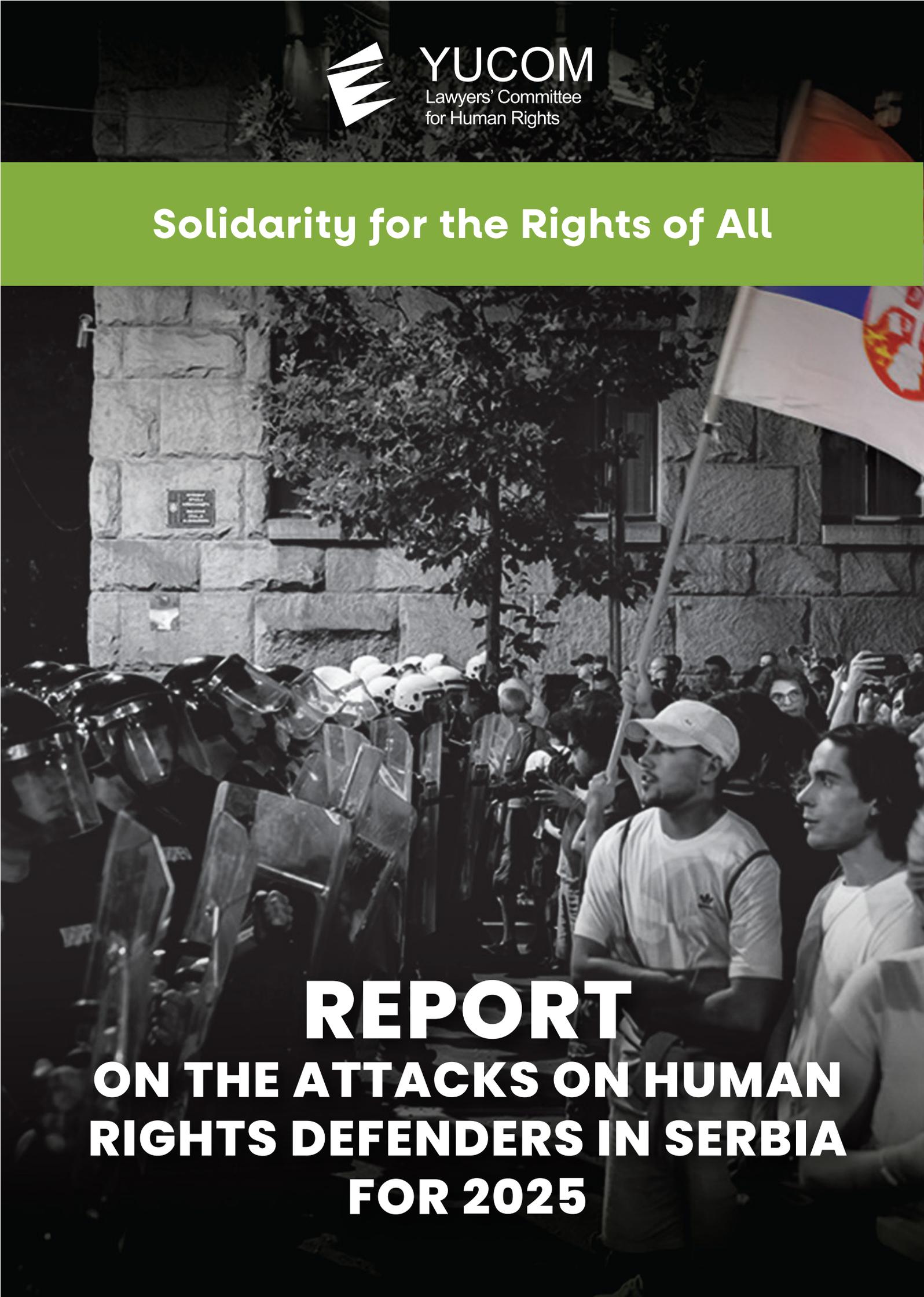




YUCOM

Lawyers' Committee
for Human Rights

Solidarity for the Rights of All



REPORT ON THE ATTACKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN SERBIA FOR 2025

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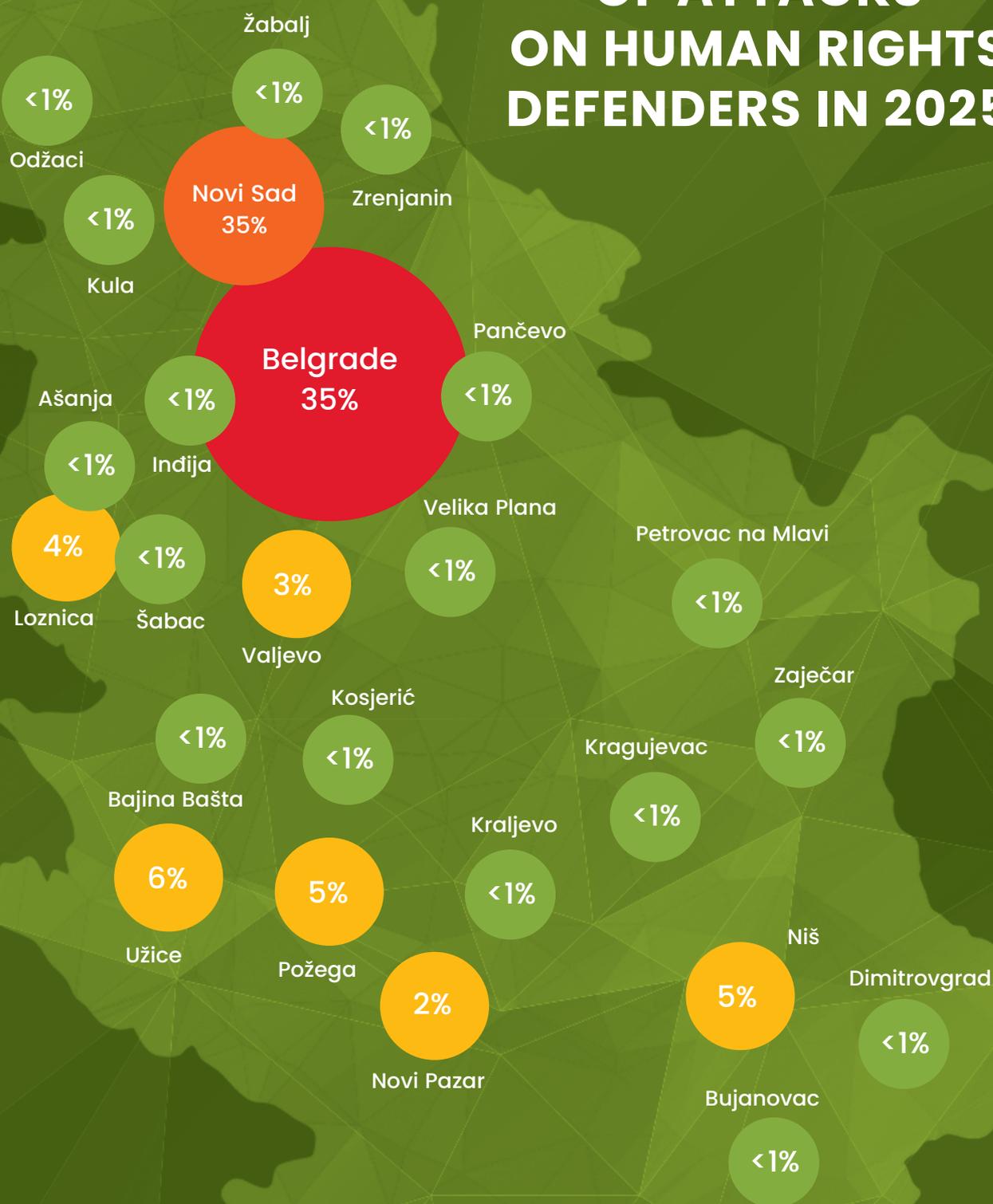
In this report, the term “human rights defenders” is used as a gender-neutral expression encompassing both men and women, as well as all persons engaged in the protection and promotion of human rights.

