopted conclusions in which it was assessed that the allegations about the use of a sound cannon during the protest on 15 March are not true and that there is no evidence to support them. The Committee appealed to stop the spread of disinformation that disturbs the public, and called on the prosecution and competent state authorities to investigate the events that occurred during the 15 March protest, causing disturbance of order, and to establish the facts as soon as possible. The Committee called on the competent authorities to act in accordance with Article 343 of the Criminal Code and prosecute all persons who misinformed the public and caused disorder and panic in connection with the protest that was held on 15 March.<sup>424</sup>

After the opposition deputies presented the public with official documents showing that the MoI had requested the purchase of seven LRAD-450XL devices and nine LRAD100Xi devices in 2021, and a photograph taken during the 15 March protest showing a device that looks like the LRAD 450XL sound cannon from *Genasys*<sup>425</sup> mounted on a Gendarmerie jeep stationed near the National Assembly building, the Minister of the Interior confirmed that the police in fact possesses a sonic weapon that is colloquially called ‘sound cannon’ since 2021, but that “it is in the warehouse, in boxes”, adding that the previous statements – that they do not possess such a weapon – were “clumsy”, i.e. that he meant that “the MoI has not included this device in its arsenal of means of coercion”. When asked why the state even purchased these devices if their use is not allowed, he replied that it was a “failed investment”.<sup>426</sup> On that day, the Minister publicly demonstrated the use of the sound device that was photographed next to the building of the National Assembly of Serbia on the day of the protest. He said that it was a technical device that amplifies sound, used for providing information to a larger number of people at great distances.<sup>427</sup>

According to a daily newspaper that cited a source from the Gendarmerie, there were several sound cannons at the 15 March protest, and one of them was indeed located near the National Assembly building. The journalist’s source said that the device was mounted on the hood of the *Defender* vehicle, and that members of the Gendarmerie were told that “this device will be activated if needed” and that they will be instructed on “what to do in case it needs to be”. The device was not activated, but the source said that there were several of them and that they were deployed in different locations: “We were told that there are also mobile devices, which are not mounted on vehicles”. According to a source from the Gendarmerie, members of that unit were told that one such device was placed in or next to the Presidency building, and that the tractors that were parked around the Pioneers’ Park were positioned precisely to repel the impact of the cannon if it were to be used, because “our people” i.e. police officers were also positioned in the park.<sup>428</sup>

On 19 March, the police in Niš took a statement from a citizen as part of the preliminary investigation procedure for the criminal offence of causing panic and disorder. After two police officers arrived at his door, he was taken into custody and was first told that he would have to be taken to Belgrade to give a

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423 Conclusions of the Committee for the Control of Security Services, from the meeting held on 18/03/2025

424 Conclusions of the Committee for Defence and Internal Affairs, from the meeting held on 18/03/2025

425 Tepić: The MoI had purchased LRAD 450 XL devices, *N1*, 19/03/2025

426 Đačić: The police have a sound cannon, it is sitting in boxes in the warehouse, the statement that we don’t have it was rather clumsy, *N1*, 19/03/2025

427 Đačić publicly demonstrated and tested the sound devices used by the MoI, *RTS*, 19/03/2025

428 A gendarme tells *Danas*: Several “sound cannons” were deployed at the Saturday protest, *Danas*, 19/03/2025

statement. It was later decided that his statement would be taken in Niš. The reaction of the prosecution and the police was caused by a post he had posted on 16 March on *Instagram*, containing a clip of a television appearance by Belgrade attorney Božo Prelević, in which he said that he had information that a *Genesis* sound cannon, purchased through “Jugoimport”, was used at the protest. Besides this video, he also published a video from the *Instagram* profile General Strike, containing words that officials of the Serbian police did order the activation of the sound cannon on 15 March. According to him, the police officers advised him to delete the post from the social network and publish a retraction, which he did.<sup>429</sup>

In early April 2025, the public also learned that there was an attempt to prosecute at least several other public figures for allegedly committing the crime of causing panic and disorder. Namely, on 26 April, the Chief Public Prosecutor of the HPPO in Belgrade issued a mandatory instruction to the Special Public Prosecutor for High-Tech Crime in which he requested him to “process [Zdravko Ponoš, an opposition member of parliament] without delay and bring [him] to the public prosecutor on duty” because of his post on the social network X about the use of a sound cannon, by which he allegedly committed a criminal offence under Article 343 of the Criminal Code. The Special Prosecutor refused to act on that instruction, lodging an objection to it with the High Prosecutorial Council. The Commission of the Council accepted his objection on 2 April, cancelling the instruction of the Chief Public Prosecutor of the HPPO in Belgrade.<sup>430</sup> On the same day, Belgrade attorney Božo Prelević said that he and Aleksandar Radić were the targets of the same type of persecution by the chief public prosecutor of the HPPO in Belgrade,<sup>431</sup> while Belgrade attorney Aleksandar Olenik stated on 8 April that he too was among those whose arrest was ordered by the chief public prosecutor of the HPPO in Belgrade.<sup>432</sup>

In connection with this case, opposition parties and civil society organisations filed criminal charges with the Public Prosecutor’s Office for Organised Crime, believing that there were grounds for suspecting that a criminal act of terrorism was committed on 15 March. Also, at the end of March, civil society organisations submitted a request to the European Court of Human Rights for the issuance of an interim measure, on behalf of 47 citizens who suffered health issues due to the effect of an unknown sonic weapon or a similar device for crowd control and suppression. The Court in Strasbourg asked the state for information on whether state authorities have used or intend to use sonic weapons, about the legal grounds for their use, and which protection measures are applied. Since the state has submitted answers to the Court’s questions, to which civil society organisations have submitted comments, it is now up to the Court to decide on the issuance of interim measures. On 9 April, civil society organisations announced that the European Court of Human Rights has informed them that the request would be decided by a panel of judges, instead of a single judge who usually decides on this type of request.

The outgoing Prime Minister and the President of the Republic have announced on several occasions that the security agencies of the USA and the Russian Federation – the FBI and the FSB – will be getting involved in the investigation of the 15 March case.<sup>433</sup> However, this information was never confirmed by the competent public prosecutor’s office or the above-mentioned security agencies. In this regard, we should mention that Serbia and Russia agreed on a joint fight against popular uprisings known as “coloured revolutions” in 2021.<sup>434</sup> The then Minister of the Interior Aleksandar Vulin<sup>435</sup> and Secretary of the Kremlin Security Council Nikolai Patrushev took part in the agreement, and the current government in Serbia (the same since 2012) views student and civil protests – including the one from 15 March – as coloured revolution and an attack on the state.

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429 A man from Niš was the first in Serbia to be summoned and questioned for posting about the sound cannon on the networks, *Južne Vesti*, 21/03/2025

430 Prosecutor Stefanović’s instruction to detain and prosecute Ponoš over the sound cannon has been cancelled, *N1*, 5/04/2025

431 “The President of Čačiland clearly gave an order on RTS” – attorney Božo Prelević targeted by prosecutor Stefanović for his announcements about 15 March, *Nova*, 5 Apr 2025

432 LSV [League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina]: Stefanović ordered the arrest of Olenik after he appeared on N1, *N1*, 8/04/2025

433 Aleksandar Vučić: The FSB will come in two or three days, I hope, and the FBI in seven or eight, *Politika*, 26/03/2025

434 “Serbia and Russia in the joint fight against ‘colour revolutions’”, *N1*, 03/12/2021

435 Aleksandar Vulin was the Minister of the Interior when the Mol acquired at least 16 LRAD sonic devices; he was later the Director of the Security Information Agency (from Dec 2022 to Nov 2023), and then the Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of the Republic of Serbia. Prior to serving as Minister of the Interior, Aleksandar Vulin was the Minister of Defence of the Republic of Serbia (from Jun 2017 to Oct 2020).



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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- When next amending and supplementing the Criminal Code, formulate a single criminal offence that would include all the elements of incrimination from Articles 136 (extortion of testimony) and 137 (ill-treatment and torture) of the Criminal Code and provide for a number of other, additional elements, such as some typical qualifying circumstances (consequences of the act, act committed by several officials, etc.). Also, punishments should correspond to the severity of each form of ill-treatment. Statute of limitations for criminal prosecution and sentence execution should be prohibited, and the mandatory imposition of the security measure prohibiting employment, activities and duties to officials, in accordance with the recommendations of international bodies, should be mandatory.
- When next amending and supplementing the Criminal Procedure Code, prescribe mandatory audio-visual recording of citizens' statements in the police, in accordance with the recommendations of international bodies.
- Investigations into cases of torture and other forms of ill-treatment of citizens should be urgent, independent, thorough and sufficiently transparent, so that the public can get an impression of whether the state authorities are effectively sanctioning these acts or enabling impunity for their perpetrators, and to enable the injured party to participate effectively in the proceedings.

### 4.3.4. The Principle of Non-Discrimination and the Position of Sensitive (Vulnerable) Social Groups

*It is not possible to implement the principle of non-discrimination in the context of the ever-present selective repression by use of various methods (from insults to physical attacks and arrests) of all segments of society that express a critical attitude towards the Government. Since the fall of the roof canopy in Novi Sad (on 1 November 2024), activists, students, the academic community and school teachers, artists, journalists, representatives of civil society organisations, national minorities, foreigners... have all been under attack. Reports on the implementation of the Revised AP for Chapter 23 (for 2024) as well as information about the activities of the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue (also for 2024) state the formal aspects of the planned activities, but not the actual results and their effects on society. The Government in its technical mandate failed to solve the resulting social problems because its policy was not based on the principles of non-discrimination, tolerance and respect for diversity. On the other hand, frequent changes in the composition of the Government do not contribute to the continuity of the initiated activities. The new mandate holder declaratively supports human rights and the prohibition of discrimination on any basis, citing gender, religion, ethnicity and background. However, there is a conspicuous absence of sexual orientation, gender equality and gender identity.*

Selective repression (which spreads to an ever-increasing number of people and includes an ever-increasing number of social groups) comprises various tactics of demonstration of power – from intolerance, insults, belittling, inflammatory and discriminatory statements, disinformation, manipulation, propagation and hate speech, marking, targeting, labelling, public disclosure of personal data, to the ban on entering the country, pressure, intimidation, threats, illegal surveillance, spying, endangering security, open demonstration of force, trampling, beating, arrest, knife attacks and media “sentencing”. This is the context in which Serbia’s progress in European integration in the area of non-discrimination, gender equality, protection from gender-based violence against women and children’s rights should be assessed, and it is completely inconsistent with the European basic rights values and standards. In the past period, very little has been done in these areas, and it was more of a formal than essential nature.



### Human Rights in the New Prime Minister's Government Programme

In the new Prime Minister's Exposé,<sup>436</sup> there are two subtitles related to human rights – Relations with religious communities, human and minority rights (p. 29), in which only the religious rights of traditional religious communities are mentioned, and Human rights, women's rights and minority rights (p. 30-31), in which it is declaratively stated that human rights are the foundation of every democratic society, and that "no one should be discriminated against on any basis – be it gender, religion, ethnicity or origin". Special importance of the rights of national minorities is emphasised, while the rights of persons of different sexual orientations and gender identities are conspicuously missing. Political, social, economic and cultural rights are not even mentioned.<sup>437</sup>

### Social Context as the Reverse Side of (Non)discrimination

The fall of the canopy at the reconstructed railway station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, which caused the death of 16 people, including children, and serious injuries to another person, put corruption under the spotlight and led to the blocking of squares and roads for 15 minutes in silent tribute to the victims. Blockades of faculties began after the attack on students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts during a fifteen-minute period of silence; after that, the number of blocked faculties, as well as high schools, rapidly increased. The students presented four demands to the institutions, and for the first time referred to the President, who has usurped all the levers of power, as "an incompetent institution", refusing any dialogue with him and demanding that the institutions do their job. Students organised a large number of protests and blockades, as well as the largest civil protests in Serbia – in Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Niš and Belgrade.<sup>438</sup>

Cars knocking down female students at peaceful protests in Belgrade (on 16 January<sup>439</sup> and again on 24 January<sup>440</sup>), and – immediately afterwards – the beating of students in Novi Sad (on 28 January) by members of the ruling party, when one female student was seriously injured,<sup>441</sup> caused public outrage and were characterised as attempted murder. The President of Serbia, however, expressed a benevolent attitude towards cars charging into protesting citizens<sup>442</sup>.

Students and their parents were intimidated by phone calls from persons who presented themselves as employees of the Security Information Agency.<sup>443</sup> An activist of the STAV group, Mila Pajić,<sup>444</sup> was exposed to a particularly cruel attack. Numerous other students and activists were accused of being foreign mercenaries (or mercenaries of the opposition<sup>445</sup>) on the portal of the pro-government Movement "Kopaćemo" ("We shall dig"), which points out that "the list of student mercenaries is purely informative and is not used for labelling".<sup>446</sup> Convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj published the personal data (passports) of students, Serbian and Croatian citizens, accusing them of being "Croats leading the protest, who want to destabilise Serbia". The Agency for the Protection of Personal Data of the Republic of Croatia responded to this, demanding that the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Protection

436 [Exposé of mandate holder Djuro Macut \(15/04/2025\)](#), Government of the Republic of Serbia, 21/04/2025

437 *Ibid*, p. 30

438 Iva Jovanović, [History of student protests in Serbia – What should you know?](#), Nova Ekonomija, 25/01/2025

439 ["Crashing into a female student in the centre of Belgrade is attempted murder"](#), Direktno.rs, 16/01/2025

440 Nikola Savić, [Eyewitness of the brutal knockdown of a student in Jurija Gagarina Street: "The girl drove through a line of guards, people rushed after the car and tried to break the car window"](#), Nova.rs, 24/01/2025

441 Dejana Vukadinović, [Attacks on students in Novi Sad: Suspects detained for 30 days](#), BBC News in Serbian, 28/01/2025

442 In December, when a protester was carried on the hood of a car for the first time, the President almost "approved" such behaviour by saying: "They say someone jumped on the hood of his car because they wanted to pass... The man was going his way... And the man passed. And you jump on his car, and you say arrest the person who was driving the car? Are you guys in your right mind? In which country does that happen? Have you lost your minds altogether?" Yes, Vučić basically admitted that he was the main inspirer of attacks against students, Nova.rs, 19/01/2025

443 [The Dean's Collegium of the Faculty of Organisational Sciences reacts to the intimidation of students by BIA](#), D.D. Danas, 28/12/2024

444 [The regime's "run of the gauntlet": New tabloid attacks on Mila Pajić and Dinko Gruhonjić](#), VREME, 12/01/2025

445 Dragan Djilas is the leader of the opposition Party of Freedom and Justice, and Dragan Šolak is the founder and President of the Advisory Board of the company "United Group".

446 [List of mercenary students](#), Movement "Kopaćemo", 19/03/2025

of Personal Data carry out urgent control.<sup>447</sup> There is constant pressure and attempts to create discord between the students and professors.

Some university professors are in the same situation as the students. The defamation of Professor Dinko Gruhonjić<sup>448</sup> (whom the media call a “separatist from Vojvodina”) continues, and so do attacks on the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, which have in the meantime escalated into a physical attack with a knife on the street,<sup>449</sup> as well as against the Rector of Belgrade University, who was called the most derogatory names and threatened with prison by Government ministers.<sup>450</sup> The target was the Rector and the Rector’s College, i.e. the deans and professors of the University of Belgrade, who were accused of “All together clearly, directly and unequivocally planning a coup d’état, violence as a prelude to civil war and the assassination of the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.”<sup>451</sup>

At a peaceful public gathering of hundreds of thousands of citizens in Belgrade on 15 March (the largest ever protest organised in Serbia), while tribute was being paid in silence to the victims of the fall of the roof canopy in Novi Sad, an illegal weapon resembling a sound cannon had been used. The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, a member of the pro-EU coalition, assessed this as war against citizens.<sup>452</sup>

### ✖ **ALARM: Discrimination against All Dissidents of the Government**

Discriminatory treatment of representatives of national minorities and foreigners continued, and Romanians were targeted as well. The Romanian embassy reacted due to disparaging information and the lack of professional ethics of journalists who were manipulating the public and promoting hate speech. Croatia submitted a protest note<sup>453</sup> to Serbia because five Croatian citizens (among 13 foreigners<sup>454</sup>) were taken to the police without explanation, and later banned from entering Serbia for a year. The Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) produced the report “The Croatia Dossier: Coordination of Hate”, which shows the violation of human rights of Croatian citizens and the propagation of hatred during the political crisis in Serbia in the period from December 2024 to February 2025.<sup>455</sup>

YIHR asked the Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Office and the regulatory body to investigate human rights violations against Croatian citizens in the context of student protests, because the tabloid media played a big role in promoting and spreading hate speech, violating all the ethical principles of reporting, as well as a number of laws including the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination.<sup>456</sup> At the same time, the entry of media teams from Croatia and Slovenia was prohibited, making it impossible for them to report on the protest in Belgrade (15 March 2025), which is why the Association of Journalists of Serbia (UNS) protested.<sup>457</sup>

The expulsion of Croatian citizens continues: a doctor who has been living and working in Serbia for 12 years has been assessed as an “unacceptable security risk”, probably because she supported the student protests and because, as a doctor, she condemned the President entering the intensive care unit to visit people who were injured in the fire in Kočani (North Macedonia).<sup>458</sup> Similarly, the Italian pianist who

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447 [The Agency sent a request to the Serbian supervisory body for urgent action due to the publication of Croatian citizens’ personal data](#), Agency for the Protection of Personal Data, 19/03/2025

448 [The regime makes them “run the gauntlet”: New tabloid attacks against Mila Pajić and Dinko Gruhonjić](#), VREME, 12.01/2025

449 [Nevena Bogdanović, From insults in tabloids to stabbing: Dean from Niš targeted for supporting student protests](#), Radio Free Europe, 31/03/2025

450 [Glišić: Rector Djokić is playing with the fate of thousands of families, he ought to be arrested](#), Fonet/Tanjug, NIN, 28/03/2025

451 [Brnabić: I am scandalised by the role of the Belgrade University in the attempted coup, they are to respond to the public immediately](#), Euronews Serbia, 14/03/2025

452 [aNNOUNCEMENT: War against citizens: Who ordered the use of illegal weapons?](#), BCBP, 16/03/2025

453 [Vanja Kranić. Croatia submits a protest note to Serbia](#), N1 Zagreb, 23/01/2025

454 [Autonomy: A total of 13 foreign citizens were detained and expelled from Serbia without explanation](#), Autonomija info, 22/01/2025. (These were the participants of the Erste Academy for Civil Organisations from Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, North Macedonia, Albania, Moldova, Romania, Austria and the Czech Republic).

455 [Report “Croatia Dossier: Coordination of Hate”](#), YIHR, 14/03/2025

456 [The Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Office and regulatory bodies to investigate human rights violations against Croatian citizens in the context of student protests](#), YIHR, 14/03/2025

457 [UNS: State authorities to enable unhindered work to foreign journalists](#), Jugpress, 15/03/2025

458 [Croatian citizen expelled from Serbia for supporting students](#), N1, 08/04/2025

played in Niš during the blockade of the five bridges had to leave Serbia within three days because the police warned “that he was not here for tourist purposes”.<sup>459</sup>

Labelling, hatred and threats are addressed to anti-war activists, journalists, professors, artists and opposition politicians. They are called “the biggest criminals against the Serbian people”, while at the same time convicted war criminals are being glorified.<sup>460</sup>

The same is the case with the celebration of the character and actions of Nebojša Pavković, who was convicted of war crimes committed in Kosovo. YIHR submitted a request to the Cultural Institution of Čuprija to cancel the competition and the decision on the selected conceptual solution for a mural in the centre of Čuprija, dedicated to the image of this war criminal. The request for the dismissal of the director of this institution was submitted as well. It was pointed out that such an occurrence would violate a number of laws, including the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, i.e. Article 13, which considers the propagation of ethnic cleansing a serious form of discrimination.<sup>461</sup>

The government in Serbia uses (every) opportunity to deal with non-governmental organisations that for years have pointed to corruption, violations of the law and violations of human rights, as described in detail in the second chapter of this Report.

The case of two LGBTIQ+ people who accused two police officers of torture (in February 2024) ended in a court ruling that found the officers not guilty. The organisation “Da se zna” (Let It Be Known) filed criminal charges against the two policemen, as well as a complaint to the Protector of Citizens and the Department of Internal Control of the MoI (which was partially accepted). The attacked young man said the following: “We are deeply disappointed by the actions of the judicial authorities of Serbia, so I have unfortunately decided to leave this country”. The organisation is now planning to apply to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.<sup>462</sup> Even the exhibition of the artwork created by students of the elementary school in Indjija, on the occasion of the International Day of Tolerance, became a reason for intolerance and insults. On their tolerance poster, three girls drew people with disabilities, people of different skin colour, symbols of different religions and boys and girls holding hands, adding the inscription (in the corner of the poster) – gay is ok. The teachers were accused of promoting the gay population, and it was said that they instructed the children and that the Principal and the teacher should be replaced. A priest of the Serbian Orthodox Church also participated in this, and a threat of physical violence against the children appeared on social networks (“There is a need to break the crayons and the legs of the one who drew this”). The post was later deleted.<sup>463</sup>

## Activities of a Formal Nature Instead of Real Changes

In a context that is extremely tense and possesses all the characteristics of an emergency situation, the state offers, as a response, formal activities in the field of anti-discriminatory policy that do not affect reality. The Ministry of Justice has stopped publishing quarterly reports on the implementation of the Revised AP for chapter 23 (AP23)<sup>464</sup> after the third quarter of 2023. The Annual Report for 2024 on the implementation of activities from AP23 mainly lists whether action plans have been adopted (or not) (with an indication that donor funds will be needed for their implementation), the Government’s conclusions accepting activity programmes, reports, decisions on the establishment of councils, adoption of conclusions of international bodies, information on the preparation of periodic reports on the implementation of international agreements, meetings with international delegations, and information on the implementation of training (often without specifying the scope of those activities and the number

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459 [Italian pianist expelled from Serbia](#), Vreme, 06/04/2025

460 There are 43 names on the list, and it reads as follows: “This list is nowhere near complete, and it is only the starting point...”. We call on the Prosecution: Bring to justice the biggest criminals against the Serbian people (LIST), Vaseljenska TV, 24/12/, 2024

461 [The cultural institution in Čuprija requests the cancellation of the competition for the creation of a mural depicting war criminal Nebojša Pavković](#). YIHR, 19/03/2025

462 “Crime without punishment”: Examples of impunity for untouchable perpetrators, victims left to fend for themselves”, TV Nova, 07/02/2025

463 [Tolerance is ok, as long as it's not gay: How a student's drawing caused aggression and insulting of a teacher in Indjija](#), P.V.P. N1, 23/11/2024

464 [REPUBLIC OF SERBIA, NEGOTIATION GROUP FOR CHAPTER 23, ACTION PLAN, CHAPTER 23 – JUDICIARY AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS](#), January 2025, Ministry of Justice, 19/03/2025

of participants). Most of the time, the reports contain no quantitative data and there is a conspicuous absence of data on the effects of implemented measures and activities.

The Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue submitted detailed information to the Committee for Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality regarding its activities for the period January-September 2024, covering six areas. It states that the Ministry is satisfied with what has been done, and that the biggest achievement in the preparation of the planning documents was made in the sector of anti-discrimination policy and promotion of gender equality (two APs were prepared).<sup>465</sup> This Ministry also prepared a Report on the outcomes of social dialogues held in 2023,<sup>466</sup> which was submitted to the Government as information. It is noteworthy that just a small number of participants responded to the data collection questionnaires (only 53 out of 300 participants to whom the questionnaires were sent). The absence of numerous data is visible in the tabular presentation of each of the dialogues, and the report does not contain a summary assessment of the fulfilment (quantitative and qualitative) of the assumed obligations.