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LOCATIONS OF ATTACKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN 2025

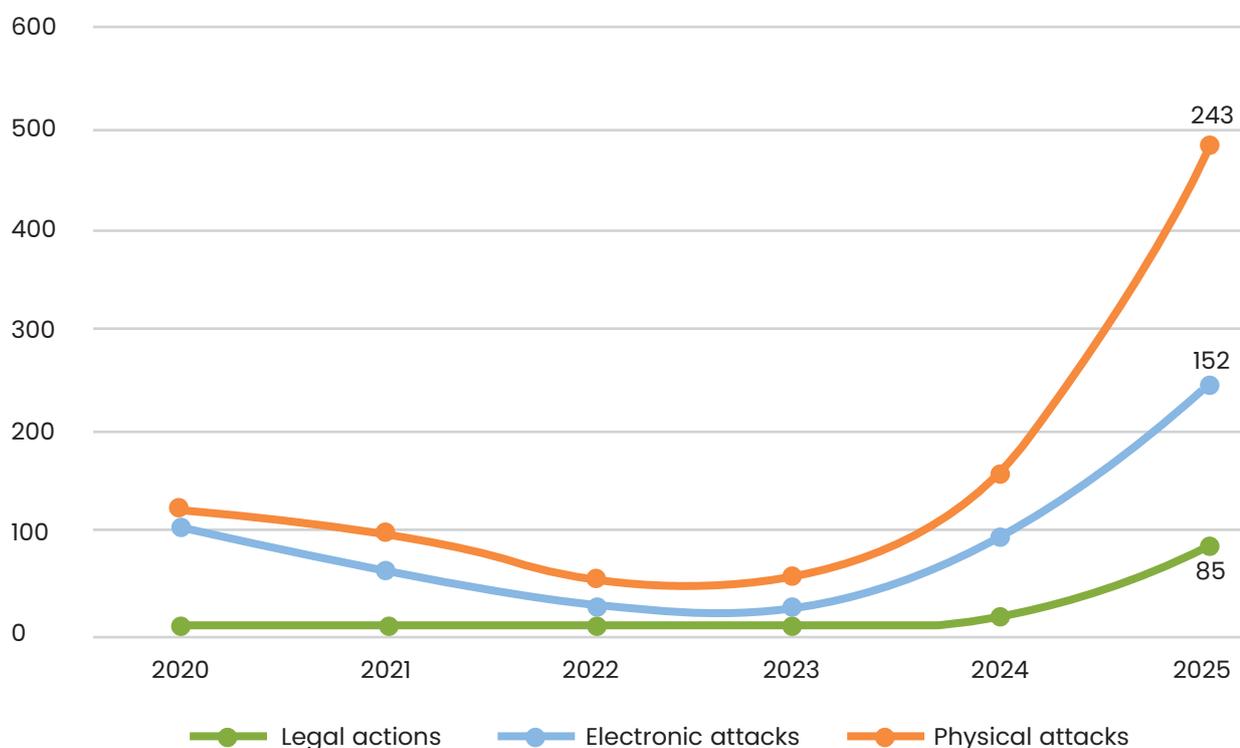


1. INTRODUCTION

On 7 November 2020, the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights – YUCOM launched the first interactive **Map of Attacks and Pressures Against Human Rights Defenders in Serbia**. The very term human rights defender may sound unusual or archaic to some, therefore individuals engaged in the protection of rights often do not immediately identify themselves with this term. Nevertheless, the term encompasses all those who advocate for the protection and advancement of human rights: activists, journalists, lawyers, researchers, whistleblowers, citizens who speak out publicly, as well as civil society organizations. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders affirms the right of individuals and groups to promote and protect human rights and establishes the obligation of states to ensure their protection against violence, threats, and retaliation.¹

Following the publication of annual reports on the attacks on human rights defenders for **2020**, **2021**, and **2022**, the preparation of further annual reports was temporarily suspended, while the Map of Incidents continued to be regularly updated. This report provides an overview of attacks on human rights defenders in Serbia in 2025. Although the period 2023–2024 was not covered by annual reports, it was marked by a sharp increase in pressure on activists and an intensification of repressive practices, culminating in the outbreak of student protests in the second half of 2024.

During this period, findings indicating a significantly deteriorating position of activists were reflected in relevant documents of international institutions, including resolutions of the European Parliament, the European Commission's Serbia Progress Report, the Joint Declaration of the EU–Serbia Civil Society Joint Consultative Committee, among others.



Graph 1: Number of attacks 2020–2025

¹ United Nations General Assembly, Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Resolution 53/144, 9 December 1998, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-right-and-responsibility-individuals-groups-and>



2. METHODOLOGY

This report is based on the continuous collection and verification of data entered into the Map of Incidents. For each reported case, core parameters are recorded, including the gender and place of residence of the targeted person, the targeted person's relation to the attack (direct target, colleague, or family member), the type of perpetrator, the type of attack, and the right affected. Data are derived from citizen reports, open sources, media coverage, documentation from civil society organizations, and legal teams providing free legal aid.²

All data undergo verification and classification according to predefined categories, with careful attention to incident counting: group attacks are recorded as single cases, which means that the actual number of targeted persons is often higher than the number of registered incidents. The report combines quantitative analysis with qualitative descriptions of the most significant cases in order to provide a clear insight into the nature, trends, and severity of attacks on human rights defenders during 2025.

Although journalists undoubtedly qualify as human rights defenders, the Map of Incidents and this report do not include attacks on journalists, as Serbia already has a separate and comprehensive database of such incidents maintained by the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS). In order to avoid data duplication and overlapping records, the report focuses on other categories of human rights defenders that have not previously been systematically mapped.

The report aims to provide interested domestic and international stakeholders with a clear overview of the current situation and information on the position of human rights defenders in Serbia that has not previously been available through comparable regional or international mapping initiatives.

² It should be noted that certain incidents, particularly those affecting vulnerable or less visible groups or occurring outside major urban centers, are not reported, covered by the media, or adequately documented in a manner that would allow for their verification and inclusion in the database. Therefore, the statistical data should be understood as reflecting a minimum estimate of the number of attacks.

3. GENERAL TRENDS

The fifth year of data collection shows a dramatic increase in the number of recorded incidents. In 2025, a total of 317 incidents were registered, eight times more than in 2022.

For the first time, the number of incidents recorded outside Belgrade (213) exceeded the number of those occurring in the capital (104). At the same time, an increase was observed in attacks targeting informal groups (153) and individuals (112), compared to attacks on associations (47).



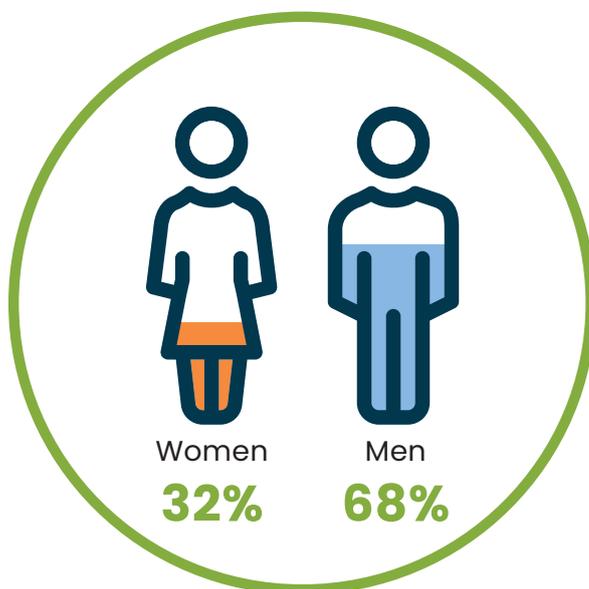
Graph 2: Number of attacks by month and selected examples

In addition to the fact that, given the high number of incidents, some attacks have likely remained unrecorded, the total number of registered cases is further reduced due to the methodology which, for practical reasons, records group attacks as single incidents. As a result, the actual number of targeted persons affected by these attacks is significantly higher than the number of formally registered incidents, and the real number of those targeted may be estimated to be several times greater. Among the recorded targeted persons, 68% were men and 32% were women.

In addition to the quantitative increase, a rise in the severity of attacks was also recorded. For the first time, physical attacks against individuals and their property (269) - including deprivations of liberty (109),³ various forms of physical assault (73)⁴ and threats (57)⁵ - significantly outnumbered digital attacks (152), which continue to predominantly consist of tabloid smear and discrediting campaigns carried out through online platforms and social media (120).

Since a single incident may involve multiple types of attacks, the combined total of individual categories significantly exceeds 317, with nearly half of the recorded incidents (46%) involving an overlap of two or more types of attacks.⁶ Although confirmed cases of spyware being installed on activists' phones have been documented, and forensic analyses indicate that the actual number of targeted persons is significantly higher,⁷ recorded attacks falling within the area of digital security remain relatively rare (12).⁸

The total number of recorded incidents (317) has had consequences for the lives of numerous citizens, activists, and even bystanders. For the first time, more than 80% of all attacks share the same trigger: the protests that erupted following the death of 16 people as a result of the collapse of a canopy in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024. Although such attacks carry a potentially strong deterrent effect on those advocating for the protection of human rights, practice to date shows that citizens and activists, despite the pressures they face, continue to speak out persistently and courageously against injustice and human rights violations.



Graph 3: Gender of Targeted Persons

³ The number of arrests, apprehensions, and detentions of citizens in connection with public assemblies exceeded 1,000 in the period from November 2024 until the time of drafting this report. In accordance with the adopted methodology, multiple individuals may be recorded as a single case of deprivation of liberty where it is not possible to determine the identity of all persons arrested. The Map of Incidents processes publicly available data that could be verified and includes information on individuals who may be considered human rights defenders. For further information on arrests, apprehensions, and detentions, see: <https://pustiteihsv.org/baza-podataka/>.

⁴ This category includes incidents involving beating, torture, attempted murder, and other forms of severe physical violence.

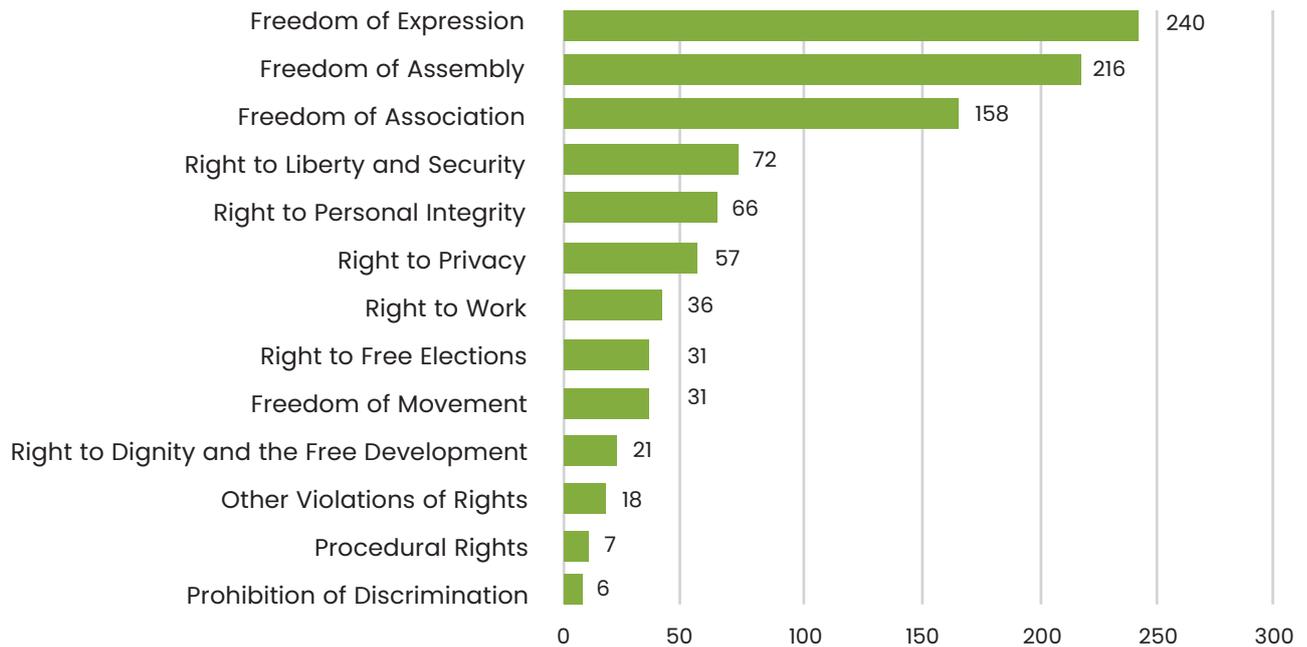
⁵ This category includes threats, intimidation, blackmail, psychological harassment, and other forms of non-physical coercion.

⁶ A single incident may involve multiple types of physical attacks (e.g., torture and deprivation of liberty), as well as different categories of attacks (e.g., deprivation of liberty and the initiation of criminal proceedings). All types of attacks are recorded independently; therefore, the sum of individual categories may exceed the total number of incidents.

⁷ According to Serbia: A Digital Prison - Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia, a report by Amnesty International published on 16 December 2024, forensic evidence related to the NoviSpy spyware indicates that this software may have been installed on more than 600 mobile phones belonging to journalists, activists, and other members of civil society.

⁸ It is important to note that, due to methodological limitations, the number of attacks does not necessarily correspond to the number of targeted persons, as a single attack may affect one individual or several hundred.

4. RIGHTS MOST FREQUENTLY AFFECTED IN ATTACKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS



Graph 4: Human Right Affected

The three fundamental human rights that form the foundation of civic engagement – freedom of assembly, freedom of association, and freedom of expression – remained among the most frequently affected rights of human rights defenders in 2025. Compared to previous years, an increase was recorded in both the severity and the systematic nature of pressures, which increasingly involve direct repression and the misuse of judicial mechanisms.

Freedom of assembly was the most visibly affected right, particularly through inadequate policing during protests, as well as through numerous detentions of participants and organizers of public gatherings. During 2025, a significant number of criminal and misdemeanor proceedings were initiated against citizens and activists. Such practices have a pronounced chilling effect and clearly demonstrate an intention to discourage any form of public expression of dissent in relation to government actions and policies. Government officials continued to undermine freedom of association by attempting to portray civil society organizations as foreign agents or opponents of the state.

The most pronounced expression of such pressure was the attempt to adopt a **“Foreign Agents” Law**, which entered parliamentary procedure at the end of 2024 and prompted a strong reaction from the public and civil society due to its fundamental incompatibility with the Constitution and European standards. At the beginning of 2025, officers of the Criminal Police Directorate **conducted raids** on the premises of five non-governmental organizations under the pretext of investigating alleged money laundering, reportedly prompted by **statements** made by the then Director of the FBI concerning corruption related to USAID’s operations. The action was carried out in close coordination with **a smear campaign** in tabloid media, further intensifying pressure on the civil sector and contributing to an atmosphere of stigmatization and fear.

Freedom of expression was subjected to a wide range of pressures, from SLAPP⁹ lawsuits and targeting in pro-government media to the above-mentioned coordinated smear campaigns on social media. The number of such cases reached record levels in 2025, further confirming the continued shrinking of space for critical speech.

⁹ SLAPP lawsuits (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) represent a misuse of defamation and related legal proceedings. Rather than seeking justice, their primary aim is to intimidate journalists, activists, and citizens who expose wrongdoing or irregularities in the conduct of public authorities.

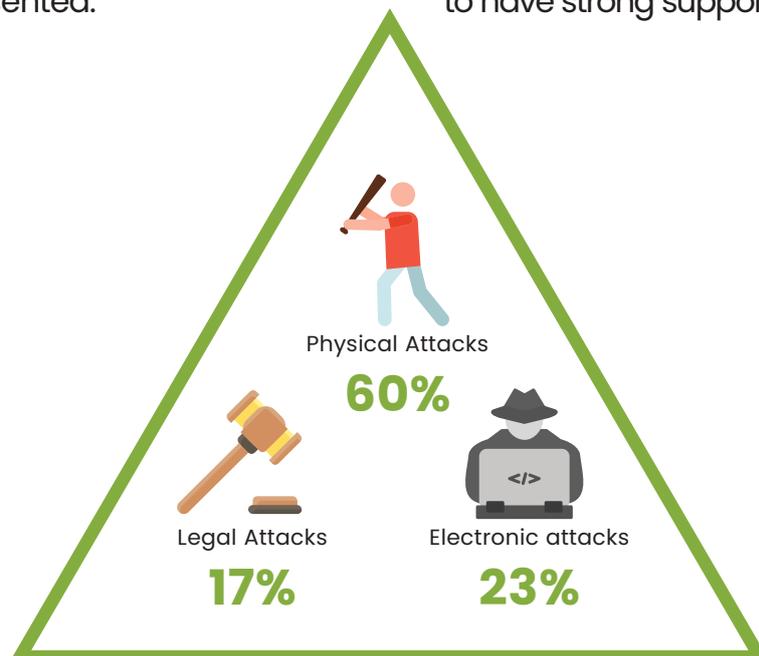


Source: protesti.pic

Image 1: Protest “Serbia, Wake Up”, 13 August 2025

Smear campaigns are most commonly carried out through the coordinated involvement of multiple tabloid media outlets and typically consist of a series of related articles and/or television broadcasts targeting specific individuals or organizations. Such campaigns often serve to justify physical attacks or the initiation of legal proceedings against human rights defenders. They are frequently accompanied by statements from the highest-ranking state officials, thereby further legitimizing the narratives presented.