## Activities of Independent Bodies for the Protection of Rights and Equality in 2024

The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality published the Regular Report for 2024.<sup>467</sup> She received 714 complaints, mostly for discrimination based on gender (192), disability (78), health condition (77), age (77), national affiliation or ethnic origin (71) and marital and family status (37), as well as a smaller number of complaints related to membership in political, trade union and other organisations, religious or political beliefs, property status, skin colour, sexual orientation, race, gender identity, appearance and other characteristics. Most of the complaints were submitted in relation to the procedure before the public authorities, but also in the field of health care, employment or work, education and professional training, when providing public services or using facilities and surfaces, and in the field of the public sphere, public information and media.<sup>468</sup>

Recommendations of the Commissioner were mostly complied with, and when they were not, they had to do with discriminatory speech in public space against LGBTIQ+ and members of the Roma national minority, discrimination based on membership in political, trade union and other organisations, failure to provide services to children with disabilities, and discrimination against law graduates who graduated from a private law school. The Commissioner's Office operated with 73.33% of the total number of systemised jobs.<sup>469</sup>

The Protector of Citizens published the regular report for 2024.<sup>470</sup> This body acted in 3,975 cases (3,917 complaints and 58 cases that were launched on its own initiative). 827 recommendations were dispatched to the administrative bodies, and 21 to the public authorities. The public authorities acted on the recommendations in 89.71% of the cases. The report states that the greatest number of violations involved economic, property and social rights, and that special attention was devoted to the protection of the rights of children and young people, mothers in labour, victims of obstetric violence, victims of violence in the family and partner relationships, members of the LGBTIQ+, national minorities, migrants and asylum seekers at state borders, as well as victims of human trafficking.<sup>471</sup> It repeated the findings from previous reports (the need to amend the law, adopt by-laws, increase the number of hired experts...), which confirms that the government did not take appropriate measures to improve the situation in relation to almost any of the sensitive social groups in 2024. There is a striking lack of content regarding the fall of the canopy at the Railway Station in Novi Sad and the student and civil protests, which were mentioned, neutrally, only a few times in the Report.

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465 [The Parliamentary Committee adopted the information on the work of the Ministry](#), Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, 26/03/2025

466 [Report published on the outcomes of social dialogues in 2023](#), Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, 26/03/2025

467 [Regular annual report of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality for 2024](#), March 2025, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, 19/03/2025

468 *Ibid*, pp.6-7

469 *Ibid*, p. 13

470 [Regular annual report of the Protector of Citizens for 2024](#), March 2025, Protector of Citizens, 19/03/2025

471 *Ibid*, pp.1-2

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government of the Republic of Serbia should ensure the conditions for consistent, efficient and effective fulfilment of obligations by the RA of the Republic of Serbia for the EU Growth Plan for the WB, and Revised AP for Chapter 23 and 24, but this can no longer be expected from the Government formed by the ruling regime.
- The Government should ensure the conditions for ending discrimination, hate speech and violence against any dissenter. The non-discriminatory policy should be applied consistently, while monitoring and assessing real effects.

### 4.3.5. Gender Equality and Violence against Women

*Ambitious deadlines for amendments to laws and the adoption of public policy documents set in the Reform Agenda in the area of 'Basics' proved unrealistic. There were no significant systemic changes in the field of gender equality. The Law on Gender Equality is still under suspension, with no announcement as to when the opinion of the Constitutional Court could be expected. In February 2025, the AP for 2025 for the implementation of the Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030 was finally adopted. Despite numerous promotional activities, there are no visible effects of the work of the Minister without portfolio in charge of coordinating activities in the field of gender equality, prevention of violence against women, and women's economic and political empowerment. Gender equality is not mentioned in the Declaration of Position paper of the new mandate holder, while women's rights are linked to patriarchal values (because women are "the source of life, the strength of the family and the foundation of our community"). Although the mandate holder said that "any violence against women deserves strongest condemnation", he did not react to the sexual harassment allegations of female students against the Minister of Education, who is a professor at the Faculty of Teachers.*

*The question is whether a serious systemic fight against gender-based violence against women is possible in a violent context that is constantly intensifying, especially when the government actively undermines trust in institutions (primarily in the police and the Prosecutor's Office). It remains to be seen whether this had anything to do with the reduction in domestic violence reporting (by almost 4,000 incidents). The AP for the period 2024-2025 was prepared for the Strategy for preventing and combating gender-based violence against women and domestic violence 2021-2025, but the public debate on this document went unnoticed. However, there is no such document on the website of the competent Ministry, nor was the process of its creation participatory. Despite the lower number of women that were killed in the partner-family context, the lack of recognition of the risks and the lack of protection for women who previously reported serious violence is worrying. The state's response to reports of sexual harassment and digital violence is completely inadequate. Even reports of obstetric violence are not receiving an appropriate reaction from the authorities, while court proceedings are long and without an epilogue. The policy of (lack of) financing of specialised services for women who experienced violence provided by women's organisations in Serbia has not changed.*

The implementation of the first measures from the Reform Agenda in the 'Basics' area (negotiation chapters 23 and 24) has been delayed, and there is currently no data on how far the activities related to issues of gender equality and gender-based violence against women have come.

Although the basic principles had been drawn up and the public debate on the Draft AP for 2024-2025 for the implementation of the Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030<sup>472</sup> completed, the Government adopted the document only in February 2025. For these reasons, AP is only valid for the year 2025<sup>473</sup>, and it remains to be seen how many of the planned activities will be implemented. It was stated in the AP that financial resources in the amount of 5,411,543,000.00 dinars (approximately 46,254,504 EUR) will be planned, and that all activities implemented with funds from the budget represent the regular duties of

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472 Consultations on basic principles for drafting the text of the Action Plan proposal for 2024 and 2025 for the implementation of the Strategy for Gender Equality for the period from 2021 to 2030, Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, 15/05/2025.

473 Action plan for 2025 for the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy for the period from 2021 to 2030, *Official Gazette of RS*, no 15 of 21/02/2025.



civil servants and do not require special budgeting<sup>474</sup>. In the tabular presentation of the AP, links to the program budget and estimates of financial resources are entered for only some of the planned activities.

In the report on the implementation of the Revised AP23 from December 2024, the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality (3.4.2.1) is listed as a completed activity, and it is not mentioned that the Constitutional Court suspended its implementation in its entirety. The Ministry of Human and Minority Rights has installed a web application in which gender data can be entered directly in various aspects of the public sector, which should help monitoring the implementation of activities for the promotion of gender equality. However, a report on the implementation of the Law in 2023 was not prepared (a report on the implementation of the AP for achieving gender equality was) and, as of the end of March, the report for 2024 was not made publicly available either.<sup>475</sup>

The Government's coordinating body for gender equality has not been formed, and the coordination of these topics is in charge of a Minister without portfolio. It remains unclear whether the idea of establishing this body was actually abandoned. On the website of the Cabinet of Ministers without portfolio in charge of coordinating activities in the field of gender equality, prevention of violence against women, and economic and political empowerment of women, apart from the biography of the Minister<sup>476</sup> (and announcements covering her every step), there is still no information about the composition of the Cabinet and the work programme.<sup>477</sup> In connection with such a strategy, there is probably a new activity – the *Koloplet* podcast, which will be dedicated to the "promotion of true values, equal opportunities and equality", which the Minister will personally lead!!!<sup>478</sup> The intention to establish an alimony fund (which was proposed several years ago by several women's organisations, along with prepared models of the fund) was not announced by the Minister, but rather by the President of the Republic (a non-competent institution), which made the Minister "sincerely and wholeheartedly" happy.<sup>479</sup>

In the Report on the outcomes of the social dialogues held in 2023,<sup>480</sup> we can see that few representatives of the civil sector participated in the dialogues on gender-sensitive language, and no data on the implemented activities and the resulting changes. This certainly has something to do with the decision of the Constitutional Court to stop the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality as a whole. The Report on Activities from the Revised AP23 states that trainings for civil servants on gender equality were organised, but the number of trainings and participants from the ranks of civil servants was extremely small.

In cooperation with GIZ, the Ministry in charge of social protection started an activity at the end of the year in 20 selected units of local self-governments to implement gender-responsive integrated services<sup>481</sup> (as stated in the report under activity 3.4.4.2). There is no publicly available detailed information on which services were financed, what effects are expected, how much money was invested (and from which sources), or how sustainable will these services be once the project ends.

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474 It refers to activities of participation in working groups, work on monitoring the implementation of regulations or the preparation of analyses, reports, data collection and the like (AP for 2025, pp. 44-45).

475 Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, [Reports](#), 28/03/2025

476 Cabinet of the Minister without portfolio in charge of coordinating activities in the field of gender equality, prevention of violence against women, and economic and political empowerment of women, [Cabinet of the Minister](#), 25/03/2025

477 *Ibid*, Cabinet, [Chief of Cabinet, Special Advisor, Gender Equality, Programmes, Gender Equality](#), 25/03/2025

478 [Minister Macura at the conference in Niš: The position of women has significantly improved, but we have more work to do](#), Cabinet of the Minister without portfolio, 25/02/2025

479 [Establishment of the alimony fund as proof of seriousness of the state](#), Cabinet of the Minister without portfolio, 25/03/2025

480 [The Report on the outcomes of social dialogues in 2023 has been published](#), Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, 26/03/2025

481 Beginning of cooperation with 20 local self-government units on the improvement of social protection services in Serbia, Support 4 Partnership, 02/11/2024



### **In the New Prime Minister's Declaration of Position Paper, Family Rights are Prioritised over Women's Rights and Gender Equality**

Much like the Declaration of Position paper of the previous Prime Minister,<sup>482</sup> gender equality is omitted in that of the new Prime Minister as well,<sup>483</sup> and women's rights are associated with "deep respect" for women who are "the source of life, the strength of the family, and the foundation of our community". It is also added that "any woman in Serbia must have, and will have, the same rights and opportunities as any man".<sup>484</sup> Although the Prime Minister points out that "any sort of violence against women deserves strongest condemnation", he stands by the decision that the new Minister of Education should be a person who is claimed to "have neither the professional nor moral qualities necessary to assume this position at a time of crisis", as pointed out in a joint statement of the representatives of universities in Serbia.<sup>485</sup> Similarly, the existence of serious sexual harassment accusations of female students against the Minister as a professor of the Faculty of Teachers (reported since 2021) was highlighted in the statement that was issued by the women's organisation Osnažena, in cooperation with the AWC, which is why the immediate withdrawal of the proposal for his appointment was demanded.<sup>486</sup> This announcement was signed by more than 18,000 citizens and at least 45 civil society organisations, but that did not sway the Prime Minister.

### **Violence against Women in a Violent Social Context**

It is dubious whether a serious systemic fight against gender-based violence is even possible in a violent context, especially when trust in the institutions that represent the first in line of battle in the protection of women who have experienced violence (primarily the police and the Prosecutor's Office) is undermined.

The report on the implementation of the Revised AP23 states that the AP for the period 2024-2025 for the Strategy for the prevention and combating gender-based violence against women and domestic violence 2021-2025 was prepared in the second half of 2024. The competent Ministry announced a call for a public debate on the draft AP from 7 to 28 February 2025.<sup>487</sup> In the course of the public debate, only one proposal came from the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, which clearly indicates that the process was invisible to interested parties, even if it formally did meet the criteria of public policies. The AP Proposal document<sup>488</sup> has been posted, and it shows that the Working Group charged with the preparation of the AP (established on 26 October 2023) consisted of competent ministries and the Provincial Secretariat, Republic and Provincial institutes, the Coordinating Body for Gender Equality and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, and one civil society organisation (Centre for Missing and Abused Children).<sup>489</sup>

It is evident from the AP Proposal that the largest number of indicators of the success of the measures (results) have been changed or deleted, and that there are mostly small differences between the initial and target values. It was also stated that all the funds provided for the implementation of the activities were planned in the budgets of the relevant ministries and budget users, in the budget of the Republic, the Province and local self-government units, and that the state will fully rely on its own funds in the implementation of the planned activities. However, when looking at the table of planned measures/

482 [Miloš Vučević's Exposé](#) (01/05/2024), National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia.

483 [Djuro Macut's Exposé](#) (15/05/2025), Government of the Republic of Serbia.

484 *Ibid*, p. 30

485 Announcement of the Rebel University in Belgrade, the Free Universities in Niš, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Novi Pazar and Proactive from Kosovska Mitrovica. The newly elected Minister of Education has neither professional nor moral qualities to manage this department, Beta/Nova.rs, 16/04/2025

486 Press release: "[We demand the immediate withdrawal of the proposal for the appointment of Dejan Vuk Stanković as Minister of Education](#)", AWC, 15/04/2025

487 [Action Plan for the period 2024-2025 for the Strategy for prevention and combating gender based violence against women and domestic violence 2021-2025](#). eKonsultacije.gov.rs, 01/04/2025

488 *Ibid*.

489 It was already mentioned that only two civil society organisations answered the [public call](#) for participation in this Working Group, that both were selected, and that the conspicuous absence of specialised women's organisations from the *Women against Violence Network* is an indicator of mistrust and lack of respect for the expertise of these organisations by ministries, state bodies and local self-government units.

activities and the sources of their financing, neither the total nor the individual estimated financial resources for any measure/activity<sup>490</sup> are listed, nor is there a connection with the programme budget.

Monitoring the implementation of the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence against Women is limited to listing the number of reported events and pronounced emergency and extended measures, the number of cases discussed at meetings of Coordination and Cooperation Groups, and the number of developed individual protection and support plans. There is no report on the analysis of actions based on data, and no overview of the actual effects. Training for judges and prosecutors on these topics is carried out by the Judicial Academy, with the support of foreign donations but with a very small number of participants.

After the adoption of the General Protocol on acting and multi-sectoral cooperation in situations of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence (April 2024), there has been no data on whether special sectoral protocols have been adopted to date, nor is there any data on the implementation of the General Protocol (whether it reached the perpetrators at all), which should be reported by the Council for the Suppression of Domestic Violence (which did not hold any meetings after the second session on 15 April 2024).<sup>491</sup>

In November, grants were approved to civil society organisations with the aim of preventing family and peer violence;<sup>492</sup> the day before, the Government made a decision to extend the deadline for the implementation of projects until 28 February 2025.<sup>493</sup> The question is how the projects that were allocated around 30,000 euros were able to implement all the activities in a short period of only 4 months, and what are the effects of the activities implemented in this way. Until now, it has not been the practice of the ministries that distribute budget funds to civil society organisations to post implementation reports (narrative and financial) on the website, nor is a summary overview report on implementation and achievements prepared so that the interested public can have an insight into what has changed and how public funds are spent. This would be particularly important considering the discovered cases of phantom organisations that receive budget funds at tenders.<sup>494</sup>

This Ministry is also mentioned by assistant professor Dr. Dušan Aleksić,<sup>495</sup> former candidate for membership in the Council of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). He states that the serious irregularity in that process "is based on the suspicion of a conflict of interest, the fact that practically during the process, certain organisations, 11 of them, received almost 17 million dinars for their activities from one of the ministries, i.e., the cabinet of the minister without portfolio Tatjana Macura, and some organisations reported direct pressure from this cabinet to propose certain candidates".<sup>496</sup>

The Minister without portfolio opened the International Conference on Law and Social Protection in Leskovac, stating that "42% fewer women and men have been killed in domestic violence last year, compared to fifteen years ago".<sup>497</sup> Representatives of the organisation Women for Peace, which since 2005 have been running an SOS telephone line for women who have experienced violence, were not invited to this conference. Since 2022, the municipality has systematically excluded this organisation from such and similar activities, due to its pointing out irregular decisions on the allocation of budget funds to local citizens' associations (which was elaborated in previous Alarm reports).<sup>498</sup>

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490 The exception is only one activity in the entire AP, i.e. activity 1.1.4 – Holding public events, expert meetings and conferences on protection measures against gender-based violence against women and girls, as well as domestic violence..., for which RSD 4,320,000 has been planned.

491 [The Second session of the Council for the Suppression of Domestic Violence](#), Ministry of Justice, 26/03/2025

492 Decision on the financing of project activities 0047 – Support for the implementation of measures aimed at preventing family and peer violence, published on 15/11/2024, Cabinet of the Minister without portfolio

493 [Conclusion of the Government](#), 05 Number: 56-10972/2024-1, adopted on 14/11/2024. These are changed conditions in relation to the public call, in which the deadline for implementation was 20/12/2024, i.e. two months that could have influenced the decisions of certain organisations not to apply for funds. This was discussed in the previous Alarm report.

494 Aleksandar Djordjević. [Treasury data the final proof of the fraud of the Ministry for Family Care](#), BIRN, 26/03/2024

495 Dušan Aleksić is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, a prominent communicologist and researcher, who withdrew his candidacy in the elections for the REM Council, along with six other candidates, due to a series of irregularities in the procedure.

496 [Recycling REM](#), *Peščanik*, 29/04/2025.

497 [Trust in institutions toward evolution](#), Cabinet of the Minister without portfolio in charge of coordinating activities in the field of gender equality, prevention of violence against women and economic and political empowerment of women, 27/03/2025

498 Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 – May 2023, p. 83

## Unrecognised Risks of Femicide when Violence is Reported to Institutions

At least 17 women were killed in a family-partner relationship in Serbia in 2024, which is fewer than in previous years.<sup>499</sup> However, in relation to the situation in 2023, the renewed increase in the number of murdered women who previously reported violence (8 cases in 2024, when 17 women were killed, compared to four cases in 2023, when 28 women were killed) is worrying. The fact that two perpetrators of femicide were previously convicted of a more severe form of domestic violence, or of attempting to kill their partner, confirms a poor assessment of security risks and an inadequate individual plan of measures to support and protect the victims.

In 2025, as of 30 April, seven women have been killed by their partners or male relatives. AWC, a member of the prEUgovor coalition, reacted with a statement regarding the murder of a woman from Srbobran. The fact that the perpetrator previously had been sentenced twice to prison terms for committing the crime of domestic violence against his mother, that he had been released from prison six months before he committed the murder, that the perpetrator and the mother he killed lived in houses that shared a yard – all this indicates that there was a high risk that this woman could be seriously injured again, or even killed. The question is how the Group for Coordination and Cooperation carried out risk assessments and the planning of protection measures,<sup>500</sup> as well as whether, based on such cases, trials will be introduced for future actions.

## Sexual Harassment and Digital Violence – No Response from the Authorities

The Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Jagodina issued a Decision<sup>501</sup> abandoning the prosecution of a person who was reported for 38 acts of sexual harassment against various women and several other criminal acts, against whom the Police Department of the City of Belgrade had filed 6 criminal reports. The provided explanation was that there were no grounds to assume that the suspect committed the aforementioned or any other criminal offence for which he was being prosecuted *ex officio*. This decision was based solely on the testimony of the suspect, who denied the allegations. The acting prosecutor did not request statements from the injured parties, or a listing of incoming and outgoing telephone calls. As the injured party, AWC submitted a complaint to the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office, together with two other organisations that provide SOS services. This example illustrates the extent to which the crime of sexual harassment, where women are affected most often, is minimised, which is why the low total number of reports of these crimes and the enormous difference between the number of reported crimes and the number of sanctioned perpetrators is not surprising (in 2023, only 20.7% of the people who were reported for this crime were in fact sanctioned).<sup>502</sup>

Digital violence against women, along with most terrible threats,<sup>503</sup> remains unanswered by the competent services. According to Radio Free Europe, referring to the data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, there were few convictions for acts that could be classified as digital violence in 2023, and the number was especially low when women and girls were victims. In addition to the lack of appropriate legal solutions (which was written about in the Alarm Report),<sup>504</sup> the capacities of the Department for High-Tech Crime in the police and the Special Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime are insufficient, with no signs of change. The traumatic experiences and security threats to girls remain an unresolved issue.

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499 The presentation of the number of murdered women from 2010 to 2023 was published in the [Alarm Report, May 2024](#), p. 83

500 Press release: Act before it's too late! AWC, 08/01/2025

501 Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Jagodina, Kt. no. 219/24 of 28/02/2025

502 Tanja Ignjatović, [TWELFTH REPORT on independent monitoring of the implementation of the Law on Prevention of domestic violence in Serbia for the period January – December 2023](#), p. 10, AWC, 27/03.2025

503 Miljana Miletić, Invisible bruises of digital violence against women, Radio Free Europe, 03/03/2025. The text states: "I received some nasty threats and I went to talk to the inspector. He told me that it was not enough that they were threatening me, that they were talking about where they would impale me, that my skull should be broken, that I should be found, raped... The calls were coming around the clock, she added, and even then she did not find help and support when she went to the police". Radio Free Europe, 03/03/2025

504 Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 – [November 2023](#), p. 75, [November 2024](#), p. 69

#### 🔍 **Investigative story 4:**

##### **Waiting for Justice for Obstetric Violence: A System That Has Failed Women**

In 2024, over a thousand women (1,198) responded to a call by the Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS) to share their experiences of obstetric violence. The questionnaire was compiled with the help of the Belgrade Center for Human Rights (BCHR) and the Autonomous Women's Center (AWC). Obstetric violence, as defined by the World Health Organisation, encompasses physical and verbal abuse during pregnancy and childbirth, non-consensual medical procedures, and neglect leading to preventable complications.

CINS's journalists spent over six months analysing reports of obstetric violence and speaking with some of the women and other relevant stakeholders<sup>505</sup>. The testimonies CINS gathered, spanning for decades, reveal a pattern of inhumane treatment in maternity wards across Serbia, with the majority of reports originating from facilities in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, though there are reports of inhumane treatment from all over Serbia.

Experts attribute incidents to systemic issues like inadequate communication, lack of time, a large number of births, high birth concentration in some maternity wards, which reduce women to mere numbers. While such experiences can lead to postpartum depression, they are also concerned that doctors are focused only on the physical processes during childbirth at the expense of women's psychological well-being.

Despite the severity of these experiences, nearly 97% of the women did not report the abuse, citing reasons such as shame, fear, trauma, not being able to recognise the violence due to lack of information, not knowing how or to whom to report it, and distrust in institutions.

On the other side, obstetric violence is not recognised as a criminal offense. When cases of obstetric violence reach prosecutors or courts, they are usually classified as medical malpractice, endangerment of health, or negligent professional conduct.

In 2023, Vera, anticipating her first child, encountered severe mistreatment at a Serbian state hospital following a diagnosis indicating potential Down syndrome and a likely miscarriage. Hospital staff instructed her to manage the miscarriage alone in the restroom, emphasising that if the fetus falls into the toilet, she would need to retrieve it herself. Vera's refusal led to further neglect, including being left unattended bleeding and soaked after her water had broken. Despite reporting this inhumane treatment and neglect to the Ombudsman and the Ministry of Health, her complaints remain unresolved.

Vera's experience is not isolated. CINS sent freedom of information requests for documents related to such cases from 108 courts and prosecutors' offices, covering the period between 2018 and February 2024. After identifying cases related to gynecology and, with the help of Belgrade Center for Human Rights, analyzing those that clearly indicated inhumane treatment of patients, or obstetric violence, CINS found 27 such cases. In most of them a person died – the baby, the mother, and in some instances, both. CINS also requested information about cases under the criminal charge of abuse and torture for the same period, but found none.

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505 Dina Đorđević, Teodora Ćurčić. "Stories from the maternity ward: Women who broke the silence" and "Waiting for Justice: A System That Has Failed Women", CINS, February 2025

## Misinforming the Public – Irresponsible Statements about False Reports of Violence

AWC, a member of the prEUgovor coalition, had reacted to the text “Increasingly frequent false reports – Abuse of domestic violence in Jagodina”.<sup>506</sup> In the text, it was said that about 20 percent of reports of domestic violence are false, and that the Group for Coordination and Cooperation, after analysis, characterises them as having a low level of intensity of domestic violence, that they have not been sanctioned so far, but that if their number does not decrease, or if it increases, they will start to sanction them. In the reaction to this text, it was pointed out that incomplete and biased information on this topic is very harmful, even more so when it comes from professionals. In this way, the general public is not receiving accurate information, and such writing intimidates victims of domestic violence from turning to the institutions that should provide them with protection and support.<sup>507</sup>

In connection with a series of unfounded, simplistic, unethical and malicious claims about women victims of violence and the organisations that support them, which were presented by lawyer Zora Dobričanin Nikodinović and journalist Sanja Marinković in the ‘Magazin IN’ show on Pink TV (18 January 2025), the AWC appealed to the Ministry of Justice to dismiss the lawyer from her position as a member of the Working Group for Amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code, and submitted a report to the Regulatory Body for electronic media. The AWC expressed doubts about the impartiality and goodwill of the lawyer to, within the framework of the Working Group, sincerely advocate for the improvement of the rights of victims in criminal proceedings, in accordance with Directive 2012/29/EU on the establishment of minimum standards for the rights, support and protection of victims of criminal acts.<sup>508</sup> The conclusion of the Supervisory Service of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media was that there was no violation of media laws and by-laws “because it was not a news programme, but rather an entertainment programme”.<sup>509</sup>

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The new Government should ensure the implementation of laws and by-laws in accordance with the planned deadlines through sufficient human, organisational and financial resources, as well as through clear mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the achieved changes.
- The new Government should systematically and systemically address the lack of all kinds of support and empowerment services for women with experience of gender-based violence, including recognition of the appropriate status of women’s organisations with long-term expertise in this field.
- Competent institutions should ensure appropriate attention to encouraging women to report all forms of gender-based violence, as well as appropriate assessment of security risks and appropriate response to reports of sexual harassment, digital violence and obstetric violence.

### 4.3.5. Rights of the Child

*Although a certain shift in the implementation of activities can be noted in the Report on the implementation of the Revised AP23 in 2024, not much progress has been made. The implementation is dependent on foreign donations, and it can hardly be said that there have been visible effects. A significant number of activities remain unrealised, even though they have to do with the adoption of laws and by-laws. Civil organisations had to remind the Prime Minister and other competent actors that children have the right to express their opinions, as well as the right of peaceful assembly (that they are not the property of the state until they reach adulthood), and that these adults have the obligation to provide a safe and stimulating environment in which children can freely express their views. Peer violence in schools remains a problem, yet the competent Ministry is proposing to reduce the education of teachers in pedagogical, psychological and methodical disciplines.*

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<sup>506</sup> The text was published on 22 January 2025 in *Večernje novosti*.

<sup>507</sup> AWC reaction: What is false reporting of domestic violence, AWC, 10/02/2025

<sup>508</sup> AWC reaction to the show Magazin IN and malicious claims about women victims of violence, AWC, 23/01/2025

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*



*There is no appropriate treatment for child witnesses and victims of domestic violence, with inadequate assessments of the risk of children's contact with fathers who are violent towards their mothers. In this matter, the state did not take measures from the conclusions of GREVIO and the Committee of Ministers, and did not submit relevant answers in the First Thematic Evaluation Report. In the Declaration of Position paper of the new mandate holder, emphasis is placed on the legitimacy and control of the education of children and young people. The new National Strategy for Family and Demography 2025-2035 has also been announced, as well as the intensification of work on the establishment of the "Let Children Be Born" Fund.*

The Report on the implementation of the Revised AP23 in 2024 in this area mainly mentions the activities of the Government (conclusions, regulations) establishing appropriate bodies, or decisions related to projects and reports of working groups, but not the effects of those activities. The status of a number of activities has been changed from unrealised to partially realised because certain processes did in fact start (for example, the concept of the Centre for Children, Youth and Family was developed with the support of UNICEF, as well as several special protocols for the protection of children from abuse). Some activities have been moved from the status of partial to the status of implemented (e.g. professional training of professional workers and professional associates in the social protection system), although the scope of implementation is small. Some activities were terminated in 2024 (e.g. increasing the application of educational orders and giving priority to the restorative approach in dealing with juvenile offenders) because there were no donor funds for their implementation.

Also, in the Report, certain activities that were previously marked as partially realised are now marked as unrealised (this refers to the supervision of the implementation of the National Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence, which expired in 2023). Some activities are claimed to have been implemented, such as the introduction of post-traumatic counselling and support for child victims/witnesses in criminal proceedings as part of family support services, although the Report mentions the services for supporting victims and witnesses of criminal offences in the Higher Public Prosecutor's Offices as implementers, although it is not the same type of service. In this area, a significant number of activities have not yet been implemented, although they have to do with the adoption of laws and by-laws, which should be the easier part of the job (compared to their implementation). A working group was formed to develop the new Social Protection Strategy 2025-2030 and its accompanying Action Plan 2025/2027 (November 2024), but it held only one meeting to date – in December. The fall of the Government and the election of the new one (or new elections) would delay the implementation of all activities related to the above Strategy.

## Who Do the Children Belong To and What Rights Do They Have?

On the occasion of mass protests by children and young people and blockades of schools after the fall of the roof canopy in Novi Sad, civil organisations had to remind the Prime Minister and other competent actors that children have the right to express their opinions and the right of peaceful assembly, and that those adults have the obligation to provide a safe and stimulating environment in which they can freely express their views.<sup>510</sup> At the same time, a member of the parliament from the ruling party (and a lawyer to boot) said the following in a television programme: "Now, I have to clarify something here, and I am asking the social welfare centres and relevant ministries to speak up. A child is the property of the state until he or she reaches adulthood".<sup>511</sup> Many reacted to this statement, including the Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia (MODS). It was emphasised that "children are not the property of any individual, institution or state. They are independent holders of rights that include freedom of expression, the right to participate in making decisions that concern them, and the right to protect their dignity and integrity".<sup>512</sup>

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510 Aleksandra Polić, [Press release regarding the mass protests of children and young people from secondary schools in Serbia](#), Užice Centre for Children's Rights, 16/12/2024

511 Miodrag Sovilj, "A child is the property of the state until it reaches legal age": Government representatives are 'hitting' young people with legal nonsense. *N1*, 19/12/2024

512 Press release: Children are not property, MODS, 20/12/2024



Powerless to prevent the participation of children and young people in the protests, the Ministry of Education made a decision to end the first semester early.<sup>513</sup> Earlier, this Ministry had started a public debate on amendments to the Law on the Basics of the Education System. They published an overview of the participants and the received suggestions, but not a report on what was accepted and what was not, with explanations.<sup>514</sup> One of the proposals to which experts and the general public reacted negatively was the reduction of teachers' education in psychological, pedagogical and methodical disciplines. It was pointed out that, with the proposed change, the Ministry of Education, "despite the proclaimed efforts to strengthen the educational role of the school, especially after the 'Ribnikar', Malo Orašje and Dubona incidents and the overall increase in violence in schools and society, is not moving in that direction".<sup>515</sup>

### Peer Violence Is Still an Alarming Problem

The media reported that, from the beginning of the school year to mid-November 2024, 7,456 reports of violence involving children in educational institutions<sup>516</sup> have been registered on the "I'm Protecting You" platform. The public was disturbed by the murder of a third-grade student of the Textile School in Leskovac, who was beaten with metal bars by two young men.<sup>517</sup> Fourth grade pupils from a Belgrade elementary school stopped going to school even before the start of the early school vacation due to peer violence, by decision made by their parents. According to the parents, these children had suffered violence since 2022 without an appropriate response from the school, and the case was "solved" by the violent boy withdrawing from classes.<sup>518</sup> A similar experience was reported by parents from a primary school in Subotica. Namely, a boy who had transferred to their school is behaving violently, and the school is unable to solve the problem.<sup>519</sup>

Despite all this, BIRN revealed that immediately after the murder in "Ribnikar", the Ministry of Education allocated thousands of euros to a network of phantom organisations for training on peer violence and children's rights. Some of the lectures were never held, while it is unclear to what extent others were realised. Of particular concern is the fact that the organisations and agencies that received funds on this occasion are part of a wider network of phantom organisations that received more than EUR 180,000 from the Ministry of Education in 2022 and 2023 for lectures that were mostly never organised, or were held by local youth offices free of charge.<sup>520</sup>

### Murders of Children as Revenge of a Violent Partner against Their Mothers

A two-year-old boy from the vicinity of Vršac lost his life after his father took him from kindergarten without his mother's knowledge, placed him in the passenger seat of the vehicle and caused a direct traffic accident.<sup>521</sup> The father of another two-year-old boy who tried to kill him was sentenced to (only) four years in prison.<sup>522</sup>

Serbia submitted the First thematic evaluation report on the implementation of the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on the prevention of violence against women and domestic violence.<sup>523</sup> One of the questions related to Article 31 – Custody, access and security. In the state report, there are

513 [Shortening of the first semester: How the Ministry of Education explains the decision and the trade unions' reply](#), Euronews Serbia, 20/12/2024

514 [Public debate on the Draft Law on Amendments to the Law on the Basics of the Education System](#), Ministry of Education, 13/12/2024

515 Jelena Teodorović, [The Ministry excludes pedagogy and psychology from teachers' education](#), *Danas*, 23/12/2024

516 Biljana Vučković, [Frightening data on peer violence in Serbia. The situation among the students and children is alarming! Since the beginning of the school year abuse has been on the rise: It is most widespread here](#), *Blic*, 18/11/2024

517 [The student beaten outside the Chemistry School in Leskovac dies](#), *RTS/Danas*, 27/11/2024

518 [They stopped sending their children to school because of peer violence: Parents tell N1 – the bully quit](#), N1 Belgrade, 28/12/2024

519 [Peer violence in elementary school "Majšanski put", Subotica.com](#), 19/11/2024

520 Gordana Andrić, [After the 'Ribnikar' massacre, business as usual: The Ministry of Education paid EUR 5,000 each for lectures that were never held](#), BIRN, 27/02/2025

521 [Gory scenario! Father stole the child from kindergarten and took him to his death](#), *Blic*, 14/11/2024

522 Branko Janačković, [A man poured hydrochloric acid into his son's \(2\) mouth. A father from Pirot convicted of attempted murder, here is how long he will serve](#), *Blic*, 10/03/2024

523 GREVIO, [Report submitted by Serbia pursuant to Article 68, paragraph 1 of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence \(First thematic evaluation round\)](#), Received by GREVIO on 16/10/2024

no complete answers to all the questions that were raised by GREVIO. Although children are recognised as victims in the by-laws and when they witness domestic violence, this is not the case in practice and there are no administrative data on their number. Preventive protection against domestic violence rarely includes children who witness violence against their mothers, sometimes not even children who were direct victims of violence.

Although the work on amendments to the Family Law began in 2023, it is not known whether the GREVIO recommendations that were given to Serbia in 2020 regarding Articles 26 and 31,<sup>524</sup> or the conclusions of the Committee of the Parties,<sup>525</sup> which Serbia received in June 2023, were complied with. Let us remind of the fact that a working group was formed to amend this regulation, but its composition is unknown to the public and specialised organisations, which were not invited to participate.

## The New Mandate Holder and Policy towards Children

Although the new mandate holder is connected with the so-called “students who want to study”<sup>526</sup> (who have been camping in the park in front of the Presidency since 6 March), in his Declaration of Position paper<sup>527</sup> he stated that “all students are equal and they are all our children”, emphasizing the need for unity and reforms that would prevent such divisions (p. 4). Like the previous mandate holder, the new one also stresses the importance of national content and school subjects of national importance, organised and systematic work, and the influence of the power of social networks on children and young people, which must be turned to the benefit of “our national unity and survival” (p. 4). He reiterates that prevention, as well as the timely response of state institutions to violence involving children is a high priority of the Government, and that coordination of the actions of 7 departments was established by the platform “I’ll keep you safe” (p. 8). Children are discussed the most in the segment called Demography and Birth Control. The National Strategy for Family and Demography 2025-2035 has been announced and should include goals, measures and institutions for family protection and demographic renewal. Also, the intensification of work on the establishment of the “Let Children be Born” fund was announced in accordance with the conclusions of the All-Serbian Assembly (we believe that the same applies to children of national and ethnic minorities living in Serbia), which will include measures for family support and the development of services for children, as well as changes to the conditions for obtaining child allowance, and its amount (p. 23).

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The new Government should provide conditions for accelerating the implementation of all activities planned in the Revised AP23 in the field of children’s rights, with special attention to providing adequate resources for all children from vulnerable groups and their families.
- Educational institutions and the media should increase efforts to implement preventive programmes on all types of violence that will be accessible to children and young people of all ages, with their active participation.

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524 GREVIO’s (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) SERBIA, 22/01/2020

525 Committee of the Parties, Conclusions on the implementation of recommendations in respect of Serbia adopted by the Committee of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention, 01/06/2023

526 “I am glad to see you here”, Endocrinologist Djuro Macut supports students who want to study (Video) Novosti online, 10/03/2025

527 Djuro Macut’s Expos (15/04/2025), Government of the Republic of Serbia, 21/04/2025

### 4.3.6. Strengthening Procedural Safeguards

*Six months have passed without any published reports on public debates concerning the proposed amendments to the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code. Although the Ministry of Justice claims that the consultations have been extended, there are no publicly available official decisions confirming the extension. The implementation of the National Strategy for the Realisation of the Rights of Victims and Witnesses of Crimes is being carried out through EU-funded projects, without adequate consultation with judicial professionals who are not involved in the projects, or civil society organisations (CSOs) that provide support services. Furthermore, the Rulebook on the Method of Keeping Records on the Provision of Free Legal Aid and Free Legal Support, adopted by the Ministry of Justice in March 2025, unlawfully obliges CSO service providers to collect and submit excessive beneficiary data, which violates the Law on Personal Data Protection.*

#### No Update on Proposed Changes to Criminal Legislation

The public debate on the proposed amendments to the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code ended on 1 November 2024. Due to severe and substantial criticism of the proposed changes, the Ministry announced that the public debate would continue in 2025.<sup>528</sup> However, there has been no update on the draft laws during the reporting period. Reports on the public debate are still not available on the Ministry of Justice's website or the E-Consultations portal. Furthermore, no official decision regarding the extension of the public debate has been made to date.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) reported that *in August 2024* the two draft laws were submitted to the European Commission for expert opinion, which was received in mid-November.<sup>529</sup> It also stated that the public debate has been extended and that the adoption of the Criminal Procedure Code is expected in the second quarter of 2025, while the adoption of the Criminal Code is expected in the first or second quarter of 2025.<sup>530</sup>

#### Implementation of the National Strategy for the Realisation of the Rights of Victims and Witnesses of Crimes

There is no publicly available annual report on the implementation status of the Action Plan for the implementation of the National Strategy for the Realisation of the Rights of Victims and Witnesses of Crime in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2023-2025.<sup>531</sup> The only publicly available information can be found in the MoJ's Overview of the AP 23 Implementation Status in 2024,<sup>532</sup> where the activities were listed. This document states that the Services for support to victims and witnesses of crime were established in the higher courts in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Kragujevac, after the presidents of these courts met with the Minister of Justice and the president of the Supreme Court in December 2023. In 2024, these services were established at four other higher courts (Zrenjanin, Sombor, Požarevac and Vranje).<sup>533</sup> Furthermore, MoJ stated that video-conferencing systems for the higher courts in Zrenjanin, Sombor, Požarevac, Užice and Vranje were delivered in July and August 2024.<sup>534</sup> The Austrian Development Agency (ADA) renovated and furnished offices for the Victims and Witnesses Support Services in these five higher courts.<sup>535</sup>

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528 Ministry of Justice, "Nastavak javne rasprave o izmenama i dopunama KZ-a i ZKP-a" [Public debate on amendments and supplements to the CC and the CPC to continue], 29/11/2024

529 Ministry of Justice, [Revised AP 23 with the implementation status as of 31 December 2024](#), under Activities 1.3.6.2, 2.3.7.2, 3.4.4.10, 3.5.1.7 and 3.5.1.8, p. 244

530 *Ibid*, stated under Activity 2.3.7.2

531 Ministry of Justice, [Action Plan for the implementation of the National Strategy for the realisation of the rights of victims and witnesses of crime in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2023-2025](#)

532 Ministry of Justice, [Revised AP 23, with the implementation status as of 31 December 2024](#), p. 244

533 *Ibid*, Activity 1.4.4.8

534 Within the project "EU for the Rule of Law – Technical capacity for the implementation of action plans for Chapters 23 and 24", implemented by UNOPS (UN Office for Project Services).

535 Through the IPA 2019 project "Support for strengthening the Rule of Law in the Republic of Serbia – Support for victims (Work package 6)", in terms of improving the existing national institutional framework in accordance with appropriate international standards.

The Ministry of Justice was assisted by the OSCE Mission in the development of all the necessary materials that contain relevant information intended for victims and witnesses of crime. The MoJ reported that these materials were delivered to the established Victims and Witnesses Support Services at the higher courts during the 4th quarter of 2024.<sup>536</sup>

On 14 November 2024, the Government of the Republic of Serbia appointed new members of the Coordinating Body for the Support of Victims and Witnesses of Crime in Criminal Proceedings.<sup>537</sup> On 12 December, the High Judicial Council adopted the *Rulebook on Operation of Victim and Witness Support Services and Focal Points for Providing Information to Victims and Witnesses*.<sup>538</sup>

Despite the fact that the Action Plan for the period 2023-2025<sup>539</sup> states that the implementation of the Strategy will be supported by four projects financed mainly by the EU, in the amount of at least EUR 629,530.00<sup>540</sup> (these activities have been implemented), there is no information on the realisation of activities by the MoJ through allocated budget funds in the total amount of EUR 418,000.00.<sup>541</sup> These budget funds were intended for the salaries of employees within the Ministry of Justice, the higher courts, and the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime. There is no information as to whether these employees were ever hired.

As regards project activities, the main conclusion is that the work of the four projects that were financed mainly by the EU is not transparent to judicial professionals who were not included in the project activities themselves, or to the CSOs that provide support to victims and free legal aid. There has been no discussion process with representatives of the judiciary and CSOs prior to the adoption of the by-law governing the organisation and work of the Victims and Witnesses Support Services in higher courts.<sup>542</sup>

The MoJ reported that, within the same project, the coordinator of the Service for Information and Support for Victims and Witnesses of the Public Prosecutor's Office for War Crimes participated in a several days long study visit to the Republic of Croatia, from 24 to 27 September 2024. It was stated that "the study visit was organised with the aim of strengthening the capacity of the system of services for exercising the rights of victims and witnesses of crime in the Republic of Serbia, and becoming acquainted with the work of professional services that provide support to victims in systems where the National Network of Support and Cooperation for Victims and Witnesses of Crime is organised in a manner similar to that in the Republic of Serbia".<sup>543</sup> There is no available information on how this objective was achieved, or whether said coordinator transferred knowledge or experience to other public prosecutor's offices, given that the Law on the Public Prosecutor's Office does not mandate the establishment of such services.

The Autonomous Women's Centre (AWC), a member of the prEUgovor coalition, strongly advocated for the institutionalisation of victim support services within prosecutor's offices during the 2022 public consultations on the new judicial laws. However, the proposal was ultimately rejected by the Working Group, the Government and the National Assembly. A representative of the High Judicial Council (HJC) also participated in the same study visit,<sup>544</sup> but HJC's activities related to the Victims Support Services after the study visit remain unknown. Through OSCE and EU-funded project, the MoJ spent five years and at least EUR 1.5 million establishing the Victim Support Services within the higher courts. Instead of focusing on the top of the pyramid, it should have started at the bottom – at the Basic Prosecutor's Offices.

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536 Ministry of Justice, [Revised AP 23, with the implementation status as of 31 December 2024](#), Activity 1.4.4.8

537 *Ibid*, Activity 1.4.4.7

538 "Official Gazette of the RS" No. 104/24 of 25/12/2024, Activity 1.4.4.1

539 Ministry of Justice, [Action Plan for the implementation of the National Strategy for the realisation of the rights of victims and witnesses of crime in the Republic of Serbia, for the period 2023-2025](#)

540 Project ADA: EUR 500,000, EU and BMZ/GIZ: EUR 42,300, OSCE: EUR 57,280, EU and CoE: EUR 29,950, and UNICEF in an undetermined amount.

541 Under designations PG 1602, 1603 and 1604, Programme activities 0006, 0010, 0014, budget lines 411, 412, 42.

542 An activity of the project "Support for strengthening the Rule of Law in the Republic of Serbia", implemented by ADA.

543 Ministry of Justice, [Revised AP 23, with the implementation status as of 31 December 2024](#), Activity 3.5.1.19

544 High Judicial Council, [Annual Report of the Work of the High Judicial Council for 2024](#), February 2025, p. 26

## The Ministry of Justice's Excessive and Unlawful Demands from CSOs That Provide Free Legal Aid Services

The MoJ has not published the Annual Report on the Implementation of the Law on Free Legal Aid for 2024 on its website, which was due until 31 March. However, some data have been provided in the Overview of the AP 23 Implementation status 2024 (see table).

Table 1: Overview of the received and reimbursed FLA requests 2020-2024

Year	Number of received FLA requests	Total reimbursed value of provided FLA services to LSGs	Average reimbursed amount per request
2020	23	RSD 344,000 (ca. EUR 2,950)	RSD 15,000.00 (ca. EUR 128)
2021	123	RSD 1,320,000 (ca. EUR 11,250)	RSD 11,667.00 (ca. EUR 99)
2022	480	RSD 4,800,000 (ca. EUR 40,940)	RSD 10,000.00 (ca. EUR 85)
2023	443 (out of which 429 were reimbursed)	RSD 5,005,065 (ca. EUR 42,714)	RSD 11,667.00 (ca. EUR 99)
2024	426	RSD 4,769,625 (ca EUR 40,680)	RSD 11,196.00 (ca. EUR 95)

Source: MoJ<sup>545</sup>

The improvement in the allocation of the total MoJ budget funds for FLA is visible, but these are still just small amounts that were refunded by the MoJ for the legal representation by attorneys in individual cases (half was paid from the budget of the MoJ, and half from the budget of the local self-government units – LSGs). There are no data on the amounts that were paid by individual LSGs that issued Decisions on free legal representation by an attorney, from the budgets of those particular LGS, or on the amount that was reimbursed by the MoJ.

On 17 March 2025, the MoJ adopted the *Rulebook on the Method of Keeping Records on the Provided Free Legal Aid and Free Legal Support, and the Method of Keeping Records Maintained by the Administrative Body of a Local Self-government Unit*<sup>546</sup> without any prior public consultations. The Rulebook imposes an obligation on LSGs, attorneys, CSOs, public notaries, mediators and Law Clinics to maintain records of the free legal aid and support they provide. It requires all providers to submit personal data of the beneficiaries (such as their names, surnames and addresses) to the MoJ, which violates the Law on Personal Data Protection. Additionally, CSOs are required to submit the numbers of the decisions granting free legal aid, despite not being legally obliged to issue such decisions since free legal aid provided by CSOs is not reimbursed by the MoJ.

545 Ministry of Justice, [Regular Annual Report on the Oversight of the Implementation of the Law on Free Legal Aid for 2020-2023 and Revised AP 23, with the implementation status as of 31 December 2024](#), p. 244

546 "Official Gazette of the RS" No. 22/25 of 17/03/2025

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Introduce the obligation to issue public calls for representatives of civil society organisations for participation in the working groups of the Ministry of Justice for amendments to the legislation, in the same manner as for public calls for the development of Strategies and Action Plans.
- Provide additional time for expert discussion on draft laws on amendments to criminal laws before submitting them to the National Assembly for adoption.
- Implementation of the National Strategy for the Realisation of the Rights of Victims and Witnesses of Crime and its accompanying Action Plan through four EU-funded projects should be transparent and inclusive to all judicial professionals and all CSOs that provide services to victims.
- The *Rulebook on the Method of Keeping Records on the Provided Free Legal Aid and Free Legal Support, and the Method of Keeping Records Maintained by the Administrative Body of a Local Self-government Unit* should be revoked or amended in order to harmonise it with the Law on Free Legal Aid and the Law on Personal Data Protection.