Aggressive rhetoric by public officials and pro-government media further reinforces such an environment, normalizes hate speech, and creates an atmosphere in which activists are portrayed as a threat rather than as actors contributing to the public interest. Nevertheless, despite intensified pressure, citizens, activists, and civil society organizations continue to defend fundamental freedoms with persistence and solidarity, demonstrating that resistance to authoritarian practices in Serbia continues to have strong support within society.

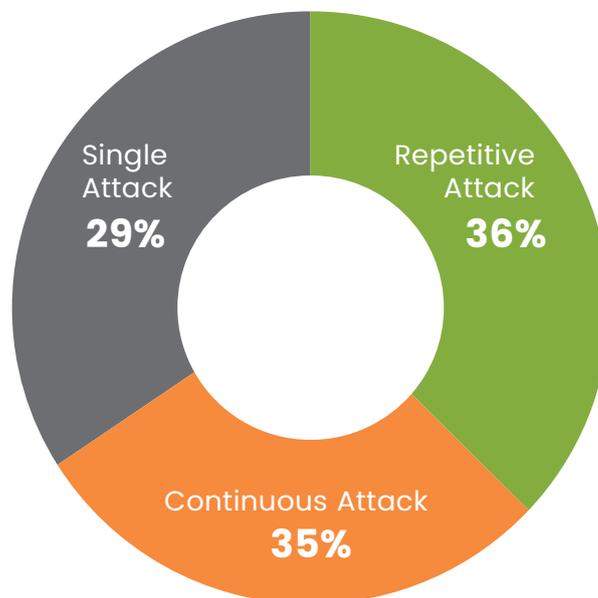


Graph 5: Types of Attacks



5. SELECTED ATTACKS

5.1. ATTACKS ON STUDENT PROTESTS



Graph 6: Frequency of Attacks

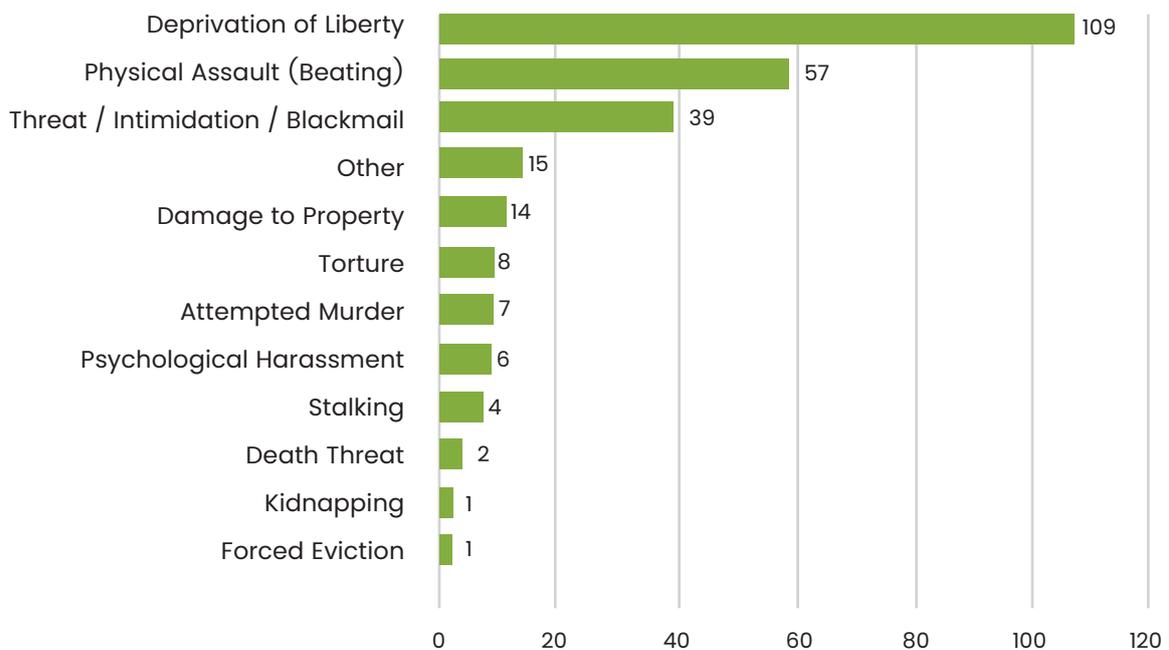
More than 80% of the attacks recorded in the Map of Incidents during 2025 concern organizers, participants, and supporters of the student protests. This striking figure reflects not only the scale and societal significance of the protests - which brought together not only students but also numerous citizens - but also the manner in which the state responded. Rather than focusing institutional action on establishing accountability for the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad Railway Station and the deaths of 16 people, 2025 was marked by numerous pressures directed at protest organizers and participants. These included apprehensions, the use of force, and the initiation of criminal and misdemeanor proceedings. Those targeted included students, secondary school pupils, university professors, deans, the rector, transport workers, clergy members, and many others who publicly expressed support for the students and defended the public interest.

Among the perpetrators were senior state officials, including the President of the Republic, members of the police, members and supporters of political parties, as well as numerous pro-government media outlets. These attacks aimed not only to intimidate participants, but also to suppress the broader wave of solidarity that had spread throughout society in support of the students' demands. In doing so, a clear message was conveyed that any form of civic resistance or public criticism could become the target of institutional pressure, further narrowing the space for freedom of expression and assembly in Serbia. In nearly 68% of all recorded cases, the incidents were not isolated, but rather constituted attacks that were continuous or repeated over time.

5.1.1. Attacks Involving Motor Vehicles

Protest participants were exposed to numerous physical and verbal attacks, while the number of incidents involving vehicles driving into gatherings has reached dozens since the beginning of the protests. Frequent cases of cars forcibly breaking through blockades, resulting in injuries to participants, may indicate coordinated attempts to intimidate demonstrators. It is particularly concerning that pro-government media systematically downplayed the seriousness of these attacks and justified the conduct of the drivers, thereby normalizing violence and fostering an atmosphere of impunity.

At the same time, an aggressive media campaign in which protest participants were labeled as “blockader-terrorists” further fueled hostility and stigmatization, creating an environment in which legitimate civic protest was portrayed as a security threat. The high number of such attacks was further reinforced by a statement from the President of the Republic relativizing one of the attacks on a peaceful gathering. Expressing surprise at calls for the criminal prosecution of a driver who carried a protester on the hood of his vehicle, the President stated that the driver had not violated the law.



Graph 7: Number and Types of Physical Attacks



Source: social networks

Image 2: Sonja Ponjavić struck by a car on 16 January 2025 during a blockade in Belgrade

One of the most serious incidents occurred on 16 January 2025, during a fifteen-minute blockade at the intersection of Roosevelt Street and Queen Marija Street, when a car drove at high speed into a group of gathered citizens and struck student Sonja Ponjavić. At the time, she was standing on the sidewalk and, due to the force of the impact, was thrown onto the roof of the vehicle. In November 2025, the trial continued in the criminal proceedings against the driver, who is charged with attempted aggravated murder. This represents one of the rare cases in which a driver has been formally prosecuted for an attack on protest participants.

The mild response of state authorities to these attacks, as well as the decision of the President of the Republic to grant a pardon in August to the young woman responsible for an attack that occurred on 24 January 2025 in New Belgrade – when she struck protest stewards with her vehicle – had a strong chilling effect and conveyed a message of impunity for violence against citizens expressing their dissatisfaction. During an incident near Palmotićeveva Street in Belgrade at the end of January, two doctors were also struck by a vehicle. On the same day, in Sremski Karlovci, a driver repeatedly drove toward a group of citizens who were welcoming students arriving from Belgrade.

In March, a black car drove into a group of students and teachers from the “Mihajlo Pupin” Technical School in Novi Sad during 16 minute moment of silence.

In April, a black car drove into protest participants near Vuk’s Monument in Belgrade. In June, a driver who had previously verbally abused participants in a peaceful blockade struck activist Marija Srdić with his vehicle in Novi Sad. In the same month, an incident was recorded during a blockade in Vojvode Stepe Street in Belgrade, when police vehicles – four vans positioned across all four lanes – advanced at speed toward the gathered citizens in order to forcibly disperse them.

The forcible breach of protest blockades in this manner was first recorded in Šabac in 2021, when supporters of the Serbian Progressive Party used an excavator to violently break through a protest blockade on a bridge. Instead of condemning this endangerment of citizens’ safety, the President responded by stating that the excavator operator had done nothing wrong and that his movement constituted a constitutional right.