### 4.3.7. Personal Data Protection

*The Action Plan for the implementation of the Personal Data Protection Strategy was finally adopted in March, and work began on improving the Law on Personal Data Protection. During 2024, the practice of the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection intensified, and its capacities were enhanced through the opening of a regional office in Kragujevac and new staff appointments. However, most of the senior officials within the Commissioner's Office still hold acting positions. The Commissioner did not respond decisively to the intensified smear campaigns involving the misuse of personal data of activists and participants in the student and civic protests ongoing since November 2024, nor did he comment on reports by international organisations and investigative media uncovering unlawful surveillance practices conducted by Serbia's security agencies.*

#### Initial Steps in the Implementation of the Personal Data Protection Strategy

The Action Plan for the period 2025–2027 for the implementation of the Personal Data Protection Strategy for the period 2023–2030 (the Action Plan) was adopted in early March,<sup>547</sup> fifteen months after the legal deadline had expired. It remains unclear whether and how the Strategy was implemented in the meantime. The Strategy envisaged the establishment of a supervisory body to monitor its implementation, as well as the preparation and publication of an annual report – none of which is mentioned in the Action Plan or on the Government's website.

The working group for drafting the Action Plan was established in late September 2024 without the inclusion of representatives from relevant civil society organisations. Two meetings were held in October and November. The public consultations conducted by the Ministry of Justice at the end of the year went largely unnoticed, with only one comment submitted. This may be attributable to the fact that no documents – apart from the decision on the establishment of the working group – were published on the e-Consultations portal.<sup>548</sup>

The Action Plan envisages the improvement of the Law on Personal Data Protection from 2018 (the Law) by mid-2026. The shortcomings of this Law have been extensively discussed in previous Alarm Reports and related analyses.<sup>549</sup> Subsequently, relevant sectoral laws are to be harmonised with the Law – a process that has already been delayed for nearly five years. According to the Action Plan, the analysis

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<sup>547</sup> Official Gazette RS, no. 20/2025 of 07/03/2025.

<sup>548</sup> Predlog akcionog plana za sprovođenje Strategije zaštite podataka o ličnosti za period od 2023-2030, E-Consultations (last accessed on 08/05/2025).

<sup>549</sup> Jelena Pejić. *Comments and Suggestions for Improving the Provisions of the New Law on Personal Data Protection in the Area of Criminal Justice and National Security*. prEUgovor, Belgrade, 2019.



of sectoral legislation requiring alignment is scheduled to begin only in early 2027, despite the stated objective of increasing the level of harmonisation from the current 40% to 60% by the end of that year. The Action Plan also foresees amendments to the Law to regulate automated processing of biometric data and processing through video surveillance – areas that have so far remained legally unregulated. In addition, amendments to the Law on Misdemeanours and the Criminal Code are deemed necessary.

Work on the amendments to the Law on Personal Data Protection began in late December 2024 with the establishment of a dedicated working group (WG), within which a subgroup was formed to carry out the majority of the work.<sup>550</sup> The first meeting was held in mid-January 2025. Representatives of two expert civil society organisations participated in both the WG and the subgroup until February, when they joined the wider suspension of cooperation with the executive and legislative authorities, endorsed by dozens of civil society organisations.<sup>551</sup>

The Action Plan envisages the adoption of guidelines for conducting Data Protection Impact Assessments by 2027. A workshop on this topic was organised with the Ministry of Interior (MoI) in March 2025.<sup>552</sup> The shortcomings of previous impact assessments prepared by the MoI in relation to potential large-scale biometric surveillance have been outlined in earlier Alarm Reports.

By the end of April, there were no updates regarding the regulations previously reported on in this section due to their controversial provisions and significance for personal data protection. No new information has been made available concerning the draft amendments to the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code, which were subject to public consultation until 1 November 2024.<sup>553</sup> The new Draft Law on Internal Affairs also remains unavailable to the public.

At the normative level, it is worth noting that the Commissioner has sought, through proposed amendments to another key law governing his mandate – the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance – to secure the possibility of reappointment, which runs counter to the spirit of the most recent amendments to this law adopted in 2021. The drafting of these amendments during the reporting period was criticised by the Coalition for Free Access to Information due to a lack of inclusivity, while the proposed provisions were criticised for their limited scope and potential harmful consequences.<sup>554</sup> In March 2025, the Government withdrew the proposed amendments to this law, which had previously been submitted to the National Assembly.<sup>555</sup>

## Largely Positive Quantitative Indicators of the Commissioner's Work in 2024

In 2024, the practice of the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection (the Commissioner) showed higher numbers, and its institutional capacities were strengthened. More complaints were received and resolved compared to previous years, and a record number of supervisory inspection procedures were conducted. The highest number of complaints were filed against the Ministry of Interior (69) and the public enterprise Post of Serbia (54).<sup>556</sup> There was also an increase in the number of binding final decisions issued, as well as in the percentage of their enforcement. On the other hand, the Commissioner submitted fewer requests for initiating misdemeanour proceedings than in the previous year, and did not file a single criminal complaint related to personal data protection (see table).

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550 „Izmena i dopuna Zakona o zaštiti podataka o ličnosti” [Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Personal Data Protection], *E-Consultations* (last accessed on 08/05/2025).

551 “Joint Resolution on the Suspension of Cooperation with the Legislative and Executive Authorities in Serbia”, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 04/02/2025. “NKEU sent a letter to the President of the EC: EU should not turn its backs on Serbian citizens”, 04/02/2025

552 “Poverenik i zamenica Poverenika na radionici u Vršcu” [Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner at the Workshop in Vršac], Commissioner, 17/03/2025.

553 For more information, see: Jelena Pejić Nikić (ed.) *PrEUgovor Alarm Report on the Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 – November 2024*, Coalition prEUgovor, Belgrade, 2024, pp. 85-86.

554 “Announcement of the Coalition for Freedom of Access to Information and the National Convention on the European Union: The Proposed Amendments to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance: A Step Backward for Transparency and Increased Risk of Abuse”, Partners Serbia, 26/12/2024.

555 See more in the section of this report on access to information of public importance.

556 Commissioner, *Annual Report for 2024*, March 2025, p. 116.

Table 2: Practice of the Commissioner for Personal Data Protection for the period 2020-2024

Commissioner's work in numbers	2020.	2021.	2022.	2023.	2024.
Resolved complaints	149	209 ▲	177 ▼	163 ▼	267 ▲
Received complaints	139	204 ▲	181 ▼	178 ▼	228 ▲
Conducted oversight procedures	205	303 ▲	416 ▲	731 ▲	864 ▲
Initiated oversight procedures	223	363 ▲	354 ▼	769 ▲	864 ▲
Binding final decisions (% of implemented decisions)	56 (91%)	83 ▲ (85%) ▼	51 ▼ (92%) ▲	48 ▼ (91,7%) ●	133 ▲ (93,2%) ▲
Criminal reports filed by the Commissioner	3	3 ●	1 ▼	0 ▼	0 ●
Requests to initiate a misdemeanour procedure	6	3 ▼	2 ▼	10 ▲	7 ▼

Source: Commissioner's annual reports for 2020-2024<sup>557</sup>

By the end of 2024, the number of staff within the Office of the Commissioner had increased to 121.<sup>558</sup> However, the target set in the Action Plan for Chapter 23<sup>559</sup> – 129 employees – has yet to be reached. The Commissioner has assessed that the current workload already exceeds this target and requires approximately 150 staff members. In December, the long-announced regional office in Kragujevac was finally opened. According to the Action Plan, an additional regional office is expected to be established by 2027. An analysis conducted by the prEUgovor coalition showed that, based on the overall caseload statistics of the Commissioner's Office for the period 2023–2024, the practice of the Novi Sad office accounts for approximately 2%, while the Niš office represents only 1%, with the share of data protection cases from Niš being negligible.<sup>560</sup>

Meanwhile, the issue of acting appointments within the Office remains unresolved. A majority of managerial staff continue to serve in an acting capacity. This practice is widespread across Serbia's public administration and has drawn criticism from the European Commission, as the failure to conduct open competitions and the uncertainty of tenure negatively affect the professionalism and impartiality of public officials.<sup>561</sup>

With the support of international donors, the Commissioner continued the awareness-raising campaign on the importance of personal data protection and the applicable regulations, with a particular focus on the healthcare and interior sectors. In 2024, training sessions were held in 27 police directorates, involving over 1,550 participants.<sup>562</sup> As of March 2025, a new training cycle is being implemented for 15 local self-government units.<sup>563</sup>

<sup>557</sup> Commissioner, *Annual reports*.

<sup>558</sup> Commissioner, *Annual Report for 2024*, March 2025, p. 145.

<sup>559</sup> Ministry of Justice. *Revised Action Plan for Chapter 23*, Activity 3.9.1.3.

<sup>560</sup> Jelena Pejić Nikić (ed.) *PrEUgovor Alarm Report on the Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 – November 2024*, Coalition prEUgovor, Belgrade, 2024, p. 86.

<sup>561</sup> See more in: *Ibid.*

<sup>562</sup> Commissioner, *Annual Report for 2024*, p. 122.

<sup>563</sup> „Zaštita podataka o ličnosti – zakonodavstvo i praksa (Vršac)” [Personal Data Protection – Legislation and Practice (Vršac)], Commissioner, 05/03/2025.

Particular public attention was drawn to the launch of the “Zdravitas” portal, a system for monitoring the physical development and motor skills of pupils, administered by the Ministry of Education. The system collects sensitive health data on pupils from the third grade of primary school through to the end of secondary education without parental consent, with the stated aim of “timely detection and correction of potential irregularities in children.”<sup>564</sup> Following an initiative by the Independent Union of Education Workers of Serbia, the Commissioner carried out a supervisory inspection of the Ministry of Education in October 2024 and concluded that the data processing in this case was in accordance with the Law on Personal Data Protection. The Commissioner found that there was an adequate legal basis, that a data protection impact assessment had been conducted in advance, and that technical, organisational, and human resource measures had been taken to ensure data security – thus determining that consent of the data subjects was not required for this processing.<sup>565</sup>

However, this conclusion did not dispel the concerns of parents and teachers, who criticised the Ministry for failing to communicate clearly, promptly, and directly with the public about the content and justification of the “Zdravitas” portal, leaving them presented with a *fait accompli*. Experts expressed doubt over the Ministry’s assessment that such an extensive database carries low risks for the personal data of minors and called for a review of both the purpose and legal basis of the controversial portal. They also urged that all preparatory activities be suspended in the meantime.<sup>566</sup> Under mounting public pressure, the user component of the portal was postponed at the end of November.

### ✖ **ALARM: Targeting Protest Participants through the Misuse of Their Personal Data**

In his annual report, the Commissioner failed to address the intensified smear campaigns involving the misuse of personal data of activists and participants in the student and civic protests, which have grown increasingly widespread since November 2024. These campaigns not only seek to discredit individuals who speak out critically against the authorities, but they also expose them to personal risk by effectively painting a target on their backs. Similar practices were recorded a year earlier during the election campaign and subsequent post-election protests, at which time the Commissioner largely declared a lack of competence.<sup>567</sup> During the reporting period (November 2024 – April 2025), the SHARE Foundation documented eleven violations of privacy and personal data protection online, nine of which targeted anti-government activists, students, and professors involved in faculty and school blockades across Serbia.<sup>568</sup>

In November, the tabloid *Informer* published surveillance camera images of activist Nikola Ristić taken at Belgrade Airport, along with details of his flight, insinuating that he had “gone abroad for instructions.”<sup>569</sup> In early January, scanned Croatian passports belonging to two students from the Faculty of Organisational Sciences were circulated on social media and published in the daily *Večernje novosti*, accompanied by accusations that they were organising student blockades as foreign nationals.<sup>570</sup> The students in question are twin brothers whose parents fled Croatia during the 1990s and who hold dual citizenship. In response to media inquiries, the Commissioner stated that an investigation into the data leak from institutions would be launched but clarified that the office does not have jurisdiction over the media.<sup>571</sup> Also in January, tabloids reported on the mental health of a female activist from Novi Sad, claiming to

564 „Kontroverzna platforma „Zdravitas“ poreske obveznike koštala 350.000 evra?“ [Controversial 'Zdravitas' Platform Cost Taxpayers 350,000 Euros?], *Nova ekonomija*, 09/10/2024.

565 „Saopštenje Poverenika: „Zdravitas““ [Commissioner’s Press Release: 'Zdravitas'], Commissioner, 28/10/2024.

566 „Partneri Srbija: Saopštenje povodom održanog panela o portalu Zdravitas“ [Partners Serbia: Press Release after the panel on 'Zdravitas' Portal], Partners Serbia, 29/11/2024.

567 See more in: Jelena Pejić Nikić (ed.) *PrEUgovor Alarm Report on the Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 – May 2024*, Coalition prEUgovor, Belgrade, 2024, p. 95-97.

568 *Share monitoring* (last accessed on 08/05/2025).

569 „Dok njegovi demoliraju Novi Sad, on otišao po instrukcije?! Đilasov nasilnik Nikola Ristić snimljen na aerodromu “Nikola Tesla” (FOTO)” [While his people are demolishing Novi Sad, he went to get instructions?! Đilas’s thug Nikola Ristić caught on camera at Nikola Tesla Airport (PHOTO)], *Informer*, 6/11/2024.

570 „Novosti objavile lične podatke studenata“ [‘Novosti’ published personal data of students], *Danas*, 03/01/2025.

571 FoNet, „Ko je medijima prosledio podatke iz pasoša braće Stojaković?: Poverenik o objavljivanju ličnih podataka studenata“ [Who Leaked the Stojaković Brothers’ Passport Data to the Media?: The Commissioner on the Disclosure of Students’ Personal Data], *Danas*, 03/01/2025.

have had access to her medical records – even though such sensitive data should be afforded a higher level of protection.<sup>572</sup>

The Movement “*Kopaćemo*” (“We Will Dig”), established in support of the government’s stance amid widespread public opposition to lithium exploitation in western Serbia, has on several occasions targeted students and professors – labelled as party or foreign activists – by publishing their personal data, while operating its own website and social media accounts anonymously.<sup>573</sup> In early January, photographs and personal details of eleven students were posted on social media in a format resembling a wanted list, labelling them as organisers of the blockade at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad.<sup>574</sup> Students from the faculties of philosophy in Niš and Novi Sad suspect that unauthorised individuals gained access to student email databases in order to send unsolicited surveys and messages urging them to end the blockade.<sup>575</sup>

## Amnesty International Exposes Unlawful Surveillance of Activists and Journalists in Serbia

The Commissioner has not publicly commented the report by Amnesty International on the unlawful surveillance of journalists and activists in Serbia.<sup>576</sup> The report, published in December 2024, is based on interviews with 13 individuals who were directly targeted by digital surveillance, as well as 28 additional civil society representatives from across the country. It is further supported by forensic analysis of approximately twenty mobile phones. The report reveals that the police and the Security Information Agency (BIA) abused their powers by unlawfully installing the domestically developed spyware “*NoviSpy*” on the smartphones of journalists and activists who had been detained or summoned for questioning for various reasons – without any legal basis.

The *Cellebrite* software, lawfully obtained through an international donation to Serbian security agencies to support the fight against organised crime, was used to unlock the targeted phones. On the “infected” devices, social network were mapped, communications intercepted, and all available data extracted, including photos, messages, and contacts. The software is capable of accessing deleted data as well as information stored in the cloud. According to Amnesty’s findings, the domestically developed spyware *Novi Spaj* (*NoviSpy*) has the capability to take screenshots and send them directly to a BIA server, as well as to access the device’s location, microphone, and camera. Forensic analysis linked the spyware to an individual officer within the BIA.

The Security Information Agency (BIA) officially denied the allegations presented in the report, stating that it would not comment on what it described as “nonsensical claims.”<sup>577</sup> However, cybersecurity experts at Google confirmed Amnesty’s findings, identified additional compromised devices, and removed the spyware from them. The company *Cellebrite* conducted its own internal investigation and, in February, suspended the use of its products in Serbia on ethical grounds.<sup>578</sup>

Several civil society organisations, including the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), a member of the prEUgovor coalition, filed a criminal complaint with the Special Prosecutor’s Office for High-Tech Crime against unidentified authorised persons from the police and BIA. They also submitted requests to the Protector of Citizens (Ombudsman) and the Commissioner for the initiation of oversight

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572 „Odsek za psihologiju iz Novog Sada: Opasne laži medija o mentalnom zdravlju studenata” [Department of Psychology from Novi Sad: Dangerous Media Lies about Students’ Mental Health], *N1, Beta*, 17/01/2025.

573 „Spisak studenata plaćenika” [List of Foreign Mercenaries], *Kopaćemo*, 11/12/2024 and „Spisak stranačkih profesora” [List of Party Professors], *Kopaćemo*, 18/01/2025.

574 FTN se budi, „Saopštenje za javnost: Studenti Fakulteta tehničkih nauka oštro osuđuju targetirawe kolega i deljenje privatnih podataka, koji svakako nisu istiniti” [Personal Data Protection –], *X*, 4. 1. 2025.

575 Aleksandar Stankov, „“Procurele” mejl adrese studenata Filozofskog – o blokadi fakulteta ispitivani sa nepoznatog portala” [Leaked Email Addresses of Philosophy Students – Questioned about the Faculty Blockade by an Unknown Portal], Media Reform Centre Niš, 20/12/2024. „Ko su ti ljudi i otkud njima naše adrese”: Lažni studenti pišu pravim, s ciljem razbijanja blokada” [“Who Are These People and How Did They Get Our Addresses?”: Fake Students Writing to Real Ones in an Effort to Break the Blockades], *N1*, 01/04/2025.

576 *Digital Prison: Surveillance and Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia*, Amnesty International, December 2025.

577 „Saopštenje BIA” [BIA Press Release], BIA, 16/12/2024.

578 “Cellebrite Statement About Amnesty International Report”, Cellebrite, 25/02/2025.

procedures, as well as letters to specialised bodies of the Council of Europe and the United Nations.<sup>579</sup> These organisations argue that the use of such spyware is unlawful, as it is not provided for by law and fails to meet the criteria of necessity and proportionality required for restricting the right to privacy of correspondence and the right to personal data protection. Moreover, such conduct may constitute criminal offences, including unlawful collection of personal data, creation and distribution of computer viruses, unauthorised access to protected computer systems, and illegal electronic data processing.<sup>580</sup>

According to Amnesty's information, Special Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime launched an investigation in February, while the Ombudsman and the Commissioner are also examining the reported cases.<sup>581</sup> In the meantime, new incidents involving spyware attacks have been recorded – one targeting a student who was detained in late December while attempting to attend a ruling party event in Belgrade,<sup>582</sup> and two others involving BIRN journalists in February 2025.<sup>583</sup>

The Serbian public was first made aware of the illegal use of spyware in 2023, when the BCSP was directly targeted in an attempted digital surveillance operation involving the Pegasus spyware.<sup>584</sup>

### **Police and BIA Procure Technology for Indiscriminate Mobile Phone Surveillance**

Investigative journalists have uncovered additional methods used by the police and the Security Information Agency (BIA) to circumvent domestic regulations governing the application of special measures for covert communications surveillance. Over the past decade, these security agencies have purchased at least twenty so-called *IMSI catchers* – devices that mimic mobile network base stations and capture communications from all phones that connect to them within a radius of several hundred metres.<sup>585</sup> In Serbia, the use of this specific technology is not legally regulated. While there are broader legal provisions under which such tools might theoretically be deployed, their use still falls into a legal grey area, primarily due to the potentially disproportionate nature of the surveillance and the absence of effective oversight mechanisms.

The key question is whether the use of *IMSI catchers* can be technically limited to targeting only one or a few individuals who are subject to lawful surveillance pursuant to a court order. If such technical limitation is not feasible and the devices indiscriminately capture data from all mobile phones within range – including those of individuals who happen to be nearby – then the use of this technology is disproportionate to its intended purpose and should not be permitted. If, however, it is technically possible to isolate only the devices specified in a court order, the question then becomes how oversight is exercised to monitor its use and ensure that there is no excessive or abusive deployment of the technology.

The competent authorities certainly must not use this technology for preventive purposes – for instance, to identify participants in anti-government protests – an issue that has raised serious concerns among civil society organisations that work to defend digital rights all over the world. There is no legal basis for such use, as police powers apply only in situations where there is reasonable suspicion that a criminal offence has already been committed, and where the aim is to identify perpetrators and gather evidence for criminal proceedings. Moreover, such application would neither be legitimate nor proportionate, and it would seriously endanger not only the right to personal data protection, but also the freedoms of expression and assembly.

579 "Open Letter: Serbian authorities must prosecute illegal hacking of journalists and activists", Share Foundation, 19/12/2024.

580 „Zahtev upućen Povereniku za pokretanje nadzora povodom neovlašćene obrade podataka o ličnosti od strane policije i BIA" [Request Submitted to the Commissioner to Launch Oversight Procedure Regarding Unauthorised Processing of Personal Data by the Police and BIA]. Share Foundation, 24/12/2024.

581 Massimo Moratti, „Entering the Serbian digital prison: an interview with Jelena Sesar", *Osservatorio Balcani & Caucaso*, 22/04/2025.

582 "Cellebrite zero-day exploit used to target phone of Serbian student activist", *Amnesty International Security Lab*, 28/02/2025.

583 "BIRN Serbia journalists targeted with spyware", *Share Foundation*, 28/03/2025.

584 "BCSP Warns: Citizens Are Victims of Illegal Surveillance by the State", *BCSP*, 16/12/2024.

585 Aleksa Tešić. "Serbia Imports Wireless Equipment Capable of Indiscriminate Mass Surveillance", *Balkan Insight/BIRN*, 12/12/2024.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- While drafting amendments to the Law on Personal Data Protection, the working group should take into account existing analyses and recommendations from civil society, experts, and the academic community – particularly with a view to clarifying ambiguous provisions related to data processing for special purposes and regulating data processing through audio and video surveillance. Broader discussion is essential regarding the regulation of automated processing of biometric data.
- The Ministry of Interior should refrain from introducing and legalising smart, mass biometric surveillance in public spaces, in line with the recommendations of international bodies.
- The Commissioner should urgently take the necessary steps to eliminate the prolonged acting status in managerial positions within its Office.
- The Commissioner should respond more decisively to abuses of personal data protection rights in politically sensitive and high-profile cases that attract public attention, particularly when such cases reflect deeper systemic problems and institutional weaknesses.
- Security institutions must immediately cease unlawful digital surveillance. Oversight and control bodies – including the Commissioner, the Ombudsman, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, the Internal Control Sector of the Ministry of Interior, and the National Assembly (both plenary and relevant committees) – must investigate all documented cases of personal data misuse, establish individual accountability within state institutions in line with their mandates, and propose improvements to the legal framework and practices governing covert communications surveillance.



# 5. CHAPTER 24 – JUSTICE, FREEDOM AND SECURITY

## 5.1. Police Reform

*The status of the third draft of the Law on Internal Affairs is currently unclear. Meanwhile, just days before the protest that was held on 15 March in Belgrade, the Serbian Government amended the Regulation on Special and Specialised Police Units. Dragan Vasiljević was appointed as the new Director of Police, first in the acting status in late February and then, two months later, for a regular five-year term, following a public competition; however, the documents related to that competition are not publicly available. During the recent student and civic protests, the police demonstrated a lack of operational autonomy, most notably through scenes of police brutality at the protest in Novi Sad. The peak of this was the use of illegal unidentified weapons at the protest that took place on 15 March in Belgrade. Numerous incidents of misconduct by police officers were also recorded throughout this reporting period. Furthermore, some police professionals who expressed solidarity with the protesters or voiced dissent from the official policy became targets of persecution. Reports from international organisations once again point to the police's involvement in the installation of spyware on the devices of activists and other critics of the ruling regime, further eroding public trust in the police.*

At the beginning of January 2025, the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) did not present the results of its work as it did in the previous two years. According to the Law on Police, the MoI is required to publish an annual report on the state of security in the Republic of Serbia and a report on the MoI's work before April of the following year. The MoI is obliged to publish on its website quarterly reports on its work, approved by the relevant committee of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia for interior affairs.<sup>586</sup> Unfortunately, the MoI has not been publishing these reports for years. Also, it has not published four semi-annual reports on the implementation of the Revised Action Plan for Chapter 24.<sup>587</sup> This data indicates that the MoI is not conducting its work transparently, further undermining public trust in its operations.

### Non-transparent Changes of the Regulatory Framework

The Working Group in charge of drafting the new Law on Internal Affairs was formed in mid-November 2024. The adoption of this Law is a measure of the Reform Agenda for the Republic of Serbia that is aimed at strengthening the regulatory framework in the sub-field of "Fight against Organised Crime". The deadline for the Working Group to complete its task was 31 January 2025.<sup>588</sup> The interested public was informed whether the draft has been prepared, or what stage the Working Group has reached in fulfilling this task. Due to the socio-political crisis that arose after the collapse of the canopy of the renovated railway station in Novi Sad, it is uncertain whether any progress has been made on this issue.

On the other hand, the Government of Serbia adopted amendments to the Regulation on Special and Specialised Police Units on 12 March 2025, concerning the Police Brigade and Intervention Unit 92 within the Belgrade Police Department. According to the new amendments, the Intervention Unit 92 now has broader powers, including the ability to use civilian vehicles and off-road vehicles without police markings, as well as an expanded list of special equipment and weapons. Thanks to these changes, it now has greater authority in combating crime, carrying out high-risk arrests, resolving crisis situations and operating in extraordinary circumstances (terrorism, mass attacks, armed uprisings). Additionally, these

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586 [Law on Police](#), "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia" nos. 6/2016, 24/2018 and 87/2018, Article 6, paragraphs 3 and 4

587 In the section on European Integration, the latest report published on the website of the Ministry of the Interior covers the period from July to December 2022.

588 "In preparation: Working version of the draft Law on Internal Affairs. Deadline for the Working Group's task completion: 31 January 2025", *Paragraf*, 14/11/2024

amendments have expanded the scope of work of the Police Brigade, which is now entrusted with tasks related to securing large public gatherings when there is a higher risk of disturbing public order. These amendments came into force on 14 March 2025.<sup>589</sup> It is noteworthy that this regulation was amended just before the largest protest in the history of Serbia, which took place on 15 March in Belgrade, further increasing the powers of these special police units.

## Mismanagement of Human Resources

The Minister of the Interior, Ivica Dačić, stated at the beginning of December 2024 that six candidates remain in the process of selection for the new Police Director. Of the 12 applications received during the competition, which was announced at the end of October 2024, six candidates did not meet the requirements, while the documentation for the remaining six is being reviewed to determine if they meet the formal conditions.<sup>590</sup> However, by the decision of the Government of Serbia of 27 February 2025, Dragan Vasiljević was appointed acting Police Director for a six-month period. He had previously served as Assistant Police Director, although that position had been vacant for three years, which created a paradoxical situation.<sup>591</sup> Vasiljević was often presented in the media as *de facto* police director and has been one of the candidates in the formal competition for the position. Shortly after Vasiljević's appointment, Ivica Dačić explained that the competition for the new police director had not yet been concluded because of the current political situation and the work of the Government in a technical mandate. Although the Government in a technical mandate cannot make appointments to positions, this decision was made before the technical mandate began, i.e. before the Assembly confirmed the resignation of the Government. Media reports suggest that the decision to appoint Vasiljević was based on his good relations with political structures within the MoI.<sup>592</sup> The competition for the Police Director did not specify a deadline for its completion, which further delays the selection of the person for this position. This means that in a state of political crisis, student blockades and regular mass protests, the Serbian police force is headed by an acting official whose interim position is highly dependent on the will of the Government.

In the meantime, the new Government of Serbia, by decisions dated April 30, 2025, first dismissed Dragan Vasiljević from the position of acting Director of Police and then appointed him as the Director of Police for a five-year term, following a public competition.<sup>593</sup> The documentation regarding the implementation of this competition is not publicly available, which further raises concerns about the transparency of the process and the political motivations behind this decision.

After more than a year of being led by an unlawfully appointed acting chief, the Internal Control Sector received a new acting head in late November 2024.<sup>594</sup> The newly appointed chief is currently the only legally appointed head of a sector within the MoI, unlike the heads of other sectors (for Emergency Situations, Logistics, and Information and Communication Technologies) who are still appointed unlawfully.<sup>595</sup> These appointments of the acting officials as sector chiefs continue a problematic practice that allows for easier political influence over the operations of the Serbian police.

In this reporting period, there were several examples of police officers being punished or pushed out of the MoI due to political unsuitability. One such case involves police officer Katarina Petrović, against whom a second disciplinary procedure has been initiated. Officially, the procedure was launched due to her statements in TV appearances on N1 in the autumn of 2024, but the immediate trigger was actually her public call – via the social network X – for fellow officers to sign a petition supporting student

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589 "The government amended the decree: Intervention unit granted broader powers and more equipment", N1, 14/03/2025

590 "Dačić reveals the candidates for new police director", Danas, 04/12/2025

591 "Who is Dragan Vasiljević: New Police Director with no scandals in his career", N1, 27/02/2025

592 "Dačić: The competition for the director of the police has not been concluded yet, the acting director was selected without him", N1, 06/03/2025

593 Government of Serbia, Third Session, Personnel Solutions, 30/04/2025

594 "Miroslav Paunović has been appointed as the acting head of the Internal Control Sector of the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia: He replaced Goran Colić", Nova S, 28/11/2024

595 These decisions of the Government of Serbia are available at: Personnel solutions in 2024 and 2025.

demands. Nearly 500 police officers from across Serbia signed the petition.<sup>596</sup> Although the Appellate Court acquitted her in October 2024 of charges related to leaking classified information in the case involving Nikola Petrović (one of the Serbian President's best men), she still is facing disciplinary action for publishing that report. This new procedure enables her continued persecution within the police force.<sup>597</sup>

Another example involved Police General Božidar Živković, who was forced into early retirement because his son was actively participating in student blockades. This was publicly confirmed by the President of the National Assembly in a televised interview.<sup>598</sup> His premature retirement is thus sending a clear message to all police officers: regardless of their professionalism, they may be deemed politically unsuitable if their actions – or those of their family members – conflict with the interests of Serbia's political leadership.<sup>599</sup>

The President of Serbia also publicly commented on police conduct during the ongoing student protests and blockades, stating that "police officers who do not want to protect the order and the law will be replaced, and prosecutors who do not want to protect the order and the law will be replaced".<sup>600</sup> However, staffing decisions within the police are not within the President's constitutional authority; there is a specific legal procedure in place for such matters and this statement violates the operational autonomy of the police. In fact, the President's statement is seen as an attempt to intimidate and discipline police officers in order to establish personal rather than institutional control over the police.<sup>601</sup> Chief of the Kraljevo Police Department was dismissed shortly after this statement, in a move that was widely interpreted as politically motivated and linked to an incident during protests in that city.<sup>602</sup>

### ✖ **ALARM: Police and BIA used Spyware against Government Critics**

In a report published in mid-December 2024, *Amnesty International* revealed that spyware was installed on the phones of journalists and environmental and political activists in Serbia. The activists were either summoned for questioning or detained by force, and the interrogations were often meaningless, serving only as a means to gain access to their phones and extract data. The Security Information Agency (BIA) and the police used the software to collect data from the phones, including screenshots, as was the case with Police General Slobodan Malešić, who was arrested in April 2022. *Amnesty International* claims that the number of recorded incidents points to a systemic abuse of surveillance technology by the state authorities. Unfortunately, these cases highlight the poorly defined division of authority between the police and the BIA during investigations. The current Criminal Procedure Code allows for overly broad powers of the BIA, which has led to the manipulation of citizens' privacy and enabled abuses against regime critics.

The European Commission mentions these shortcomings in every progress report, but it is unclear what actions have been taken in response.<sup>603</sup> At the end of March 2025, *Amnesty International* confirmed that two BIRN journalists were targeted in a failed attempt to install Israeli spyware Pegasus on their phones. The attempt began on 14 February 2025, when both journalists received *Viber* messages with a link containing malware. After receiving the messages, the journalists suspected a phishing attack, and *Amnesty* confirmed through forensic analysis that the messages were indeed linked to Pegasus.<sup>604</sup> With these revelations, *Amnesty International* helped raise awareness about the spread of digital repression in Serbia.<sup>605</sup>

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596 "A new disciplinary procedure has been initiated against Katarina Petrović due to her statements on TV N1 shows", *N1*, 29/01/2025

597 For additional information, see: Rodoljub Šabić, *Ugly, threatening, unacceptable message*, *Peščanik*, 03/02/2025

598 "The regime openly talks on Pink TV about the purge of undesirable police officers because their children are participating in protests", *N1*, 31/03/2025

599 "BCSP: Support for police officers who honourably and independently perform their duties despite the brutal pressures of the regime", *BCSP*, 17/02/2025. Namely, although he had met the requirements for retirement, he could have continued working and was intending to do so.

600 "Vučić threatens to fire police officers and prosecutors who do not 'protect the order'", *N1*, 22/03/2025

601 "BCSP: The police are not a tool for repressing citizens, nor a shield for preserving power", 23/03/2025

602 "A reshuffle in the top ranks of the Kraljevo police after eggs were thrown at Mayor Terzić", *Radio Sloboda*, 31/03/2025

603 "Proven: BIA is hacking activists' phones", *BIRN Serbia*, 16/12/2024

604 "Two BIRN journalists targeted by Pegasus spyware programme", *BIRN Serbia*, 27/03/2025

605 See more in the section on personal data protection in this Report.

The case that became a turning point in the discovery of mass human rights violations in Serbia, and which initiated this report, refers to the arrest of Slaviša Milanov, an independent journalist from Dimitrovgrad. Namely, *Amnesty International* uncovered a case of digital repression in Serbia in February 2024, based on an incident in which Milanov was detained after a routine traffic stop. During his detention, he noticed an unusual change in his phone – the settings for data and *Wi-Fi* were turned off. A forensic analysis conducted by *Amnesty International* revealed that the *Cellebrite* tool was used to unlock Milanov's phone while he was detained. The investigation also uncovered the presence of spyware *NoviSpy*, which allows for tracking and accessing data from the phone. Although a year has passed since then, the relevant institutions in Serbia have not yet resolved this case. Although the prosecution requested an investigation, the police did not take the necessary steps or respond after the *Amnesty International's* report on numerous cases of digital surveillance of journalists and activists in the country.<sup>606</sup>

## Police Conduct during Student and Civic Protests

Images of police violence during protests in Serbia have once again circulated the region and the world. After the collapse of the canopy of the renovated railway station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, which resulted in the death of 16 people, a mass citizens' protest was organised several days later. Demonstrators gathered at the site of the accident and then proceeded toward the City Hall to submit demands for accountability from the authorities. However, the protest escalated when masked groups with baseball bats and rocks appeared among the crowd and began attacking the City Hall building. The police responded by using tear gas. Opposition representatives, although peaceful, were unable to submit their demands as they were not allowed to enter the institution. Despite the Serbian President's promise that violent participants would be arrested, 14 opposition representatives and activists were detained by plainclothes police officers without identification.<sup>607</sup> Officials from the Mol claimed after the protest that the police acted defensively and professionally.<sup>608</sup>

An identical scenario was recorded a year earlier in Belgrade, in December 2023, following the parliamentary elections. During protests over alleged election fraud, the situation escalated in the almost identical manner: masked attackers appeared, the protest turned violent, and the police responded brutally – with tear gas, batons and arrests. This pattern was also present during the July 2020 protests. In all these cases, the police claimed they acted lawfully and with restraint, despite numerous video clips showing otherwise.

During the ongoing protests, the police regularly detained activists, students and other participants for information-gathering interviews. This tactic, used to intimidate people who publicly criticise the ruling regime in Serbia, has become a common practice.<sup>609</sup> Additionally, there have been arrests involving unnecessary use of force, where protesters were knocked down and dragged by the police.<sup>610</sup> Serious incidents were reported in some cases, including allegations of police torture, like in the case of Ilija Kostić, who lost a body part after being ill-treated while in detention.<sup>611</sup> Some participants were also injured during traffic blockades.<sup>612</sup> According to the law, the police are obliged to secure all gatherings, including unregistered ones, and to ensure protection during events such as the fifteen-minute traffic blockades organised by students.<sup>613</sup>

At the protest held on 15 March 2025 in Belgrade, which was part of a series of protests entitled "15 for 15", allegations emerged that the police had used a sound cannon (LRAD – Long Range Acoustic Device) to disperse demonstrators. Some participants expressed suspicions regarding the use of this device, claiming

606 "The Ministry of the Interior has not resolved the case of spying on journalists from Dimitrovgrad even after a year", *N1*, 25/03/2025

607 "Protest in Novi Sad: Faeces thrown at the City Hall, rally in support of the detained", *BBC News in Serbian*, 05/11/2024

608 "The Ministry of the Interior (Mol) has released information about 14 individuals who were detained during the protest in Novi Sad", *N1*, 06/11/2024

609 "Petrović on the recent arrests: Intimidation of all those who criticise the government", *KRIK*, 10/04/2025

610 "Savo Manojlović detained, police officers took him from the Sava Bridge", *N1*, 20/11/2024

611 "Two versions of the 'Ilija Kostić' case, prosecutor requests verification of the assault allegation", *Insajder*, 25/11/2024. Read more in the section on prohibition of torture of this Report.

612 "A student injured during the blockade in Belgrade has been released from the hospital", *BBC News in Serbian*, 16/01/2025

613 "Filipović (Jukom) for Marker: The police are obliged to secure both registered and unregistered protests, the registration is just a formality", *Insajder*, 17/01/2025

that they heard extremely loud sounds that caused physical discomfort and disorientation.<sup>614</sup> After the event, Minister of the Interior Ivica Dačić initially denied that the MoI possessed such a weapon. Three days later, however, he admitted that the MoI does in fact own LRAD devices, which were purchased in 2021, but emphasized that no one from the MoI had ever used them.<sup>615</sup> Due to these contradictory statements, there is a need to conduct two investigations within the MoI: first, it needs to be determined who ordered the procurement of such devices, whether the procurement procedure was followed, and how much did the devices cost; second, the Internal Control Sector of the MoI must initiate an investigation to determine who authorised the use of this unlawful device.<sup>616</sup> Furthermore, assuming that the MoI indeed did not deploy this weapon, its duty is to investigate which other (non)security actors may have used it, under whose orders, and through which channels it was acquired. On the other hand, an investigative journalism report reveals that the Serbian police used a device resembling a sound weapon as early as in November 2023, during the forced eviction of refugees from an abandoned building in the suburbs of Sombor. According to witness accounts, during the police raid a piercing sound was emitted from a device that was carried by one of the officers, allegedly to scare and disperse the refugees.<sup>617</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The MoI should inform the public about the current status of the third draft of the Law on Internal Affairs. All proposed solutions from previous drafts that could potentially violate the rights of citizens and lower the standards of police work should be corrected.
- The Government of Serbia must complete a public and transparent procedure for the election of a new Police Director as a matter of priority.
- The MoI must improve its human resources management by introducing a strategic approach to planning and hiring new personnel. Competitions should be held as soon as possible to fill positions at high and strategic levels in the MoI and the police, with the aim of solving the identified problems of too many officials in acting positions and thereby improving the integrity of this institution.
- The Internal Control Sector should launch an investigation within the MoI regarding non-professional police conduct at protests and the use of illegal weapons during the 15 March protest in Belgrade, in order to determine who had authorised and was responsible for their use.
- The Government, the National Assembly, political actors, EU institutions, EU member states, civil society organisations and the media must insist on and work together to create an environment that contributes to improving the police's operational independence.

614 "More than 500 citizens reported consequences, while the authorities deny the use of the sound cannon", *Al Jazeera*, 17/03/2025. Read more in the section on prohibition of torture of this Report.

615 "From 'Serbia doesn't have a sound cannon' to 'Serbia does have a sound cannon': The chronology of contradictory statements", *Radio Free Europe*, 19/03/2025

616 "Someone must have signed the order to take it out of storage: The police must launch two investigations in the 'sound cannon' case", *Nova S*, 21/03/2025

617 "Serbian police have already used sound weapons – on migrants", *BIRN Serbia*, 19/03/2025



## 5.2. Migration and Asylum

*During the reporting period, Serbia continued to experience a decline in migrant arrivals and reduced occupancy in the asylum and reception centers. Despite this, smuggling networks remain active and increasingly violent, with reports of abductions and extortion, as well as cases of large-scale smuggling, uncovered both domestically and through Europol operations. Most migrants still avoid the asylum system, and pushbacks at Serbia's northern borders, often involving violence, remain a serious concern. Civil society organisations stress the need for an independent border monitoring mechanism to uphold human rights and prevent refoulement. In addition, there is an urgent need to establish an efficient system of early identification of different categories of migrants, which would ensure their timely protection under international standards. This implies better coordination of the competent institutions and compliance with standards for the protection of migrants' rights, including access to asylum and corresponding rights in the territory of Serbia. Improving these mechanisms is the key to more efficient management of migration flows and adequate protection for vulnerable groups within the migration population. Labour migration continues to grow, but gaps in legal protections and enforcement persist, especially for foreign workers employed by branches of international legal entities. A more coordinated, rights-based approach is urgently needed.*

### General Overview of the Current Situation

According to the latest data from Frontex, the European Union is continuing to experience a decline in the number of irregular border crossings, particularly along the Western Balkans route. In the first two months of 2025, there was a 25% overall decrease in detected irregular entries into the EU compared to the same period the previous year. The most significant drop was recorded along the Western Balkans route, where the number of crossings fell by 64%.<sup>618</sup>

However, this apparent decrease in migratory movements has sparked concern among civil society organisations, which argue that the Frontex statistics show only a partial picture of the situation on the ground. The Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS),<sup>619</sup> for instance, responded to the data by urging a more nuanced interpretation. ICS warned that a sole reliance on Frontex figures risks obscuring the broader and more complex dynamics of migration, especially along the Balkan route. The organisation emphasised that no international source has confirmed a real decline in departures from the main countries of origin for refugees. On the contrary, in several countries conditions are reportedly deteriorating, potentially increasing the pressure to migrate.

ICS also underscored the need to complement Frontex data with other indicators, such as arrival numbers in frontline EU states like Greece, as well as documented cases of pushbacks at the EU's external borders in the Western Balkans. According to the organisation, the decline in the visible presence of migrants may be less indicative of an actual reduction in attempts to cross borders and more a reflection of evolving smuggling methods. In particular, smuggling networks appear to have become more structured, with border crossings increasingly taking place through concealed and less detectable means.<sup>620</sup>

Despite the overall decline in the number of migrants currently present in Serbia, smuggling networks remain highly active, and field reports point to an increasingly violent modus operandi. According to testimonies collected from the field, there has been a rise in cases of abduction carried out by smugglers, particularly targeting migrants in transit. Victims are reportedly kidnapped, physically abused, and filmed while being beaten. These videos are then sent to their families, often accompanied by threats of execution unless a ransom is paid. Such incidents underscore not only the ongoing presence and adaptability of smuggling groups, but also the severe forms of violence and extortion they employ. A detailed investigation by BIRN documented similar practices along the Western Balkans route, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where an Afghan-led group has been terrorising refugees through kidnappings and ransom schemes.<sup>621</sup> These patterns of organised violence and criminality show the persistent risk environment faced by migrants, even amid lower overall numbers and heightened border controls.

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618 FRONTEX, [Monthly irregular migration statistics – February 2025](#), 13/03/2025

619 ICS, [Balkan route: Frontex data only paints a picture of reality](#), 15/01/2025

620 *Ibid.*

621 Saša Dragojlo, Tomaso Siviero. 'BWK': Naoružana banda Avganistanaca terorize izbeglice koje prolaze kroz BiH [ 'BWK': An armed gang of Afghans is terrorising refugees passing through BiH], BIRN, 02/04/2025



This pattern of violence is part of a broader, organised smuggling infrastructure operating across Serbia. Recent cases highlight the scale and sophistication of these networks. At the Sot border crossing with Croatia, Serbian police intercepted a refrigerated truck carrying 11 hidden foreign nationals, with the driver found using forged documents and fake licence plates.<sup>622</sup> In separate incidents, two men from Subotica were arrested for smuggling,<sup>623</sup> and six individuals were detained for attempting to transport 77 migrants toward the EU between 12 September 2024 and 26 February 2025.<sup>624</sup> These cases confirm that smuggling groups are still active and well-organised.

Between 1 January and 11 April 2025, the Hungarian border police<sup>625</sup> reported that a total of 1,176 individuals were apprehended and returned through the IBH gate, the official term for removals conducted via Hungary's Integrated Border Barrier – a fortified fence that spans much of the border with Serbia. In addition, 2,394 irregular crossing attempts were prevented during this period, while 111 individuals were arrested and subjected to legal proceedings. These figures suggest a sustained level of irregular migration activity at this border, despite earlier reports of declining overall trends.

While these figures indicate ongoing irregular migration activity, they capture only part of the reality. Civil society organisations, including the Asylum Protection Center (APC) and the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), have documented numerous unregistered pushbacks. These often involve migrants being expelled through breaches of the border fence or other unofficial points, frequently without due process and sometimes accompanied by violence.<sup>626</sup> APC reports that in January 2025 alone, 33 individuals recounted being pushed back from Hungary into Serbia, with 20 describing violent encounters including beatings and destruction of personal belongings.<sup>627</sup> These accounts suggest that the actual number of pushbacks may be significantly higher than official statistics indicate. They also highlight the importance of considering both official data and first-hand testimonies to fully understand the complexities of migration dynamics and border enforcement practices in the region.

### Establishing a Monitoring Mechanism for Border Practices

Complexity and challenges of the migration flow create a need to strengthen national mechanisms for monitoring actions at entry and exit points. A stronger national mechanism is important not only in the context of persons seeking international protection, but also to fulfil the positive obligation of the Republic of Serbia to take appropriate measures to ensure compliance with the principle of non-refoulement and concerning foreigners who have not formally expressed intention to apply for asylum. The principle of non-refoulement obliges the state to prevent the expulsion or return of any person, regardless of their legal status or expressed intention, to a country where they could be subjected to torture, inhumane treatment or persecution. This obligation goes beyond the issue of access to the asylum procedure and requires the state to proactively assess the risks that return may bring, regardless of whether the individual has formally applied for asylum.

The lack of systematic monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations of international human rights monitors regarding actions at the border, together with the absence of a clear accountability mechanism for violations, contributes to the creation of a climate of impunity. These cases, together with the incidents of informal expulsion at the green border, further indicate the need to strengthen the institutional framework in the Republic of Serbia, not only by improving the actions of police officers at the border, but also by establishing an independent mechanism for monitoring the human rights compliance at the borders.