5.1.2. Physical Attacks

Throughout 2025, a continuous pattern of physical attacks against participants in the student protests and their supporters was recorded across various cities, with it being likely that many incidents were never reported to the competent authorities or made known to the public. In January 2025, students of the Faculty of Law were attacked and pelted with glass bottles, while a similar incident was recorded against students of the Faculty of Technical Sciences. During that attack, the perpetrators arrived in ambulances with covered license plates. The misuse of emergency vehicles was recurrent, ranging from their use to falsely portray situations in which blockade participants were allegedly preventing emergency services from passing, to the use of such vehicles to transport individuals wearing masks and, in certain cases, objects that were later described as weapons. In one incident, reckless driving of an ambulance resulted in a dog being run over.

In January, a group of masked individuals threw stones at the building of the Faculty of Sport in Niš. Later that month, young men armed with baseball bats attacked students in Novi Sad while they were putting up stickers calling for a protest. Several students were injured, including a female student who sustained serious bodily harm in the form of a fractured jaw. Although four attackers were arrested, the President pardoned them in July after downplaying the attack by stating that they had merely been defending party premises. In March, four students of the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education in Novi Sad were beaten. In June, a Law Faculty student who had been publicly identified as a student representative was attacked by masked individuals wearing symbols associated with the Red Star sports club. In the same month, another student participating in the blockade and in organized protest marches was beaten by three individuals. At the end of October, students participating in the initiative “A Student in Every Village” were attacked in the village of Jabuka.

During election observation in November in Mionica, observers from CRTA were physically assaulted and unlawfully deprived of their liberty, while members of the Futog Citizens’ Assembly from Novi Sad had their vehicles damaged. In December, according to statements by students from Niš, a doctor at the University Clinical Center in Niš refused to provide adequate medical care to a student who had suffered a severe allergic reaction, allegedly due to her participation in the protest. Even a priest of the Serbian Orthodox Church was targeted in a physical attack after hosting students in the parish house who were walking to Novi Sad.

A significant number of attacks were recorded near a camp of government supporters in Pionirski Park in Belgrade.¹⁰ At the beginning of October, on the plateau in front of the National Assembly, men from this camp beat Bogdan Tomić, a student of the School of Computing, causing him to lose consciousness and sustain a head injury. In early November, a female student from the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad was physically attacked while attempting to film individuals staying in the park and was subsequently hospitalized. Also in November, following a protest, members of the Stari Grad and Savski Venac citizens’ assemblies were attacked by masked individuals. In the same month, during a blockade in front of Pionirski Park, one of the runners who participated in weekly runs as a form of support for the students was beaten and robbed. Although the police were present during these attacks, they did not intervene.

¹⁰ In March 2025, in response to the student protests, supporters of the Serbian Progressive Party organized a “Students Who Want to Study” camp in Pionirski Park in Belgrade, which subsequently expanded to the area between the park and the National Assembly. The area was fenced off, and access was restricted to the public.

5.1.3. Attacks on Supporters of Student Protests

Attacks on supporters of the student protests were frequent. Teachers, public sector employees, private entrepreneurs, and ordinary citizens were targeted because of their support for the protests. They faced dismissals, workplace harassment, and, in some cases, the closure of their privately owned businesses.

Attacks on professors and teachers who publicly supported the student protests were also frequent. In January, the tabloid *Alo* directed a campaign against a secondary school teacher in Bajina Bašta. In February, the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš was subjected to a physical attack and threats, and in March she was attacked with a knife. In Novi Sad, a physical education teacher was dismissed due to his expressed support for the students.

The Rector of the University of Belgrade was also targeted after a minister stated during a television appearance on Pink TV that he “must be arrested because he has ruined the future of a large number of students.” At the end of April, a police officer assaulted professor Smiljana Milinkov while she was offering passive resistance and blocking the entrance to the faculty, lifting her and throwing her to the ground. In June, three professors from the University of Novi Sad were arrested while serving as protest stewards during a demonstration. In the same month, the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in Novi Sad and five other individuals were arrested on allegations of financial misconduct and placed under house arrest, although the underlying issue concerned the payment of employees’ salaries. In September, media reports indicated that the situation amounted to broader repression, as a significant number of professors lost their jobs and several school directors were dismissed due to their support for the protests. At the beginning of the same month, during a protest in Novi Sad, two teachers from the Mechanical and Transport School in Čačak, Aleksandar Dilparić and Mirko Mirković, were apprehended. They were detained for up to 48 hours and charged with assaulting a public official.

In mid-September, during the television program “*Dossier (Ex) Cathedra: Medusa 2*”, broadcast on *B92*, *TV Prva*, and *TV Informer*, Professor Dušan Spasojević of the Faculty of Political Sciences was specifically singled out, with claims that he was encouraging students to engage in anti-state activities. At the end of September, Vukašin Slavković, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Engineering Sciences in Kragujevac, received a threatening SMS message stating that the “Black Hand” would “catch up with him” because of his participation in and support for the student protests. At the end of October, Tamara Antić, the principal of a secondary school in Bačka Palanka, was dismissed on the grounds that she had failed to initiate disciplinary proceedings against teachers who had participated in the student blockades. In the same month, the Dean of the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, Iva Draškić Vićanović, was questioned before the Misdemeanor Court in Belgrade in connection with the suspension of classes during the student blockades. At the end of November, disciplinary proceedings were initiated against Associate Professor Milan Ćirić of the Faculty of Medicine in Niš after he joined students in a 16-minute moment of silence.

A particularly illustrative example of systematic pressure is the case of Milomir Jaćimović, a transport provider from Žabalj, who was subjected to a series of attacks and administrative measures for providing free transportation to students. In April, the tires on his vehicles were slashed; at the end of June, their windshields were smashed; and numerous misdemeanor fines brought his company to the brink of closure. At the beginning of July, after his son was arrested for pasting posters on the premises of the Serbian Progressive Party in Novi Sad, Jaćimović attempted self-immolation in protest. Following his discharge from hospital, he was placed in police detention on charges of causing general danger and obstructing a public official.

The attacks continued thereafter. In mid-July, the police confiscated the license plates of several of his buses. At the beginning of November, Jaćimović was again apprehended, and one of his buses was seized during a protest in support of Dijana Hrki, who had begun a hunger strike. Students from Niš were temporarily held inside the seized bus. A few days later, he was once again apprehended in front of the Municipality of Žabalj for allegedly disturbing public order and peace. The most recent incident was recorded in December, when his driver's license was revoked, reportedly on the grounds that he had obtained a medical certificate from the "wrong" health institution.

In September, Miroslav Šarković was apprehended in Gadžin Han following an anonymous report alleging that he possessed narcotics in his apartment. Šarković claims that the true reason for his apprehension was his support for the students, pointing to the fact that the police removed a banner expressing support from his window on the very day that state officials were passing through the town to mark Flag Day.

At the beginning of October, Mladen Zlatković from Bujanovac was dismissed from his position at the Bujanovac Reception Center. Although "cost reduction" was cited as the official reason, Zlatković claims that he was dismissed due to his open support for the student protests. On 17 October 2025, Jelena Dragaš, a nurse at the Special Psychiatric Hospital in Kovin, publicly stated that she had been subjected to workplace harassment and had received a formal warning prior to dismissal, allegedly because of her support for the student protests. In addition, on 25 October 2025, a book stand operated by Slobodan Stepanović was removed, despite his having conducted business at the same location for nearly ten years with regularly renewed permits. He was told that he was "spoiling the city's ambience," while Stepanović believes that the actual reason was his public support for the students.

5.1.4. Police Misconduct and Excessive Use of Force



Source: protesti.pic

Image 2: Protest "Serbia, Wake Up", 13 August 2025

Throughout 2025, numerous cases of excessive use of force and unlawful conduct by police officers were documented. These incidents targeted citizens, activists, and students participating in peaceful protests, as well as individuals providing first aid or legal assistance to those arrested, and even bystanders.

For years, police at public gatherings rarely resorted to coercive measures and, when they did, generally applied milder means. In contrast, 2025 was marked by the use of disproportionate force against protest participants, including the potential use of unlawful devices such as long-range acoustic devices (LRAD) and CN tear gas, as well as documented cases of torture in which non-resisting protesters were kicked, trampled on the head and body, and struck in the genitals, alongside instances of the brutal beating of young people and minors. This shift reflects a serious escalation of repression and unlawful police conduct toward citizens.

The most alarming incident occurred on 15 March 2025 in Belgrade, when, according to numerous eyewitness accounts and available evidence, a long-range acoustic device (LRAD) was used against peaceful demonstrators during a minute of silence held in memory of the victims of the canopy collapse in Novi Sad.

The incident reportedly caused mass panic, hearing damage, and psychological trauma among participants. Despite the gravity of the event, no effective investigation was conducted. On the contrary, witnesses were subjected to intimidation by public officials and threatened with criminal prosecution for “causing panic.” An instruction was even issued by the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade ordering the prosecution of citizens, which was subsequently declined by the Special Prosecutor’s Office for High-Tech Crime. Civil society organizations provided free legal aid and collected testimonies from more than 3,500 affected individuals. After the European Court of Human Rights granted an interim measure prohibiting Serbia from using the long-range acoustic device, the case remains pending before the Court. In a series of mutually contradictory statements, the police initially denied possessing such a device and later claimed that the devices were unpacked and stored in a warehouse. Following the publication of a photograph showing the device mounted on a Gendarmerie vehicle in front of the National Assembly, the police then asserted that it was used solely as a more powerful megaphone.



Image 3: Gendarmerie vehicle equipped with an LRAD 450X¹¹ device near the National Assembly during the protest on 15 March 2025

¹¹ LRAD (Long Range Acoustic Device) is a device designed to emit high-intensity sound over long distances and is primarily used for crowd control, dispersal of demonstrations, and communication in crisis situations. Although it is often presented as a warning device, in practice it may cause serious health consequences, including hearing damage, disorientation, headaches, and psychological trauma.

On the night between 15 and 16 March 2025, an officer of the Zvezdara Police Station physically **injured** the arm of Kristina Todorović, attorney at law from the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, while she was present at the station to provide free legal assistance to individuals arrested during the protest. The officer had previously verbally abused her, then grabbed her by the arm and forcibly removed her from the room. Civil society organizations called on the Ministry of the Internal Affairs to conduct an urgent investigation and initiate disciplinary proceedings against the officer.

On 28 April 2025, in Novi Sad, Professor Smiljana Milinkov of the Faculty of Philosophy was **attacked** in front of the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education by members of the Intervention Unit. A police officer knocked her to the ground, causing injuries to her neck, legs, and head. On 28 June, Luka Mihajlović, a student of technical sciences, was **beaten** and apprehended by police during a protest and was subsequently hospitalized at the Clinical Hospital Center in Zemun. According to his mother, he was **handcuffed** to a hospital bed, a claim **denied** by the Ministry of the Internal Affairs.

During a protest on 30 June in Vojvode Stepe Street in Belgrade, four police vehicles with flashing lights **drove into** a crowd of citizens and students participating in a peaceful traffic blockade. According to eyewitnesses, the vehicles were moving at high speed, causing panic. At least 16 individuals were apprehended. Just one day later, on 1 July, police officers severely **beat** Aleksa Stanković, a student and photojournalist who had previously published footage of police officers verbally abusing female protest participants. The assault was carried out by two officers, who repeatedly punched and slapped him. On the same day, police also **struck** a student of the Faculty of Music Arts on the head and ribs with a baton until he lost consciousness.

At the beginning of July, police in Užice arrested nine protest participants during a blockade of the main road, which was forcibly **dispersed** using batons and pepper spray. After one week and a series of solidarity protests held in front of the courthouse, pre-trial detention was **lifted** for seven of the nine

detainees, who had been suspected of assaulting a public official, while for the remaining two it was replaced with house arrest.

On 11 July, a plainclothes police officer harassed a female student of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, **pulling** her by the hair in front of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade in an attempt to force her to unlock her phone. In August, a minor, Vukašin Starčević, was arrested in Odžaci. During his apprehension – reportedly carried out without a warrant and without the presence of his parents – he was **beaten**, slapped, and threatened by inspectors from the Belgrade Criminal Police Directorate and by the head of the Kula Police Department, Milan Stanković. Medical professionals documented injuries to his head, shoulder, and abdomen, while the police classified the incident as an “unfortunate event.” Starčević was released late in the evening after an attempt to compel him to sign a statement he had not made. Earlier that same day, Vukašin's father, Marko Starčević, was also arrested. Following 48 hours of police detention, he was placed in pre-trial detention for up to 30 days but was released after five days, subject to a measure prohibiting participation in public gatherings.

On 14 August 2025, following a protest in Valjevo, police officers severely **beat** dozens of young people, including minors. According to eyewitness testimonies and available video footage, the violence involved baton strikes to the head and neck, kicking, trampling on the head and chest, blows to the genitals, being struck in the head with stones, as well as repeated blows while victims were on the ground and not resisting. Tamara Jeremić, who had been providing first aid at the protest and was wearing a red vest to indicate her role, was also assaulted. Witnesses report that police officers pulled individuals out of bakeries, betting shops, and taxis, after which they were beaten regardless of whether they had previously participated in the protest.¹² More than 15 police officers reportedly brutally beat a fifteen-year-old boy, the son of Milena Belotić. Dušan Radojević was also severely beaten, sustaining dozens of blows, including kicks and trampling to the head. Vladimir Đorđević was likewise struck on the head, kicked, and trampled. Criminal complaints against 28 commanding officers and police officials were filed in October.

¹² Milan Ilić was pulled out of a taxi, while Luka Subotić and Marko Stefanović were taken out of a betting shop, after which they were brutally beaten.

On 15 August, Aleksandra Nikolić, a student of the Faculty of Law, sustained serious injuries after falling to the ground during a police charge and being struck multiple times on the head with batons. Several of her teeth were broken in the incident. An emergency medical team reportedly refused to provide her with medical assistance, stating that they were intervening exclusively in cases involving injured police officers.

On the same day, student Nikolina Sindelić informed the public that, during her apprehension alongside other protest participants, she was slapped, had her head struck against a wall, and was threatened with rape by Marko Kričak, Commander of the Government Security Unit, inside a government garage. In what she described as retaliation, Sindelić was subsequently subjected to the public dissemination of private explicit photographs and to so-called SLAPP lawsuits initiated by Marko Kričak. Particularly concerning in this case is the fact that the photographs that appeared publicly had previously been submitted by Nikolina Sindelić as part of a criminal complaint filed privately to protect her right to privacy. Among the first to share the photographs publicly was Dijana Hrkalović, a former State Secretary at the Ministry of the Internal Affairs. Serious incidents continued throughout the autumn. At the beginning of September, police used excessive force against protest participants on the campus of the University of Novi Sad, resulting in injuries to dozens of students and citizens. Tear gas and pyrotechnic devices were used, and those gathered were pushed back using vehicles and batons.

In September, environmental activist Milena Orubović Đukić was struck on the head with a baton by a police officer during a protest in Kosjerić. The following day, she was arrested along with six other activists. Although video footage shows that she was not acting violently, she was held in police custody for 48 hours on suspicion of assaulting a public official.

Aleksandra Božić from Šid was apprehended on 11 September 2025 during a protest in Novi Sad. She alleged that she had been subjected to police torture and that officers failed to take her medical condition into account. The Ministry of the Internal Affairs denied the allegations of abuse and stated that she was suspected of obstructing a public official in the line of duty.

During a protest in Novi Sad on 17 November, police officers beat several university and high school students, including Vukašin Đinović, a student at the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Novi Sad. Among those injured were also Jana Rodić, a student at the Faculty of Sciences, and Branko Rodić, a student at the Faculty of Technical Sciences.

Additional insecurity during the student protests stemmed from the fact that many police officers did not wear identification badges and were masked. This prompted concerns among legal experts and the broader professional community that some individuals may not have been official police officers, but rather persons granted access to uniforms by the authorities. The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights filed criminal complaints against police officers and individuals presenting themselves as such for unlawful conduct and the use of excessive force against citizens. Despite extensive evidentiary material - including eyewitness testimonies, photographs of injuries, medical documentation, and video recordings depicting clear instances of torture¹³ against protest participants - as of the conclusion of this report, no police officer had faced either criminal or disciplinary accountability.

¹³ For example, repeated baton strikes, blows to the genitals, trampling on the face and body, among other forms of violence and ill-treatment.

5.1.5. Criminalization of Protests

The narrative portraying the student protests as an attempted “color revolution” and an attempted coup did not remain confined to media propaganda but was further reinforced through the misuse of judicial mechanisms. The most visible manifestation of this was the prosecution of activists on charges of calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order. In this way, space was created for the involvement of the Security Information Agency, whose plainclothes officers, using unmarked vehicles, apprehended and questioned activists. In several cases, the public was initially informed that students had gone “missing,” only for it to later emerge that they had in fact been detained by the Agency.