622 [Policija Srbije sprečila krijumčarenje 11 osoba na granici sa Hrvatskom](#) [Serbian police prevented the smuggling of 11 people at the border with Croatia], *Nova.rs*, 10/03/2025

623 [Dva muškarca iz Subotice u pritvoru zbog sumnje da su krijumčarili migrante](#) [Two men from Subotica in custody on suspicion of smuggling migrants], *N1*, 04/03/2025

624 [Uhapšeno šest osoba zbog krijumčarenja 77 migranata](#) [Six persons arrested for smuggling 77 migrants], *N1*, 26/02/2025

625 Source: [The National Police Hungary](#)

626 BVMN, [Illegal pushbacks and border violence reports](#), January 2025, p. 14

627 APC, [Increase in Forceful Pushbacks from Hungary to Serbia](#), 12/02/2025

It is important to note that the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum introduces an obligation for member states to establish an independent mechanism for monitoring respect for human rights at the external borders, which raises the question of Serbia's role in this context, bearing in mind that it is not yet a member of the European Union. In this regard, Serbia's responsibility in protecting the basic rights of foreigners in the migration process, including the right to international protection, can be further strengthened through cooperation with international and European institutions, as well as through civil society initiatives to establish a national mechanism for monitoring human rights.

Strengthening institutional capacities, introducing proactive measures for the protection of the most vulnerable groups of migrants and establishing an independent supervisory mechanism would not only contribute to better protection of the rights of foreigners, but would also ensure greater responsibility of the state in fulfilling its international obligations.

At the national level, statistical data indicate a significant decline in the number of newly arriving migrants. According to figures published by UNHCR,<sup>628</sup> a total of 1,292 new entries into government centres were registered in Serbia during the first two months of 2025. This represents a 71% decrease compared to the same period in 2024, when 4,469 new arrivals were recorded.

The number of newly registered entries into the accommodation centres managed by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM) has also experienced a notable decline. In October 2024, 2,090 new entries were recorded, a significant decrease compared to 3,939 entries in the same month of 2023. As highlighted at the CPWG (Child Protection Working Group) meeting, it is important to note that these figures reflect individuals who were recorded by SCRM staff upon entry into the centres and do not correspond to official registration figures maintained by the Ministry of the Interior.

A decline is also observed in the number of people staying in the centres, suggesting shorter durations of stay and a generally reduced presence of migrants and asylum seekers in official accommodations. In October 2024, 584 individuals were accommodated in the centres, while by the end of March 2025 this number had further declined to 411, pointing to both a decrease in the number of entries and a more rapid turnover within the facilities.

Four asylum centres are currently operational in Serbia: Sjenica, Krnjača, Obrenovac and Vranje, while the centres in Tutin and Banja Koviljača remain in a sleeping mode. Refugees and migrants are accommodated in three active reception centres: Preševo, Bujanovac and Principovac, while reception centres in Adasevci, Pirot, Bosilegrad, Subotica and Sombor are in a sleeping mode. According to available information, there is a proposal to permanently close several reception centres, including Adaševci, Subotica, Bosilegrad, Tutin and Krnjača, due to the low number of residents and reduced need for accommodation capacities. Regarding Krnjača, SCRM confirmed that the Ivan Milutinović (PIM) facility (from where the asylum centre is run) was sold to the Millennium Group in January 2025. Although a lease extension allows use until the end of March 2025, families and vulnerable groups are expected to be relocated to Obrenovac thereafter.<sup>629</sup>

A comparison of UNHCR data from October 2024<sup>630</sup> and March 2025<sup>631</sup> shows some shifts in the national composition of migrants in Serbia's asylum and reception centres. While Syrians and Afghans remain the most represented groups in both periods, Egyptians appeared among the top nationalities in March, replacing Pakistanis, who were prominent in October. The presence of Burundians also declined. These changes suggest evolving migration patterns and routes through the region.

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628 UNHCR, Western Balkans – Refugees, asylum-seekers and other people in mixed movements, as of end February 2025

629 CPWG meeting, 7/02/2025

630 UNHCR, [Statistical Snapshot, Serbia, October 2024](#)

631 UNHCR, [Statistical Snapshot, Serbia, March 2025](#)

According to the IOM data,<sup>632</sup> in February 2025 the borders with Bulgaria and North Macedonia remained the main entry points for migrants who are entering Serbia irregularly, with 49% of respondents reporting entry from Bulgaria and 41% from North Macedonia. After a previous period of declining entries from Bulgaria, February marked a reversal of this trend, with crossings from Bulgaria increasing by 18% compared to January. Most respondents (78%) stated that their border crossing was facilitated by smugglers, with 86% of those facilitated coming from Bulgaria. Afghan and Moroccan nationals most commonly entered from Bulgaria (76% and 77%, respectively), while Egyptian (83%) and Syrian (50%) nationals predominantly entered from North Macedonia. These findings indicate both a resurgence in smuggling activity and shifting nationality patterns at key entry points.

During the reporting period, there were no major changes in the area of asylum. The majority of migrants entering Serbia do not apply for it.

Table 3: Statistical data on asylum for Serbia for the period October 2024–March 2025

	October 2024	November 2024	December 2024	January 2025	February 2025	March 2025
Number of registered intentions to apply for asylum	98	86	59	35	36	19
Number of submitted asylum applications	10	20	27	10	19	6
Number of approved applications	2	1	0	0	0	0

Source: UNHCR, short statistical reports for Serbia for the months October 2024 to March 2025

## Update on the Reform Agenda: Migration and Security – Sub-area 9.4

In the current reporting period, certain developments have been observed in the implementation of the Reform Agenda of the Republic of Serbia concerning sub-area 9.4 – Security and Migration. Nevertheless, it remains essential to underline that the existing formulation of this sub-area – particularly the choice and scope of its indicators – does not adequately encompass the complexity and breadth of reforms required in the field of migration. Although the Reform Agenda formally addresses migration, its current structure places disproportionate emphasis on internal security priorities, especially counter-terrorism and radicalisation, while neglecting essential aspects of migration management, asylum, and visa policy that fall under Chapter 24 of the EU *acquis*.

The first indicator centres on strategic planning for combating terrorism and violent extremism, which, although important, contributes only indirectly to migration governance. Key migration reforms – such as preventing irregular migration, improving return procedures, resolving the legal status of foreign nationals, and ensuring access to protection – are not addressed in the Reform Agenda. These priorities, however, are included in other essential strategic documents, such as the Action Plan for Chapter 24, the Schengen Action Plan, and the Integrated Border Management Strategy. Due to the multidimensional character of migration challenges, it is important to note that the prioritisation of measures from the Reform Agenda must not slow down the dynamics of the implementation of reforms defined in other strategic documents within the EU accession process, which relate to the area of migration. Only through a balanced and comprehensive approach is it possible to achieve sustainable solutions in the management of migration processes, which is also one of the key conditions for Serbia's successful approach to the European Union.

632 International Organisation for Migration (IOM), *Migrant Mobility Situation Report Serbia – February 2025*

With regard to the second indicator – the alignment of Serbia’s visa policy with that of the European Union – some progress has been made. According to the European Commission’s 2024 Serbia Progress Report (October 2024) and the Seventh Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism (December 2024), Serbia maintained visa-free access for citizens of 16 countries that are currently on the EU’s visa-required list. These countries include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Belarus, China, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Suriname and Türkiye.

Since then, Serbia has taken additional steps toward visa policy harmonisation.<sup>633</sup> On 5 December 2024, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted a Decision<sup>634</sup> amending its visa-free regime with Qatar, Kuwait and Oman. With this change, nationals of these three countries are now subject to visa requirements. Furthermore, in February 2025, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published an official notice regarding the termination of the bilateral visa-free agreement between Serbia and Mongolia. Based on Article 28(4) of the Law on the Conclusion and Execution of International Treaties, it was announced<sup>635</sup> that the visa-free regime with Mongolia will cease to apply as of 13 March 2025. This decision stems from the termination of the 2013 bilateral agreement signed in Belgrade.

On the other hand, in the previous period the Republic of Serbia abolished visa requirements for entry into its territory for holders of ordinary passports from several countries,<sup>636</sup> including the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.<sup>637</sup> This decision should be considered in light of broader migration trends and the EU’s strategic concerns, particularly given that Venezuela could be classified as one of the “refugee-producing countries”, looking from Eurostat data. The number of asylum seekers originating from Venezuela has shown a notable increase in recent years. According to Eurostat, in December 2024 alone, Venezuelan nationals submitted 6,345 first-time asylum applications in EU member states, a 32.7% increase compared to the same month in 2023.<sup>638</sup> While it remains to be seen whether the visa-free regime will have any concrete impact on migration flows from Venezuela through Serbia, this policy change may require closer monitoring in light of the potential for secondary movements toward the European Union.

## Overview of Planned Legislative Amendments and Strategic Timelines

In October 2024, Serbia adopted a new NPAA (2024–2027), which schedules key legislative reforms in migration management, including amendments to the Law on Foreigners and the Law on Border Control in the fourth quarter of 2027. However, the Schengen Action Plan sets earlier deadlines – amendments to the Law on Foreigners by Q4 2025 and to the Law on Border Control by Q1 2025 – revealing inconsistencies in strategic planning.

This lack of alignment makes it unclear whether the reforms refer to the same legislative scope or imply separate changes. It highlights the need for better coordination between strategic documents to ensure consistency and clarity in reform timelines.

The declaration adopted at the EU-Western Balkans Summit<sup>639</sup> held on 18 December 2024 in Brussels underlined the need for Western Balkan countries to make additional efforts to align with the EU *acquis* and the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, particularly as the Western Balkans route remains active. However, neither the NPAA nor the Schengen Action Plan explicitly reflect planned incorporation of the Pact’s mechanisms. Future revisions must address this gap and define how and when Serbia will align with new EU standards in migration governance.

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633 See: prEUgovor, *Serbia’s Alignment with the EU Visa Policy* (infographic), 04/03/2025

634 Decision Amending the Decision on the Abolition of Visas for Entry into the Republic of Serbia (“Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia” no. 97/2024)

635 Notice on the date of termination of the agreement between the government of the Republic of Serbia and the government of Mongolia on the abolition of visas for nationals of the two countries (“Official Gazette of the RS – International Treaties” no. 1/2025)

636 Law on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of Antigua and Barbuda on the Mutual Abolition of Visas. Law on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of Tuvalu on the Abolition of Visas for Holders of Ordinary Passports. Law on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Guatemala on the Abolition of Visas for Holders of Ordinary Passports. All published in the “Official Gazette of the RS – International Treaties” no. 1/2025.

637 Law on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Republic of Serbia and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on the Abolition of Visas for Holders of Ordinary Passports (“Official Gazette of the RS – International Treaties” no. 1/2025)

638 Eurostat, *Asylum applications – monthly statistics*, 10/03/2025

639 European Council, *EU-Western Balkans summit*, 18/12/2024

## Labour Migration – Ongoing Challenges and the Need for Stronger Control Mechanisms

The liberalisation of Serbia's labour market, through amendments to the Law on Foreigners<sup>640</sup> and the Law on Employment of Foreigners,<sup>641</sup> has led to a significant rise in the number of issued work permits and D visas. The fact that the *Rulebook on Submitting Visa Applications Electronically and Granting Visas*<sup>642</sup> has been adopted is a positive development. The Rulebook should, to a significant extent, contribute to the harmonisation of procedures related to visa issuance.

While the official Migration Profile for 2024 is still pending, field reports confirm a growing number of foreign workers in low-skilled sectors such as hospitality, construction, food delivery and transport.

However, this trend exposes systemic risks. Notably, there is a pressing need to enhance the capacity and coordination of mechanisms monitoring both the residence and movement of foreign nationals, as well as employers' compliance with labour law obligations. A multisectoral approach – linking labour inspection, migration management and the judiciary – should be reinforced to ensure a coherent and efficient system of control. Additionally, many foreign workers, fearing the loss of employment, continue to refrain from reporting violations or even seeking information from the authorities. This reluctance undermines the enforcement of their rights and leaves them vulnerable to various forms of abuse, including labour exploitation.

Moreover, the available information channels, including the "Welcome to Serbia" website, do not provide a sufficient or comprehensive overview of migrant workers' rights, obligations, and available protection mechanisms. As a result, it cannot be reliably stated that foreign workers are adequately informed or empowered to seek remedies when their rights are violated. In that context, a particular challenge lies in the availability of effective legal assistance, as well as in the ability to access the free legal aid system. Continuous efforts are therefore needed to improve outreach and awareness-raising initiatives among migrant worker communities.

From a legal standpoint, an issue that raises serious concern is the question of criminal and misdemeanour liability of a branch of a foreign legal entity that employs foreign workers and violates provisions of the Law on Foreigners or the Law on Employment of Foreigners. This is particularly problematic in light of the fact that the Serbian Law on Companies<sup>643</sup> does not recognise the legal personality of branches. Yet, in practice, branches of foreign companies – operating in Serbia – often act as employers for posted workers. The frequency of such arrangements, combined with the current legal ambiguity, presents significant enforcement gaps and raises questions about accountability when violations occur.

Serbia does not have a public policy document or an established comprehensive monitoring mechanism to oversee the realisation and accessibility of guaranteed rights for foreigners, or specifically for foreign workers.

A significant challenge is the lack of quality control over the large number of capacity building activities currently being conducted for various types of stakeholders, including private sector actors. These activities may have negative implications for end beneficiaries and may also result in legal liability for employers in cases of rights violations or endangerment of the rights of foreign workers.

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640 "Official Gazette of the RS" no. 24/2018, 31/2019 and 62/2023

641 "Official Gazette of the RS" no. 128/2014, 113/2017, 50/2018, 31/2019 and 62/2023

642 "Official Gazette of the RS" no. 12/2025

643 "Official Gazette of the RS" no. 36/2011, 99/2011, 83/2014 – other law, 5/2015, 44/2018, 95/2018 and 91/2019

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Necessary steps should be taken towards the full implementation of the Law on Foreigners and the creation of legal preconditions for solving the legal status of persons residing in the Republic of Serbia without a regulated status.
- In this sense, it is important to strengthen the infrastructure and continue supporting capacity building of the bodies responsible for the implementation of legal provisions that limit freedom of movement, provisions on return, and standards of protection and respect for the human rights of returnees who are citizens of third countries. It is necessary to take into consideration the establishment of a system for identifying different categories of migrants and the implementation of certain procedures in line with the adopted standards.
- It is essential to monitor the consequences of the implementation of the Law on Foreigners and the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, especially the provisions related to the principle of non-refoulement.
- It is extremely important to strengthen the capacity to fight irregular migration, and especially to fight against people smuggling, as well as to protect migrants who are the object of smuggling. In this sense, it is important to strengthen the links between the system of fighting irregular migration and the asylum system.
- It is necessary to maintain the dynamics of reforms in accordance with strategic documents and the EU accession process, with a focus on achieving a sustainable and efficient migration management system.
- It is necessary to support the introduction of an independent mechanism for monitoring human rights at the borders in order to ensure the protection of the basic rights of migrants in accordance with the standards defined under the auspices of the regional protection systems of the EU, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE.
- It is necessary to intensify activities aimed at sensitising local communities and initiating a dialogue that would contribute to understanding the needs of migrants and the local communities that host them.
- It is necessary to intensify international and regional cooperation in preventing irregular migration and fighting migrant smuggling.
- It is necessary to strengthen the mechanisms of protection of migrant workers, as well as preventive measures to prevent misuse by employers. In this context, it is of particular importance to strengthen the capacities of competent state institutions and judicial authorities, as well as the coordination of competent authorities in the area of migration and the fight against human trafficking. Additionally, It is desirable to strengthen the quality control system for activities aimed at informing or building the capacities of various actors, including civil society organisations, private sector entities, and public institutions with indirect responsibilities in this area.
- It is of particular importance to urgently assess the scope and quality of available legal aid and free legal assistance services for different categories of migrants, especially considering the risks and vulnerabilities to which these individuals are exposed.
- There is an urgent need to initiate the development of a new public policy document that would comprehensively regulate the issue of access to rights for foreigners in Serbia. The document should also establish a designated competent authority or coordinating body responsible for overseeing the implementation of relevant measures and ensuring inter-institutional cooperation.



## 5.3. Fight against Organised Crime

*During the reporting period, first-instance verdicts were issued in two high-profile organised crime cases. Sky ECC message transcripts, provided via international legal assistance, have become key evidence in several ongoing trials. Serbian courts have yet to establish a consistent legal interpretation regarding the admissibility and evidentiary value of these encrypted communications. At the same time, the reliance on externally provided evidence raises concerns about the operational independence and capacity of domestic investigative bodies. As a result, Serbia's fight against organised crime often appears superficial and lacking a strategic framework. This is reflected in how current high-profile cases – such as the "Balkan Cartel", "Darko Šarić", the "Belivuk clan", and "Jovanjica" – are being handled.*

Serbian police continued to achieve successful international cooperation. At the end of November 2024, the Serbian police, in cooperation with the police forces of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and coordinated by Europol, arrested eight individuals suspected of being organisers and members of the organised criminal group known as the "Balkan Cartel", involved in international cocaine trafficking. As highlighted in media reports, this police operation dismantled one of the largest drug trafficking criminal organisations in the Western Balkans.<sup>644</sup> Following the arrests, the Higher Court in Belgrade ordered 30-day detention for the members of the Balkan Cartel.<sup>645</sup> Also, in early December 2024, Serbian police participated in a joint operation with German police and Eurojust, during which ten members of an organised criminal group involved in drug trafficking were arrested.<sup>646</sup> Although these police operations represent a degree of success, the lack of independent and proactive measures by domestic law enforcement in combating organised crime remains a concern.

On the other hand, after public pressure, the Office of the Prosecutor for Organised Crime is investigating financial flows related to the construction of the Novi Sad train station, following a tragic incident in which 16 people were killed due to a collapsed canopy. A team of experts has been formed to analyse publicly available and submitted documentation. The case was taken over from the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office by decision of the Chief Public Prosecutor due to suspicions of corruption in February 2025.<sup>647</sup> In fact, some prosecutors pointed out immediately after the accident that the investigation into the canopy collapse should be handled by the Organised Crime Prosecutor's Office.<sup>648</sup> However, this only happened four months later, indicating that from the very beginning there was no political will for this prosecutor's office to take over the case.

Unfortunately, this situation sheds light on the key challenges facing the fight against organised crime in Serbia. The chronic lack of institutional transparency, the entire process remains shrouded in secrecy, with the media often serving as the only reliable source of information. Additionally, the Ministry of the Interior (Mol) has failed to publish four semi-annual reports on the implementation of the revised Action Plan for Chapter 24. It is impossible to assess progress in conducting the interim benchmarks related to the fight against organised crime. Rather than being conducted through a strategic approach, the fight against organised crime is largely reduced to *ad hoc* actions targeting individual criminal groups. Developments in ongoing cases are briefly presented in the following section.

Information on the implementation of activities, outlined in the Revised Action Plan for Chapter 24 regarding the review of the role of security services in criminal investigations, is not available to the public. No update is available on the status of the Draft Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Procedure Code, which was under public debate in October and envisaged a greater role for the Security

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644 "What did the arrest operation of the members of the 'Balkan Cartel' look like?", N1, 26/11/2024.

645 "Higher Court in Belgrade: Detention Ordered for Arrested Members of the Balkan Cartel", *Insajder*, 28/11/2024.

646 "Organised Criminal Group Suspected of Cocaine Trafficking Arrested in Serbia and Germany, Organised Crime Prosecutor Confirms", *Insajder*, 4/12/2024.

647 "Organised Crime Prosecutor to Investigate Financial Flows Following Novi Sad Canopy Collapse", *Insajder*, 12/02/2025.

648 "Prosecutor Paunović: The case of the accident in Novi Sad should be handled by the Office of the Prosecutor for Organised Crime", *Radio Free Europe*, 8/11/2024.

Information Agency (BIA) in criminal investigations.<sup>649</sup> The Ministry of Justice decided to extend the public debate to 2025, but there have been no follow-up activities, nor has the report on the conducted public debate ever been published. In the meantime, investigative journalists have revealed that the police, in cooperation with members of the BIA, installed spyware on the devices of certain critics of the ruling regime.<sup>650</sup>

## Overview of the Court Proceedings in the Most Important Organised Crime Cases

The trial against Balkan Cartel began in December 2024. As a reminder, 13 members of the Balkan Cartel were arrested in May 2023. Thanks to international legal assistance, judicial authorities from the Netherlands, France, and Belgium provided the Serbian Organised Crime Prosecutor's Office with evidence related to 5 tons of cocaine seized on the vessel *Ares* in 2020, an operation allegedly organised by members of the Balkan Cartel. Following the decision of the court panel, Sky ECC messages remain admissible evidence in the ongoing proceeding and will be further examined during the trial.<sup>651</sup>

Former State Secretary of the Mol, Dijana Hrkaločić, was sentenced to 16 months in prison for the criminal offense of influence peddling, according to a first-instance verdict. According to the verdict, she unlawfully influenced her colleagues in the police on three occasions to obstruct certain investigations. She intervened to prevent the submission of an expert report on the phone of Veljko Belivuk (a suspect in the case known as the "railway murder" from January 2017); influenced the head of the Special Investigative Methods Unit to delete part of a wiretapped conversation involving attorney Dragoslav Ognjanović; and influenced the chief of the Novi Sad Police Department to conduct a fictitious investigation against Darko Elez. Her defence was based on the claim that she acted under the orders of then Minister of Internal Affairs, Nebojša Stefanović, but the court did not accept this argument. The case attracted particular public attention due to its political context and media allegations of Hrkaločić's ties to criminal structures.<sup>652</sup>

On April 14, 2025, the Special Court in Belgrade sentenced Darko Šarić to six years in prison for organising a criminal group from detention, with the aim of discrediting and planning the murder of cooperating witness Nebojša Joksović. In addition to Šarić, the first-instance verdict also convicted his lawyer (who also was attorney of Veljko Belivuk) and three members of the Mol who assisted in the group's criminal activities. Nebojša Joksović had previously served as a cooperating witness in the cocaine smuggling case against Šarić. The key evidence in this case was encrypted Sky ECC messages, which formed the basis of the indictment. Throughout the trial, Šarić denied having access to a Sky phone while in detention or that he was running a criminal group.<sup>653</sup>

In the meantime, the trial against Darko Šarić and Veljko Belivuk has begun. They are accused of organising the murders of four members of the Škaljari clan in Greece in 2020. Belivuk has presented his defence in detail, disputing the allegations made in the indictment. Šarić also stated during his defence that he had no role in the organisation of the murders for which he is charged.

According to encrypted messages from the Sky ECC app – on which the indictment is largely based – Šarić allegedly issued instructions to other members of the group from prison. Their defence attorneys requested that the Sky messages be excluded from the evidence, but the court panel decided to admit them. Reportedly, the messages detail a plan to seize control of the drug market following the killings of the Škaljari clan members.<sup>654</sup> The trial resumed in April 2025 with the presentation of written witness statements, while the defence challenged the prosecution's evidence due to the disputed identity of the witnesses.<sup>655</sup>

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649 For more information, see: Jelena Pejić Nikić (ed.) *PrEUgovor Alarm Report on the Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 – November 2024*, Coalition prEUgovor, Belgrade, 2024, p. 98.

650 For more details about these cases, read the Alarm Report in this edition, specifically in the Police Reform section.

651 "Trial of the Balkan Cartel, Court Panel: Sky Messages Remain Admissible Evidence", *Insajder*, 31/03/2025.

652 "Hrkaločić Sentenced to One Year and Four Months in Prison", *KRIK*, 22/01/2025.

653 "Another Multi-Year Prison Sentence for Darko Šarić", *BBC News on Serbian*, 14/04/2025.

654 "Šarić and Belivuk Deny Organising Murders in Greece", *KRIK*, 12/03/2025.

655 "The trial for organizing the murders of the Kavač clan members in Greece resumed, with Belivuk defending his associates", *KRIK*, 24/04/2025.