The first wave of prosecutions for this criminal offense was recorded in 2023, when five participants in earlier protests concerning electoral irregularities, following police detention and pre-trial custody, signed plea agreements admitting to the offense.

The court confirmed these agreements despite serious procedural deficiencies which, according to the authors of the Analysis of Institutional Responses to Freedom of Assembly and Expression (2019–2024), should have led to their dismissal. Such practice is not an exception, but part of a broader pattern of misuse of this criminal law provision. This is further confirmed in Freedom of Expression in Serbia’s Digital Space - Analysis of Prosecutorial and Judicial Practice, which highlights the frequent and unfounded prosecution of citizens for the criminal offense of endangering the safety of public officials based on content published on social media.

During 2025, new criminal proceedings were initiated for the alleged offense of calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order. In practice, however, plea agreements were more frequently concluded for the offenses of violent conduct at a sporting event or public gathering, and assault on a public official in the line of duty.



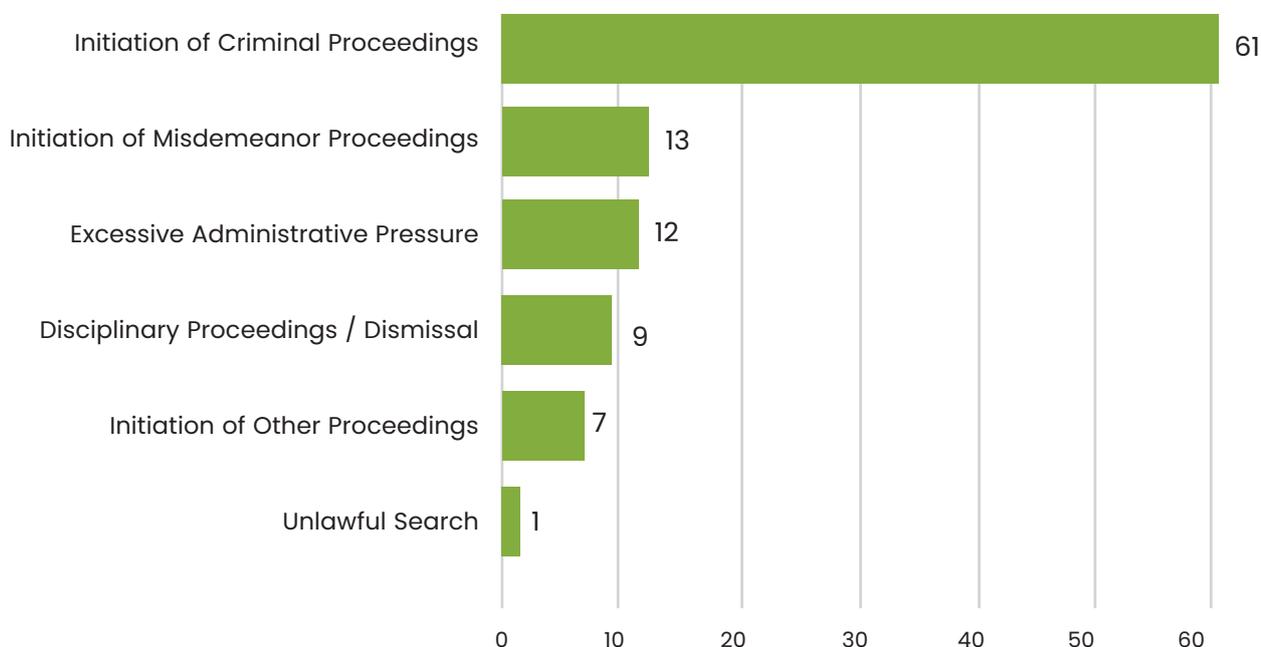
Izvor: protesti.pic

Image 4: Protest “Serbia, Wake Up”, 13 August 2025

One of the most striking examples of the criminalization of protests was the public release of a secretly recorded audio of a meeting held on 12 March 2025 between members of the Movement of Free Citizens (PSG) and the group STAV, during which activists discussed the possible entry into the building of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS). On the basis of this recording, the activists were charged with preparing a criminal offense against the constitutional order. Some of them were placed in pre-trial detention, while others left the country out of fear of arrest.

After two months in pre-trial detention, the measure was replaced with house arrest, which remained in effect until October 2025.

Nevertheless, six activists remain in exile outside Serbia, making this case one of the most prominent examples of the criminalization of political dissent and pressure on civic activism. The legality of the published audio recording was seriously called into question. Following a request for access to information of public importance, journalists from *Insajder* received confirmation that the recording had been obtained through covert surveillance of a third party who does not appear in the recording itself and who was, at the time, subject to special monitoring measures. It was later revealed that this person was Ana Oreg, Vice President of the Movement of Free Citizens (PSG) and a Member of Parliament.



Graph 8: Number and Types of Legal Attacks

Student Stefan Tomić was arrested over handwritten messages shared in a WhatsApp group stating plans to enter state institutions during the protest on 28 June. Tomić was placed under house arrest. The apprehension and release of students, with or without the initiation of misdemeanor proceedings, represented another form of intimidation. In mid-August, police in Niš apprehended five students, who were released after several hours. At the end of September, student Sava Nestorović was also apprehended and shortly thereafter released. In November, two students from Niš, Mateja Nikolić and Luka Đorđević, were taken to the Vračar Police Station following an identity check and subsequently released.

In August, Nikolić sat for an exam surrounded by five inspectors, later stating that he felt disturbed and questioned whether the police presence was intended to intimidate or humiliate him. The administration of the Faculty of Law in Niš stated that all individuals present in the classroom were students taking the exam. At the beginning of September, police apprehended ten protest participants in Novi Sad on suspicion of assaulting a public official; they were released after questioning. In mid-September, police arrested three farmers and one citizen on suspicion of committing the criminal offense of violent conduct.

They were placed under house arrest, which was later lifted on appeal. At the beginning of November, during a rally in Novi Sad in support of Dijana Hrka, police apprehended activists Sandra Adam, Ana Obradović Pantelić, and Robert Silberholz. The activists were held overnight at a police station and then released, while misdemeanor charges were brought against them for disturbing public order and peace and for indecent, insolent, and reckless behavior, after they painted a red hand symbol and the number 16 in red paint on the premises of the Serbian Progressive Party.