In the trial against members of Veljko Belivuk's criminal group, who are accused of seven brutal murders and numerous other crimes, court-appointed forensic experts have been testifying for the third consecutive month. The experts are presenting their findings regarding DNA traces and their connection to the accused and the victims. DNA samples were collected from vehicles and the house in Ritopek, where most of the victims of this criminal group were allegedly murdered, as well as from weapons found during the investigation. The trial restarted in June 2024 due to the retirement of the presiding judge. Encrypted communications via the *Sky ECC* app and the testimonies of three cooperating witnesses are the main pieces of evidence in this case.<sup>656</sup> In a separate case against Belivuk's group, related to money laundering, several witnesses have testified about suspicious financial transactions. The accused have denied any wrongdoing. They are charged with laundering money between 2015 and 2020 by purchasing luxury cars and real estate using funds obtained through criminal activities, often via third parties, in an effort to conceal the origin of the money.<sup>657</sup>

During the continuation of the unified "Jovanjica" trial, the defence attorneys for the accused police officers and Security Information Agency (BIA) members completed their opening statements. To recall, in the "Jovanjica 1" case, an organised criminal group is accused of drug production, while in "Jovanjica 2", members of the police and BIA are charged with forming a security ring that enabled the group's criminal operations. In both cases, Predrag Koluvića is listed as the leader of the criminal group. After the decision of court panel, the consolidated trial "Jovanjica" officially began in September 2024. As in previous hearings, the defence challenged the legality of the evidence, claiming it was unlawfully obtained, and argued that their clients were either falsely accused or collateral victims of internal institutional conflicts. Additionally, the defence argued that merging "Jovanjica 1" and "Jovanjica 2" into a single proceeding has slowed down the process and insisted that the cases be separated. The acting prosecutor in this case rejected all these claims, emphasizing that the evidence is precise and credible, including mobile base station data and analyses from three independent laboratories. Due to the retirement of one of the members of the judicial panel, the trial must formally restart. This is the second time the trial is beginning from the start, further prolonging the proceedings.<sup>658</sup>

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ministry of the Interior needs to publish semi-annual reports on the implementation of the Revised Action Plan for Chapter 24 for 2023 and 2024 on its website;
- Instead of focusing on individual cases, Serbia should adopt and implement a strategic approach to fighting organised crime;
- Investigative authorities should be proactive in their work and interested in investigative journalists' discoveries regarding possible connections between politicians and members of organised crime;
- To make the fight against organised crime more effective, the Draft Law on Internal Affairs should create ways for better cooperation between the police and the prosecution;
- The police must develop their capacities for applying special investigative measures independently of the security services, which should not participate in criminal investigations at all. The monitoring centre with technical equipment for the interception of communications should be moved from the BIA's premises;
- A measurable track record (of the police, the prosecutor's offices and the courts) of the fight against organised crime should be made public so that stakeholders can be informed about the success of their work.

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656 "Belivuk Requests Court Not to Postpone Trial for a Month, Claims He Cannot Endure the Pace of Full-Day Hearings", *N1*, 7/04/2025.

657 "Witnesses Testified in the Continuation of the Trial Against Belivuk, Miljković, and Their Wives", *Insajder*, 24/12/ 2024.

658 "Jovanjica Case: Defense Concludes Opening Statements, Koluvića and Holić in Hospital", *BIRN Serbia*, 26/03/2025.

## 5.4. Suppressing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings

*Over the past six months, Serbia's efforts to combat human trafficking have seen notable progress in improving the institutional framework, yet significant challenges persist, underscoring the need for further enhancement. The most important development during this period has been the drafting of the Law on Suppression and Prevention of Human Trafficking and Protection of Victims (hereinafter: the Draft Law). Led by the Ministry of the Interior, this Draft Law is the result of intensive collaboration among various state stakeholders and civil society organisations. It represents a potentially crucial framework for strengthening the victim protection system and enhancing Serbia's response to human trafficking.*

*However, as highlighted by ASTRA, a member of the PrEUgovor coalition, several critical issues were not adequately addressed in the course of the drafting process. These unresolved challenges raise concerns that not all perspectives were thoroughly considered, that some issues could have been approached differently, and, overall, that the draft could have been more comprehensive in tackling key problems. The Draft Law still has a long way to go before it is finalised and adopted, including extensive consultations within the state, a public debate, and a review by the European Commission as it is part of Serbia's Reform Agenda. Ultimately, the implementation of the law and its real-world impact remain uncertain, particularly due to ongoing issues such as lack of coordination, insufficient capacities and limited resources, which pose significant risks to its effectiveness.*

*In parallel, Serbia's response to human trafficking continues to face challenges, including the rising number of victims, the vulnerability of marginalised populations, and the limited capacities of institutions to provide adequate services. While the Centre for the Protection of Trafficking Victims (CPTV) has made progress in identifying victims – reaching 71 cases in 2024, the highest in six years – this figure remains below peak levels seen in previous years. At the same time, the performance of the Ministry of the Interior (Mol) is stagnating or declining, with fewer filed criminal charges and fewer identified perpetrators. These trends, along with other systemic issues, underscore the urgent need for a robust legal framework, enhanced coordination, and a focus on addressing the root causes of human trafficking such as poverty, unemployment and discrimination, while improving victim protection and prevention efforts.*

### 5.4.1. Assessing the Anti-trafficking Law: A Critical Review of Its Development and Content

The state's approach to drafting the Law on the Suppression and Prevention of Human Trafficking has been marked by a concerning choice of preparation and execution activities. The process began in late October 2024, without an adequate *ex-ante* analysis or a thorough assessment of the potential effects of the proposed measures. Instead, the document entitled *Suppression of Human Trafficking in the Republic of Serbia – Analysis* was shared with the Working Group in November 2024, providing insights into the legal framework, institutional organisation and the victim protection mechanisms related to human trafficking in Serbia. While this document was a solid starting point, it is not a substitute for a comprehensive *ex-ante* analysis or an impact assessment, which are essential for effectively addressing the complexities of human trafficking. The document partially addresses some key elements required for a comprehensive analysis, but falls short in several critical aspects such as the absence of stakeholder participation, alternative policy considerations and impact assessments, while the *ex-post* evaluations significantly limited the document's effectiveness in informing the drafting of a robust and impactful law.

One of the most significant shortcomings is the complete absence of stakeholder participation. There is no evidence of active involvement of government bodies, civil society organisations, victims or experts in the analysis process, which is a crucial step in ensuring the law's relevance and effectiveness. The document fails to provide a systematic impact assessment, which is necessary to evaluate the social, economic and environmental effects of the proposed law. While it mentions vulnerable groups such as women, children and migrants, it lacks a detailed analysis of how the law would specifically impact these groups. Transparency is another area where the document is inadequate. It does not clearly communicate

the methods, data and assumptions that were used in the analysis, which undermines trust in the findings. Also, the document does not consider alternative policy options, leaving a gap in the exploration of different strategies to combat human trafficking. Although it does outline some goals, it lacks measurable indicators and mechanisms for tracking success. Furthermore, there is no planned *ex-post* evaluation to assess the actual effects of the law after its adoption, which is essential for understanding its real-world impact and making necessary adjustments.

It is also worth mentioning that the process of preparing the Draft Law did not follow the provisions of the Regulation on the Methodology of Public Policy Management,<sup>659</sup> which standardises procedures for impact analyses, consultations and reporting to ensure transparency, quality and effectiveness in public policy development. This non-compliance likely compromised the Draft Law's development process, emphasising the need to adhere to such regulations to achieve better outcomes and foster trust in public policy-making.

The process of the development of the Draft Law was further burdened by a questionable methodology during the workshops. A Working Group has been formed by the decision of the Minister of the Interior,<sup>660</sup> composed of the following members: the Ministry of the Interior (including the Office for Coordination of Anti-Trafficking Activities, the Directorate of Criminal Police, the Directorate of Border Police, and the Secretariat), the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, the Misdemeanour Appellate Court, the Supreme Court of Serbia, the Administrative Court, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM), the Ombudsman, the Ministry of European Integration (MEI), the Ministry of Health, the Faculty of Law in Novi Sad, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs, the Centre for the Protection of Trafficking Victims, the Ministry of Education, the Higher Court in Belgrade, and five civil society organisations (CSOs) selected via a public call. The Working Group has held 13 meetings and one three-day workshop over the course of five months, with six cases of rescheduling or cancellations during this process.

The Working Group was presented with predefined structures and articles drafted upfront, bypassing essential preliminary discussions on objectives, scope and strategic alignment. This approach limited meaningful dialogue and input from participants, leaving critical foundational steps unaddressed. Additionally, when civil society organisations or other stakeholders raised concerns or suggested alternative approaches, they were often instructed to draft specific provisions themselves. Such a response was discouraging and demotivating, as it placed the responsibility of legal drafting on participants who, while deeply knowledgeable about trafficking and its impact on victims, were not necessarily legal experts. This approach stifled constructive collaboration and further undermined the process's transparency and inclusivity.

Moreover, the workshops of the Working Group, which were intended to gather input and refine the law's provisions, were conducted without proper documentation, i.e. minutes or brief summaries. Key observations, proposals and outcomes of discussions were neither taken nor shared, making it difficult to trace how certain solutions and provisions ended up in the Draft Law. This was crucial to enable all participants to track progress, understand which issues were resolved, and on what criteria and information decisions were based. Such lack of transparency not only undermines the credibility of the process, but also raises questions about the coherence and effectiveness of the final product.

Despite the repeated efforts of CSOs and other stakeholders to highlight the flaws in the drafting process, including the lack of proper analysis, questionable methodology and absence of transparency, these concerns were largely ignored. Whether presented through oral interventions during meetings or in the form of written submissions, the calls for a more inclusive, evidence-based and transparent approach remained unanswered. While the dedication of the majority of the stakeholders to improving the draft was evident, the lack of responsiveness from decision-makers ultimately left the process incomplete and its outcomes uncertain.

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<sup>659</sup> Regulation on the Methodology of Public Policy Management, Analysis of the Effects of Public Policies and Regulations, and the Content of Individual Public Policy Documents, "Official Gazette of the RS" no. 8/2019

<sup>660</sup> Decision on the Establishment of the Working Group for Drafting the Law in the Field of Combating Human Trafficking, Minister of the Interior, 08/10/2024



The Draft Law has the potential to be a significant step forward in Serbia's efforts to combat trafficking in human beings. It provides a comprehensive framework that addresses various aspects of human trafficking, from prevention and victim protection to international cooperation. However, while the law offers several strengths, it also contains certain weaknesses that could hinder its effectiveness if left unaddressed. One of the key strengths of the Draft Law is its holistic approach. It encompasses a wide range of measures, including prevention through education and awareness-raising, identification and protection of victims, and the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators. This multi-faceted approach is crucial for tackling the complex nature of human trafficking. Additionally, the introduction of a National Institutional Mechanism for Combating Human Trafficking (NIM) is a positive development, as it aims to improve coordination among various institutions such as the police, prosecutors, courts, social work centres and civil society organisations. This mechanism has the potential to streamline efforts and ensure a more unified response to human trafficking.

The law also places a strong emphasis on victim protection, clearly defining their rights. Victims are granted access to information, legal assistance, healthcare, and safe accommodation. A particularly noteworthy provision is the "reflection period" of at least 30 days, which allows victims time to recover and consider their next steps. Furthermore, the law envisages financial compensation and reintegration support for victims, recognising the long-term impact of trafficking on their lives. Special attention is also given to child victims, with provisions that prioritise their best interests and provide additional support. The inclusion of international cooperation is another strong point, as it acknowledges the transnational nature of human trafficking and the need for collaboration with other countries and organisations.

Despite these strengths, the Draft Law, in many respects, resembles a wish list or an idealised vision, particularly in its treatment of certain rights and services for victims, such as social protection, psychological support, free legal aid and the establishment of a Compensation Fund. While these provisions are included in a declarative manner, the draft falls short of taking concrete steps to address the practical challenges of implementation and access to these rights. As a result, victims will continue to face significant barriers in realising these protections, despite their formal recognition in the law. There is also the unclear nature of the appeal process for identification decisions, with significant resistance from some Working Group members to support this, despite solid argumentation in favour of an administrative procedure. Also, one of the major issues is the lack of clear mechanisms for implementation. While the law outlines a broad range of measures, it does not provide detailed procedures for how they will be carried out. For example, it remains unclear how the necessary financial resources will be secured, and there is a lack of specific guidelines for coordination among institutions. This ambiguity could lead to delays and inefficiencies in the law's implementation.

Another significant weakness is the limited role of civil society organisations. Although their participation is mentioned, their role is not clearly defined and the law does not provide more details on how resources sufficient to support their work will be secured. The risk of bureaucratisation is another concern, as lengthy and complex victim identification and protection procedures could delay access to essential services. The law also falls short in terms of data protection and prevention. While it mentions the need to protect victims' data, it does not establish clear procedures to ensure confidentiality and prevent misuse. While it is unrealistic to expect a single law to fully tackle systemic issues such as poverty, unemployment and discrimination, the law could have laid a stronger foundation by establishing clearer mechanisms to connect relevant actors and foster coordinated efforts. The law's effectiveness in reducing human trafficking could have been significantly enhanced by better addressing these root causes through strategic collaboration. Finally, the lack of clear sanctions for those who violate victims' rights or fail to implement the law's provisions is a notable gap that could weaken its enforceability.

As announced and explained by the Ministry of the Interior, a comprehensive list of by-laws required to implement this law will be drafted, accompanied by an ambitious adoption timeline. This process will provide a critical opportunity to refine the Draft Law, address its shortcomings, and ensure a more effective and coordinated implementation framework. The Ministry of the Interior announced a series of steps to further align the Draft Law with key stakeholders, including relevant ministries, the European Commission (as the law is listed as an output of the Reform Agenda), and the wider public through a public debate. However, a month after the official conclusion of the Working Group's mandate, there have been no updates from the Ministry regarding further developments on the finalisation of the Draft Law. In line with the Reform Agenda, the law is to be adopted by the end of June 2025.



## 5.4.2. Rising Trends in Human Trafficking in 2024

In more recent years (2019–2024), the Mol’s performance has shown a consistent decline in the number of filed criminal charges, detected criminal acts, identified perpetrators and injured persons. For example, in 2022, 30% fewer criminal acts were detected, 20% fewer charges were filed, and 25% fewer perpetrators were identified compared to 2021. This stands in stark contrast to the Mol’s achievements in 2013, when 30 criminal charges were filed, 68 criminal acts were detected, 63 perpetrators were identified, and 45 injured persons were recorded. The most concerning drop in recent years has been noted in the detection of injured persons, which fell by almost 50%.

The table and the accompanying analysis reveal several key trends in the performance of the Ministry of the Interior (Mol) and the Centre for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking (CPoTV) in detecting and addressing human trafficking cases.

Table 4: Performance of the Ministry of the Interior in regard to detection of the criminal offence of human trafficking

Mol’s performance in suppression criminal offence of human trafficking	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Annual average for the 6-year period
Number of filed criminal charges	21	23	23	18	20	20	20.8
Number of discovered criminal acts	25	24	27	18	21	23	23
Number of perpetrators	42	50	43	32	37	42	41
Number of injured persons	33	38	46	24	39	28	34.6
Number of identified victims – CPoTV	39	57	46	62	66	71	56.8

Sources: Mol<sup>661</sup> and CPoTV<sup>662</sup>

The annual averages for the past six years (2019–2024) highlight the Mol’s modest performance, with 20.8 filed criminal charges, 23 detected criminal acts, 41 identified perpetrators and 34.6 injured persons per year. In contrast, the number of victims identified by the CPoTV has shown an upward trend, reaching 71 in 2024. However, this figure remains significantly lower than CPoTVs’ peak years of 2013 (92), 2014 (125), and 2018 (76), indicating that while progress has been made, it still falls short of previous achievements.

While the CPoTV as a social welfare institution improved its victim identification, the Mol’s declining performance in detecting and addressing human trafficking cases remains a significant concern.

In 2024, CPoTV formally identified a total of 71 victims of human trafficking, the highest number in the past six years. As reported by this institution, the increase is attributed to improved preliminary identification processes, proactive measures by the CPoTV, and a rise in reported cases. Notably, 49% of the victims were children, with an average age of 12, highlighting the vulnerability of minors to exploitation. The types of exploitation have shifted in recent years, with sexual exploitation, previously dominant at over 50% in 2023, now accounting for 32% of cases. Labour exploitation has risen significantly, representing 26% of cases, followed by forced begging (19%), forced criminal activity (14%), forced marriage (5%), participation in armed conflict (1%), and illegal adoption (3%).

661 [Statistics](#), Republic of Serbia, Ministry of the Interior (section at the bottom of the web page)

662 [Statistical Data](#), Centre for the Protection of Trafficking Victims

Women constituted 69% of victims and were primarily subjected to sexual exploitation, while men were mostly exploited through labour, forced begging or criminal activity. Children made up nearly half of the victims, with 29% forced into begging, 23% sexually exploited, and others coerced into criminal activity or forced marriages. The majority of victims were Serbian nationals, but there was a significant increase in the identification of foreign nationals compared to 2023. Foreign victims were primarily exploited in Serbia, while others were identified in their countries of origin or along migration routes. Foreign nationals were most often subjected to sexual exploitation (44%), labour exploitation (31%) and forced criminal activity (13%).

The CPoTV has included essential data in its 2024 annual report, such as the socioeconomic position of victims and the recruitment and coercion mechanisms used by traffickers. This provides valuable insights into the vulnerabilities exploited by traffickers and supports the development of more targeted prevention and intervention strategies. In 2024, most adult victims were unemployed, lacked regular income, and had only basic education. Women were particularly disadvantaged, with fewer owning property or earning income compared to men. Traffickers commonly recruited victims through job offers, false friendships and marriage proposals. Control mechanisms included threats, physical violence, exploitation of vulnerabilities such as disabilities, and isolation. The use of internet platforms for recruitment and exploitation increased significantly, appearing in 49% of cases in 2024, up from 25% in 2022. Most cases were identified during or after exploitation, with only 10% detected during the recruitment phase. Exploitation often lasted more than a year, emphasising the need for early detection and intervention.

While the CPoTV's improved victim identification and detailed reporting provide valuable insights into the vulnerabilities exploited by traffickers, the institution's efforts must be complemented by stronger systemic support and coordination to ensure comprehensive protection for victims and more effective prevention of human trafficking.

### **5.4.3. ASTRA's Victim Support Unit Achievements and Insights in 2024**

The ASTRA Victim Support Unit has made significant strides in 2024, continuing its vital work in providing direct assistance to victims of human trafficking and operating the SOS Hotline. Over the past 25 years, ASTRA has established itself as a trusted resource for victims, at-risk individuals and their families, offering comprehensive support that spans emotional, legal, medical and psychosocial assistance. In 2024, the SOS Hotline received 4,100 calls,<sup>663</sup> reflecting a growing awareness of the service and the trust placed in ASTRA by victims and their close ones. These calls provided valuable insights into the needs of victims and emerging trends in human trafficking, enabling ASTRA to adapt its programmes and services to better meet these needs. The hotline not only offers emotional support, but also facilitates access to concrete resources and legal information, directly contributing to the recovery and reintegration of victims into society.

A total of 32 victims were preliminarily identified in 2024, with ASTRA's Victim Support Team conducting 125 field actions and providing 1,515 instances of direct support. The majority of victims were women and girls, who remain particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, forced marriage and labour exploitation. Men, on the other hand, were predominantly victims of labour exploitation, often in sectors such as construction and tire manufacturing. ASTRA's efforts extended beyond immediate support, with a strong focus on prevention and empowerment. The organisation received 444 preventive-educational calls, including inquiries about safe migration, labour rights and verification of job offer contracts. This proactive approach helps individuals avoid exploitation and ensures they are informed about their rights and safe migration practices.

The abuse of digital technologies, including various platforms and communication channels, was observed in 27 cases as a tool for recruiting, controlling and monitoring victims both during and after their exploitation.

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663 See: prEUgovor infographic "Human trafficking in Serbia: ASTRA SOS hotline in 2024", 30/01/2025

Collaboration with institutions remains a cornerstone of ASTRA's work, with 148 letters or notifications sent to relevant authorities to ensure victims receive the necessary support. However, the lack of feedback from institutions in 64% of the cases highlights the need for improved coordination and transparency in the response to human trafficking cases.

ASTRA's work in 2024 once again highlights the urgent need for systemic improvements in Serbia's response to human trafficking. Strengthening institutional coordination, ensuring transparency in reporting, and enhancing victim protection mechanisms are essential steps to build on ASTRA's achievements and create a more effective and inclusive system for combating this crime.

#### **5.4.4. Improving Licensing Processes and Securing Sustainable Funding for Specialised Civil Society Organisations**

The process of renewing the licence for the SOS line for trafficking victims, which lasts more than a year and a half, remains unresolved despite endless paperwork and repeated requests. The conditions imposed on potential service providers, including civil society organisations (CSOs) like ASTRA, are excessively demanding and largely unreasonable. This highlights a clear discrepancy between regulatory requirements and reality, as state institutions are often tolerated and continue operating even when they fail to meet all the required conditions. In contrast, CSOs are frequently held to a higher standard without receiving any state funding for this critical service, which leaves them entirely dependent on donor support.

To renew its licence, ASTRA had to submit extensive documentation, and despite submitting all the required documents multiple times, new requests for updates and additional paperwork have been continuously made, often only verbally. Due to the length of the process, ASTRA repeatedly had to submit contracts for staff whose previous contracts had expired during the prolonged process.

Considering the overall lack of adequate services for trafficking victims across the country, the Ministry's approach should be improved in order to avoid unnecessary obstacles for organisations applying for the licence. While the existence of procedures is certainly necessary, there is a clear need for reasonable demands, equal treatment of all stakeholders, and transparent, efficient processes that do not unnecessarily burden civil society organisations that provide essential services to persons at risk and victims of trafficking.

The financing of anti-trafficking activities in Serbia is plagued by systemic issues of transparency, accountability and misuse of funds. Recent cases highlight the extent of the problem. For instance, following the tragedy at the elementary school "Ribnikar" (in May 2023), the Ministry of Education allocated thousands of euros to a network of phantom organisations for workshops on peer violence and children's rights – some of which were never held, while others were conducted by local youth offices at no cost. The funds were funnelled into accounts controlled by the same group of individuals, raising serious concerns regarding accountability.<sup>664</sup> Similarly, a BIRN investigation revealed that more than a quarter of organisations that were awarded over one million RSD each through public tenders in 2022 and 2023 were in fact phantom entities. Out of the allocated RSD 2.6 billion (EUR 22.7 million), less than half went to legitimate organisations with verifiable results. Many of these phantom organisations were directly or indirectly linked to the ruling party or state officials, further eroding trust in the funding process.<sup>665</sup> Finally, despite member of the coalition PrEUgovor ASTRA's repeated attempts over the years to access the funds collected based on the deferral of criminal prosecution,<sup>666</sup> none of their proposals have been selected, highlighting systemic barriers to accessing critical resources by specialised CSOs.

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664 Gordana Andrić, "Posle masakra u Ribnikaru, nastavljen biznis: Iz Ministarstva prosvete plaćano po 5.000 evra i za predavanja koja nisu održana" [After the massacre in "Ribnikar", business as usual: The Ministry of Education paid 5,000 euros each for lectures that were never held], BIRN, 27/02/2025

665 Dragan Gmizić, "Fantom i iz komšiluka: Država nastavlja da dodeljuje milione fantomskim organizacijama" [Ghosts from the neighbourhood: The state continues to award millions to phantom organisations], BIRN, 2/03/2024

666 Ministry of Justice, [Deferred Criminal Prosecution](#) (last accessed on 29/04/2025)

The majority of CSOs specialised in providing services to victims of trafficking rely heavily on donor funds and development aid to finance their activities and provide adequate support to the victims and people at risk of trafficking in human beings. However, challenges persist even in this area. Funds intended for anti-trafficking are often merged with broader migration management agendas, diluting their focus and impact. Moreover, the lack of transparent and inclusive grant-awarding processes, coupled with insufficient monitoring and accountability mechanisms, further complicates the effective allocation and use of these resources.

These cases underscore the urgent need for stricter monitoring and accountability mechanisms for all funds allocated to anti-trafficking efforts, particularly those that are distributed through development aid instruments, i.e. EU4FAST. To prevent misuse and ensure effectiveness, it is essential to establish clear allocation criteria, conduct cost-effectiveness analyses, and ensure independent oversight. Additionally, the grant-awarding process should be made more transparent and inclusive, with meaningful involvement of specialised CSOs and CSOs that provide services to persons at risk and victims of trafficking in human beings at all stages – from planning and decision-making to monitoring and evaluation. Without these safeguards, the risk of inefficiency or misuse remains high, ultimately undermining efforts to combat trafficking and support its victims.

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- In light of the current implementation and reporting on the negotiation chapters, particularly AP 24, as well as the measures and activities covered by the Reform Agenda, it is essential that both the state and the EU, in addition to deadlines, pay special attention to the quality of implementing the Reform Agenda. This monitoring should include not only official assessments and reports from the state but also take into account feedback from CSOs and the expert community.
- The following key improvements are recommended to strengthen the Draft Law on Suppression and Prevention of Human Trafficking and Protection of Victims:
  - » Establish clear implementation mechanisms: Define detailed procedures for institutional coordination and ensure the allocation of sufficient financial resources.
  - » Expand CSO involvement: Clearly outline the role of CSOs and provide them with adequate funding and support.
  - » Simplify procedures: Reduce bureaucratic hurdles to ensure swift and efficient support for victims.
  - » Strengthen preventive measures: Focus on addressing root causes of human trafficking through poverty reduction, employment initiatives and anti-discrimination efforts.
  - » Introduce stringent sanctions: Implement clear and enforceable penalties to ensure accountability.
  - » Develop by-laws and a timeline: Draft a comprehensive list of by-laws and set an ambitious adoption timeline to refine and enhance the law's effectiveness.
- The EU and national authorities should establish stricter monitoring and accountability mechanisms for anti-trafficking funds, ensuring transparent and inclusive grant-awarding processes with meaningful CSO involvement. These measures are essential to prevent misuse and ensure focused and impactful initiatives.
- The state must significantly improve the response of all competent authorities and institutions in cases of potential trafficking for labour exploitation where victims are migrant workers, as well as provide support to domestic workers working in Serbia and abroad.
- The state must make substantial efforts to fully implement and operationalize the Law on Employment of Foreigners and the Law on Foreigners, as well as to protect the human and labour rights of migrant workers to prevent the creation of an environment that facilitates labour exploitation and human trafficking for labour purposes.

- When potential labour exploitation is discovered, the state must ensure appropriate protection and access to justice for potential and identified victims, in accordance with the national legislative framework and ratified international protocols and conventions.
- The state must revise the operational framework for combating human trafficking in Serbia. This will include rethinking and repositioning the function and role of the Council for Combating Human Trafficking as a body consisting of the highest public officials. It is necessary to consider the possibility of the Council being comprised of a strategic and operational part, where the operational part of the Council would meet more frequently and work more effectively.
- It is necessary to continue monitoring relevant strategic and operational frameworks of the European Union, ensuring that broadly defined approaches and solutions applicable in Serbia are adopted, as well as increasing opportunities for engagement and connection with non-EU countries.
- It is essential for all relevant institutions (ministries) to be involved in existing procedures and to operate in accordance with them to continue the process of amending and supplementing the legislative framework and align it with the EU acquis in the field of prevention and combating human trafficking.
- The reporting method on progress in implementing activities from the Action Plan for Chapter 24 should be revised to provide a clearer and more realistic picture of the progress achieved and the current state of affairs.
- Comprehensive security and protective measures for victims must be ensured, with regular assessments of risk levels and corresponding adjustments to measures.
- It is essential to prevent secondary victimization by (1) organizing training for employees in public institutions to provide empathetic support; (2) revising institutional practices to empower and respect victims; and (3) improving access to psychological support.
- The formal identification of victims should be improved by standardizing trafficking indicators and maintaining cooperation with international organizations.
- The principle of non-punishment must be enhanced by providing legal assistance and ensuring that victims are not prosecuted for crimes committed under coercion.
- Better access to compensation for all victims of human trafficking in criminal proceedings should be secured, avoiding referrals to civil proceedings.

## 5.5. Fight Against Terrorism and Violent Extremism

*In the reporting period, it has become clear that far-right extremists serve as a significant militant core of the ruling party in Serbia. A new far-right party has united known extremists and criminals to oppose the massive student protests sparked by a deadly incident in Novi Sad. Another group, the "loyalists," stands as a secret, paramilitary-like pro-Russian faction that is loyal to the President and continues to operate unchecked. Despite the presence of armed hooligans and criminals camped outside the Presidency, no decisive action has been taken against them by either police or prosecution. Meanwhile, the government's long-overdue Strategy for Preventing and Combating Terrorism remains hidden from public view, preventing both experts and the wider community from providing any meaningful input.*

### Pro-Regime Far-Right Extremists Close Ranks

At the end of December 2024, in the midst of large-scale student protests, an extreme right-wing political party called the *Party of Serbian Nationalists* was formed in Serbia.<sup>667</sup> It was established by the following: Miša Vacić, president of the organisation *Srpska Desnica* (Serbian Right); Pavle Bihali, leader of the far-right organisation *Levijatan*, whose ban was requested by the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office; Goran Davidović, the informal leader of the banned neo-Nazi organisation *Nacionalni stroj* (National Formation); and Robert Barać, who claims to have been involved in humanitarian work in Novi Sad. However, in March of this year, Barać was arrested in a operation during which the police seized 100 kilograms of marijuana and four kilograms of cocaine.<sup>668</sup>

The party emerged in response to the massive student protests demanding accountability for the deaths of 16 people in the collapse of the rail station canopy in Novi Sad. The party's leaders consider these protests extremely harmful to Serbia, branding them "communist" and claiming they are led by someone brought in from "an Ustasha organisation." Similar remarks about the protests were also made by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić during his appearance on the pro-regime TV station Pink.<sup>669</sup> According to Davidović, "this party should be a political fighting formation that will use legal means to strive for participation in government and bring about changes in Serbia."<sup>670</sup>

The party's leaders expressed support for a group of people who gathered outside the Presidency of Serbia and remained there for days in March 2025 to support the Serbian President. That group, presented as "Students who want to learn", included a significant number of hooligans, far-right extremists and criminals.<sup>671</sup>

### "Loyalists" – An Extremist, Pro-Russian Faction of the Ruling Party Sworn to Defend the President's Rule

At the end of 2024, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić informed the public that there was a hard-line faction within SNS, which he referred to as the "loyalists." According to the President, this group of people gathers the "keepers of the flame" and consists of some 17,000 individuals who have taken a blood oath in a church to defend the current government. The loyalists are predominantly pro-Russian in orientation and are willing to fight against a "colour revolution." Allegedly, they are also determined to hold accountable anyone who has betrayed the ruling party since 1 November, when the canopy of the main railway station in Novi Sad collapsed, killing 16 people. They are mostly men with firm convictions, so extreme that even the President of Serbia deems them an extreme faction.<sup>672</sup>

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667 For additional information, see: <https://partija.rs/#o-nama>

668 "Vacić i Bihali u Pionirskom parku, a gde je njihov saborac Robert Barać? Ekstremni desničar 'pao', ali ne zbog ideala, već 100 kilograma droge" [Vacić and Bihali in Pionirski Park, but where is their comrade Robert Barać? The extreme rightist 'fell', not because of ideals, but because of 100 kilograms of drugs], *NOVA*, 12/03/2025

669 Dušan Komarčević. "Studente kritikuju, vlast ne pominju: Najavljena nova ultradesničarska stranka u Srbiji" [Students are criticised, yet the authorities are not mentioned: A new ultra-right party announced in Serbia], *RSE*, 31/12/2025

670 *Ibid.*

671 "Vacić i Bihali u Pionirskom parku, a gde je njihov saborac Robert Barać? Ekstremni desničar „pao“, ali ne zbog ideala, već 100 kilograma droge" [Vacić and Bihali in Pionirski Park, but where is their comrade Robert Barać? The extreme rightist 'fell', not because of ideals, but because of 100 kilograms of drugs], *NOVA*, 12/03/2025

672 "SNS lojalisti: "Malo ekstremni", zaklinju se na krv, Vučićev brat među njima", [SNS loyalists: "A bit extreme", they swear on their blood, Vučić's brother is among them] *021*, 01/01/2025



As described by Vučić, these loyalists possess not only the characteristics of extremists, but, more importantly, exhibit the traits of a secret and paramilitary organisation. Article 55, Paragraph 3 of the Serbian Constitution explicitly states that “secret and paramilitary organisations are prohibited.” Despite this, neither the police nor the prosecution have initiated any investigation into the group.<sup>673</sup>

### ✖ **ALARM: Gathering of Armed Extremists under Police Protection**

The events leading to the massive student and citizen demonstrations on 15 March show that the message about the “loyalists” is not just a marketing ploy by the President of Serbia. Specifically, in response to the announcement of this large gathering, a medical student named Miloš Pavlović, who supports the President of Serbia, gathered with a group of like-minded individuals in Pionirski Park, in front of the Presidency building. Their message was that they do not support the student strike and that students should focus on studying.<sup>674</sup> They were soon joined by hooligans, extreme right-wingers and individuals with extensive criminal records, dressed in dark and black tactical clothing, wearing caps and concealing their faces. Later on, veterans of the disbanded Special Operations Unit – which had taken part in war crimes during the breakup of Yugoslavia and the assassination of the first democratic Prime Minister of Serbia, Zoran Djindjić – joined them. Professional journalists documented that many of those stationed in the camp were armed and had military and police equipment. Since the area was fenced off and equipped with numerous tents, Pionirski Park was effectively turned into a true paramilitary camp.<sup>675</sup>

Professional journalists also discovered that this camp was intended to serve as a base for provoking large-scale violent incidents with student demonstrators on 15 March. This would criminalise and delegitimise the demonstrators and, in turn, provide grounds for the police to forcibly disperse the protests. This scenario was avoided primarily due to the swift and effective response of the students, who distanced the demonstrators from the paramilitary camp and thus prevented any direct confrontation with the armed loyalists.<sup>676</sup> Numerous sources also indicate that the use of illegal sonic weaponry against peaceful demonstrators on 15 March – at the moment they were paying tribute to those who had died when the canopy collapsed – did not go through official chains of command, but rather through informal loyalist channels and individuals.<sup>677</sup>

It is concerning that neither the police nor the prosecutor’s office took any action regarding the formation, fortification and arming of a paramilitary camp in front of the Presidency building. On the contrary, the police continuously provided security for the camp and failed to respond adequately to numerous violent incidents initiated by the loyalists. They also did not allow citizens to move freely through Pionirski Park.<sup>678</sup>

The authorities’ response to mass demonstrations, which culminated on 15 March, has been to instead delegitimise and criminalise students and protesters by labelling them as violent extremists.<sup>679</sup> Moreover, the current Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, recently called the students terrorists, accusing them of planning to block air traffic control at Belgrade’s Nikola Tesla Airport.<sup>680</sup> In this way, demonstrators are being dehumanised, which has led some individuals and groups to resort to violence against them. All of this could lead to a further escalation of the situation and potentially more violent clashes.

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673 [Constitution of the Republic of Serbia](#), “Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia”, nos. 98/2006 and 115/2021

674 Narija Janković. “Puni se Pionirski park: Ko to priziva sukobe” [Pionirski Park is filling up: Who is it that wishes for conflicts?], *Vreme*, 12/03/2025

675 Jelena Mirković. “U Pionirskom parku hekleri i vatreno oružje, municija u kutijama od lekova: Tužilaštvo i policija se još ne oglašavaju” [Hecklers and firearms, ammunition in medicine boxes in Pionirski Park: The Prosecutor’s Office and the police remain silent], *N1*, 26/03/2025

676 “Petar Bošković – Samo zahvaljujući mudrosti studenata i vojnih veterana izbegnuto je krvoproliće” [Petar Bošković – Bloodshed was avoided only thanks to the wisdom of students and military veterans], *KTV*, 25/03/2025

677 “Bošković otkriva scenario vlasti koji je propao na protestu u Beogradu: Liči na potpis sličan Banjskoj” [Bošković reveals the government’s scenario that failed at the protest in Belgrade: It looks like a signature similar to that of Banjska], *N1*, 18/03/2025

678 “U Pionirskom parku hekleri i vatreno oružje, municija u kutijama od lekova: Tužilaštvo i policija se još ne oglašavaju” [Hecklers and firearms, ammunition in medicine boxes in Pionirski Park: The Prosecutor’s Office and the police remain silent]

679 Ivan Mitkovski, “Naprednjačka hajka na studente: Ko je plaćenik, a ko paćenik?” [The Progressives’ attack on students: Who is a mercenary and who is a doofus?], *Vreme*, 07/12/2025

680 “Brnabić optužila studente za terorizam” [Brnabić accuses students of terrorism], *Al Jazeera*, 08/04/2025

### Possible Terrorist Attack at a Large Public Gathering on 15 March

On 15 March in Belgrade, a rally of some 300,000 people demanded accountability for the deaths of 16 persons who were killed when a canopy collapsed in Novi Sad in early November 2024 due to rampant political corruption. The event remained largely peaceful – aside from minor incidents – until the 11th minute of the planned 15-minute silence for the victims, when a violent incident occurred. An unidentified crowd-control device startled participants and triggered a sudden stampede, causing panic and physical injuries. Witnesses most often described “a loud roar like that of an aircraft or a train,” at times accompanied by a wave of heat. More than 3,000 citizens reported psychological and physical after-effects; hundreds of these cases were medically documented and logged by non-governmental organisations.<sup>681</sup>

The public quickly suspected that the police had used an LRAD 450XL or LRAD 100X acoustic weapon, since they had purchased such devices in 2021. The police admitted that they do own 16 such devices, but denied that they had used them on 15 March, noting that LRADs are not on the list of coercive means that are permitted by law.<sup>682</sup> Anonymous police sources likewise insisted that no sonic device had been deployed, leaving open the possibility that an informal group had illegally employed such a device to cause fear and chaos among demonstrators. Public speculation focused on the so-called loyalists – the extremist, pro-Russian group that reportedly swore a blood oath in a church to defend the President’s rule.<sup>683</sup>

Serbian authorities categorically rejected claims that any unlawful crowd-control device had been used, asserting instead that protesters staged the incident themselves in an effort to seize power by force. In doing so, they dismissed thousands of eyewitness accounts describing how, within seconds and along an almost straight line, the crowd split in two amid panic and fear – and ignored reports of citizens’ physical ailments. The officials also ignored the experts’ assessments on this topic.<sup>684</sup>

The incident contains elements of several possible criminal offences: creating general danger, preventing a public gathering, torture and ill-treatment, and abuse of official position. Above all, this event contains elements constituting the criminal act of terrorism. Under Article 391 of the Criminal Code, terrorism occurs when a person or group, with intent to seriously intimidate the population or seriously undermine or harm Serbia’s (or another state’s or an international organisation’s) basic constitutional, political, economic or social structures, attacks the life, body or liberty of another person.<sup>685</sup>

Despite this, the prosecution did not initiate an investigation into any of the above mentioned criminal offences, instead launching an investigation into the criminal act of inciting panic and disorder against individuals who claimed that a sound cannon had been used during the protest.<sup>686</sup> Consequently, a group of non-governmental organisations that documented more than 4,000 testimonies from citizens who were targeted by the sound cannon submitted a criminal report to the competent prosecutor’s office for terrorism, due to the unexplained sound at the protest.<sup>687</sup>

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681 Testimonies regarding the sonic attack, <https://zvuk.labs.rs/>

682 “Dačić: MUP poseduje sonično oružje” [Dačić: The Mol does possess sonic weapons], *Danas*, 21/04/2025

683 Milan Radonjić, “U toku je tihi državni udar” [A coup is under way], *Radar*, 04/04/2025

684 “Panika nije bila slučajna: Stručnjak razotkriva šta se dogodilo na protestu 15. marta i ruši odbranu vlasti” [“The panic was not accidental”: The expert exposes what happened at the protest on 15 March 15, demolishing the government’s defence], *Nova*, 08/04/2025

685 Criminal Code, “Official Gazette of RS”, no. 85/2005, 88/2005 – corr., 107/2005 – corr., 72/2009, 111/2009, 121/2012, 104/2013, 108/2014, 94/2016, 35/2019 and 94/2024

686 “VJT: Formirati predmet zbog širenja dezinformacija oko zvučnog topa” [Higher Prosecutor’s Office: There is a need to open a case on the spread of disinformation about the sound cannon], *Insajder*, 16/03/2025

687 “Krivična prijava za ‘terorizam’ zbog neobjašnjeg zvuka na protestu” [Criminal charges filed for ‘terrorism’ due to unexplained sound at the protest], *YUCOM*, 09/04/2025

## Public Excluded from Drafting the New Strategy

The Strategy for Preventing and Combating Terrorism expired in 2021, yet the Government of Serbia still has not adopted a new one. As highlighted in the document titled “The Extreme Right in the Western Balkans”, prepared by the Czech Presidency of the European Union for the EU’s Working Group in charge of counter-terrorism,<sup>688</sup> the new Strategy is expected to focus on the extreme right. This focus aligns with the promises that were made by the Serbian authorities back in 2019, at a meeting of the Western Balkans’ interior ministers in Skopje.<sup>689</sup>

In its Reform Agenda, the Serbian government committed to adopting a new strategic document on counter-terrorism and prevention of violent extremism by June 2025.<sup>690</sup> Upon reviewing the eConsultation portal, prEUgovor found that on 5 February 2025 the authorities in Serbia posted a notice that work had begun on the Programme for Preventing and Combating Terrorism and Violent Extremism and the Action Plan for its implementation. Meanwhile, the Programme and the Action Plan were posted on the portal on 22 April, between the Easter and Labour Day holidays, with consultations running until 29 April. In this way, the expert community has been excluded from the process, as it was not notified about the ongoing procedure and documents – something that could have been done, for instance, through the National Convention on the EU (NCEU), an official platform for dialogue between civil society and the government regarding Serbia’s EU accession. This has become a common government tactic to prevent meaningful and effective public participation in consultations on important documents such as laws and strategies.

Although consultations on the new documents have so far formally lasted nearly two months, the insufficient notification of the broader and expert public about this process raises serious concerns about the transparency and effectiveness of the institutions responsible for drafting them. This shortcoming is particularly alarming given the fact that the previous Strategy expired back in 2021 and that a new one has yet to be adopted, despite years of pressure from the domestic expert community and Serbia’s obligations toward the European Union. Consequently, not only is there a prolonged period without the implementation of key measures to combat terrorism and violent extremism, but there is also an implicit message that involving citizens and relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process remains a secondary priority.

## The Financial Intelligence Service Did Not Eliminate Damage that Was Caused by Its Illegal Investigation of Civil Society Organisations, Media Outlets and Individuals

The Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering (Serbian financial intelligence service) abused its mandate and powers in an attempt to silence the voices of civil society organisations and the media critical of the current government by asking banks, in July 2020, to submit all financial data related to 37 civil society organisations/media outlets and 20 individuals (the ‘List’ case).<sup>691</sup> That the Administration abused its competences and powers was evident not only from the conclusions of the main (expert) authorities in this area,<sup>692</sup> but also from the fact that *Serbian Telegraph*, a tabloid close to the ruling party, published (otherwise unavailable to the public) bank transactions of several organisations so that they could be publicly labelled as traitors. The organisations that were targeted at that time later filed criminal charges against the Administration and the tabloid’s editor-in-chief.<sup>693</sup>

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688 “Telo Evropske unije predlaže raspravu o zabrani desničarskih aktivista sa Zapadnog Balkana” [EU body proposes a debate on the banning of right-wing activists from the Western Balkans], *RFE*, 14/07/2022

689 *Komisija i vlasti u Srbiji odobrili aranžman o saradnji u borbi protiv terorizma* [The Commission and the authorities in Serbia approve an arrangement on cooperation in the fight against terrorism], European Commission, Office for Migration and Internal Affairs, Brussels, 19/11/2019, 06/10/2023

690 Commentary on the Reform Agenda of Serbia in the “Fundamentals” area is available here: “[Insufficient Measures and Postponed Deadlines for Selected Burning Issues](#)”, *PrEUgovor*, 18/10/2025

691 For additional information about the ‘List’ case, see: Jelena Pejić Nikić (ed.), *PrEUgovor Alarm Report on the Progress of Serbia in Chapters 23 and 24 – May 2021*, *prEUgovor*, Belgrade, pp. 27-26 and 101-103

692 Special Rapporteurs of the United Nations Human Rights Council, the International Working Group on Financial Measures to Combat Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism (FATF) and the Committee of Experts for the Evaluation of Measures to Combat Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism (Moneyval)

693 “[Civil society organisations file criminal charges against the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering and the editor-in-chief of Serbian Telegraph](#)”, *Južne vesti*, 25 Sept 2021

Despite these facts, the financial intelligence service is still refusing to publish a detailed report on the financial investigation of 37 civil society organisations/media outlets and 20 individuals, and to repair the damage it had caused to targeted organisations and individuals by publicly admitting that they operate in accordance with the Law and informing commercial banks in Serbia about these findings.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Political authorities and media aligned with them should stop using hate speech towards their critics, especially towards demonstrators, and should refrain from labelling them as extremists and terrorists.
- The prosecution and the police should launch an investigation into the pro-Russian extremist group within the ruling party known as the “loyalists,” because it has all the hallmarks of a clandestine and paramilitary organisation.
- The prosecution and the police should investigate all media reports about the presence of armed extremists and criminals in Pionirski Park, in front of the Presidency of Serbia, as well as numerous illegal acts they have committed.
- Serbian authorities should invite the general and expert public, through media and institutional cooperation mechanisms, to participate in consultations on draft strategic documents related to combating extremism and terrorism, and facilitate meaningful public discussion on these documents in order to enhance them.
- The prosecution should urgently investigate whether a terrorist attack occurred during the peaceful mass gathering of citizens on 15 March 2025, and if it did, who was behind it.
- The Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering should publish a complete report on the conducted investigation. Also, it should eliminate the damage said investigation caused to organisations and individuals that were targeted for no reason, by publicly admitting that they are operating in accordance with the law and informing commercial banks in Serbia thereof.
- In addition to the above, the competent authorities must initiate a procedure for determining responsibility in the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering for exceeding the competences granted thereto by the Law on the Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism, which was established in the FATF report.
- The Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering should fully comply with FATF standards and recommendations, as well as the best practices in this area. The Administration must not use its powers and resources to intimidate civil society organisations under the pretext of preventing money laundering and terrorism financing.



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Coalition prEUgovor is a network of civil society organisations formed in order to monitor the implementation of policies relating to the accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU, with an emphasis on Chapters 23 and 24 of the Acquis. In doing so, the coalition aims to use the EU integration process to help accomplish substantial progress in the further democratisation of the Serbian society.

Members of the coalition are:

**Anti-Trafficking Action (ASTRA)**

[www.astra.rs](http://www.astra.rs)

**Autonomous Women's Centre (AWC)**

[www.womenngo.org.rs](http://www.womenngo.org.rs)

**Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP)**

[www.bezbednost.org](http://www.bezbednost.org)

**Centre for Applied European Studies (CPES)**

[www.cpes.org.rs](http://www.cpes.org.rs)

**Centre for Investigative Journalism in Serbia (CINS)**

[www.cins.rs](http://www.cins.rs)

**Group 484**

[www.grupa484.org.rs](http://www.grupa484.org.rs)

**Transparency Serbia (TS)**

[www.transparentnost.org.rs](http://www.transparentnost.org.rs)

PrEUgovor's key product is the [semiannual report](#) on the progress of Serbia in Cluster 1



[www.preugovor.org](http://www.preugovor.org)



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