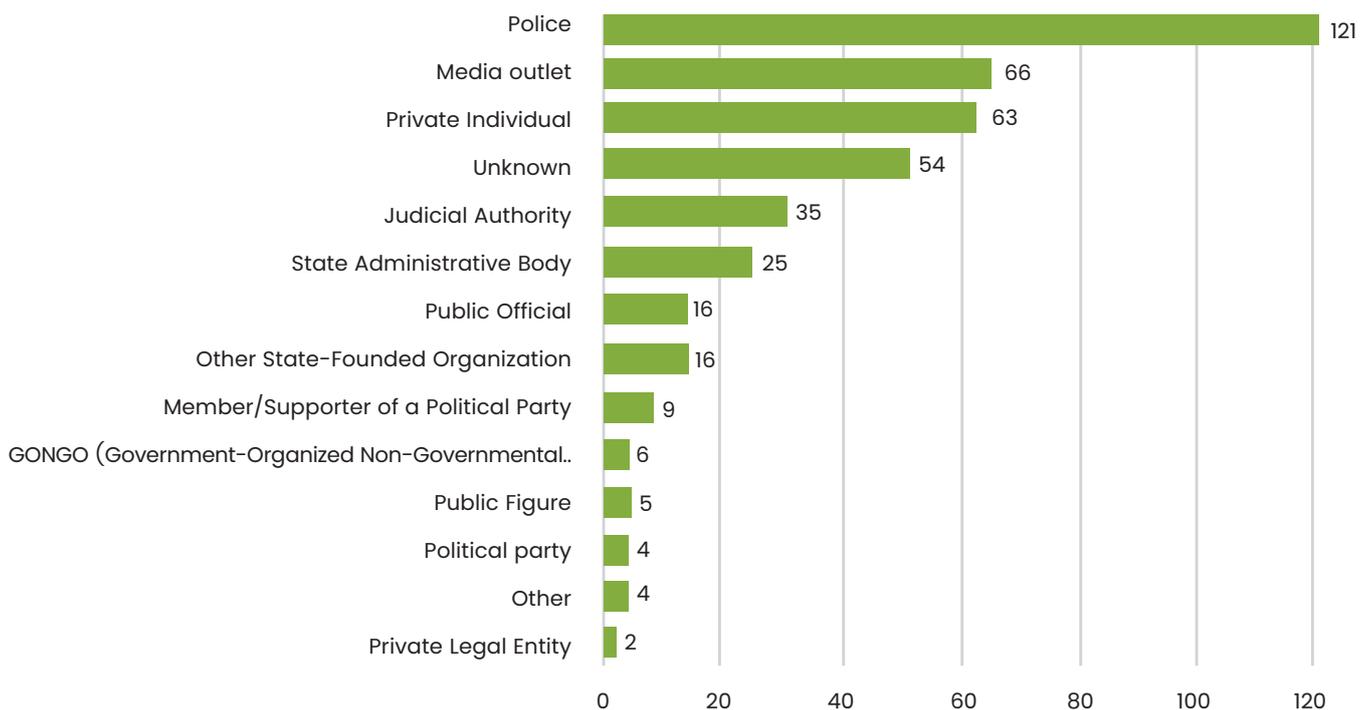
5.1.6. Media Campaign

A smear campaign in tabloid media was present almost without interruption. Protest participants were daily labeled with pejorative terms such as “so-called blockade terrorists,” “Ustaše,” “idlers,” and “foreign mercenaries,” with the aim of discrediting their goals and motives. These smear campaigns were carried out through the coordinated action of multiple media outlets publishing identical articles, as well as through special television programs, quasi-documentary films, and statements by the highest state officials.

The beginning of the year was marked by the individual targeting of students and the publication of their personal data.

Taken together, these cases point to a pattern of instrumentalizing criminal law and security structures to criminalize political dissent. The use of serious criminal charges, questionable evidence, and selective police interventions has a strong chilling effect and constitutes systemic pressure on civic activism, aimed at deterring citizens from participating in protests and publicly expressing critical views.

Following the release of the Croatian passports of the Stojaković brothers as alleged evidence of the involvement of Croatian services in organizing the protests, a list – effectively a “wanted” poster – containing the names and personal details of 12 students of the Faculty of Technical Sciences was also published. This was the second such incident, after a similar list naming 11 FTN students had been released the previous day. The narrative of a so-called “color revolution” and the alleged involvement of foreign intelligence services, particularly the Croatian Security and Intelligence Agency, in organizing the student protests was a recurring theme in propaganda campaigns.



Graph 9: Number and Types of Alleged Perpetrators

Mila Pajić became one of the primary targets of tabloid media, and in February she was publicly labeled by the President himself as a proponent of an “anti-Serbian ideology” and as someone who “hates the Serbian people.” In March, pro-government media further targeted her, portraying her as an alleged organizer and financier of a so-called “color revolution.”

In April, the tabloid *Informer* launched a new campaign targeting students of the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, portraying them as “violent individuals” who had allegedly physically assaulted Dean Patrik Drid and blocked an ambulance. The articles published the names of 18 students alongside unsubstantiated accusations, with the apparent aim of publicly discrediting and intimidating them. Judges of the Court of Appeal in Novi Sad who had rendered a decision concerning the detention of activists from the STAV group and the Movement of Free Citizens were also targeted by *Informer*.

Taken together, these examples indicate a systematic and coordinated pressure campaign against participants and supporters of the student protests, carried out through a combination of media targeting, police violence, institutional measures, and administrative sanctions. The coordinated actions of tabloid media, supported by statements from senior state officials, had a strong chilling effect and contributed to the normalization of violence and repression against students, activists, and other critical voices. At the same time, repeated physical attacks and excessive use of force, coupled with selective or absent responses by the competent authorities, further deepened the atmosphere of impunity and distrust in institutions. The ultimate aim of such conduct was not only to intimidate individuals but also to prevent the spread of solidarity and broader social support for the students’ demands.

5.2. ATTACKS ON WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Approximately one third of all recorded attacks (32%) were directed against women human rights defenders. Those targeted included women who were publicly active as students, professors, school principals, deans, prosecutors, judges, lawyers, and activists – precisely because they occupied visible positions in public life, organized resistance, or challenged those in power. The manner in which the authorities responded reflected an intersection of misogyny and political repression.

The attacks were not limited to physical violence but were also sexualized, degrading, and directed at the identity, morality, and private lives of the targeted women. Women were apprehended, subjected to police brutality and sexual violence, struck by vehicles, arrested, insulted, defamed, and exposed to public vilification through tabloid front pages and statements by the highest-ranking officials. A recurring narrative portrayed them as “foreign agents,” “traitors,” “immoral,” or “sexually deviant,” with their private lives instrumentalized as a means of discreditation.

The authorities’ response to the legitimate demands of the student protests included the promotion of a narrative about a “color revolution,” in which women were often portrayed as the enemy and turned into symbols of rebellion. The face of the alleged revolution was presented as Mila Pajić, an activist of the STAV group and one of the protest organizers, who for months was the subject of tabloid attacks. In February, she was publicly labeled by the President as a proponent of an “anti-Serbian ideology” and as someone who “hates the Serbian people.”

Pajić was one of the participants in a secretly recorded conversation among STAV activists, the audio of which was broadcast by the television channel *Informer* in March 2025. Following its release, members of the group were apprehended on suspicion of preparing a criminal offense against the constitutional order, while some participants, including Pajić, avoided arrest as they were outside the country at the time.

As part of the narrative surrounding the alleged “color revolution,” civil society organizations were also subjected to attacks. A frequent target was Vukosa-va Crnjanski, Executive Director of CRTA, who was accused of being part of an operation aimed at overthrowing the President. Maja Stojanović, Executive Director of Civic Initiatives, was similarly targeted and portrayed as a resident agent of Western intelligence services.

Women were frequent targets during blockades and student protests. Female students often assumed the role of marshals and stood in the front lines of gatherings. Students Sonja Ponjavić and Kristina Vasiljević were seriously injured in two separate vehicle attacks in January 2025. While the trial against the driver who struck Ponjavić is still ongoing, the driver who hit Vasiljević was granted a presidential pardon.



Source: protesti.pic

Image 5: Protest “Serbia, Can You Hear Us?”, 5 September 2025

Female students and women activists were frequently subjected to police brutality, apprehensions, and intimidation. In August, student Teodora Jovičić was apprehended for allegedly writing graffiti on the building of Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV). In November, Milan, David, and Irina – students traveling on a bus operated by Jaćimović – were held inside the vehicle after it was seized by police. Anja Pitulić, Doroteja Antić, and Mila Pajić went into exile following the arrests of participants in the secretly recorded meeting of STAV activists.

In September, Aleksandra Božić was apprehended during a protest in Novi Sad and stated that she had been subjected to police torture. In the same month, Milena Orubović Đukić was also apprehended, together with six other activists, just one day after sustaining a baton strike to the head during a protest in Kosjerić. In July, Vesna Klačar was apprehended during a protest in New Belgrade on suspicion of blocking traffic, although she stated that she had been sitting on a green area when the police intervened.

Jelena Božić and Darija Stjepić, activists of the initiative Sviće, were **summoned** for an informational interview in connection with graffiti written on the building of the Security Information Agency, as part of an action demanding the release of detained members of the STAV group. During a protest in Novi Sad in November, a police officer pulled a female student by the hair and **punched** her in the head. In August, at a protest in Belgrade, a female student was **struck** multiple times on the head with a baton after she had fallen to the ground. Earlier, in July, a plainclothes police officer harassed a female student of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts by pulling her by the hair in an attempt to force her to unlock her phone in front of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade.

Student Nikolina Sindelić was apprehended during a protest in August. Following her apprehension, members of the Ministry of the Interior's Unit for the Protection of Certain Persons and Facilities took her and several other protest participants to the garage of the Government of Serbia building, where, according to her account, she was severely beaten and **threatened** with rape by the unit's commander, Marko Kričak. Several days later, former State Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior, Dijana Hrkalović, **published intimate images** of Nikolina Sindelić on the social media platform X, in what has been described as an act of revenge pornography. The images were subsequently displayed live on air by Dragan Vučićević, editor-in-chief of Informer television. Kričak then initiated a SLAPP lawsuit against Sindelić in what appeared to be a form of retaliation.

Members of the academic community were also subjected to repression and intimidation. Smilja Milankov, a professor who participated in the protests, was exposed to police **brutality** and **death threats**. The Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš faced **death threats** and was also the target of a **knife attack**. In June, the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine was arrested on allegations of irregularities related to salary payments at the faculty.

Many female professors, teachers, and school principals were subjected to **retaliation**, dismissals, and removals from their positions due to their public support for the demonstrations and participation in protests.

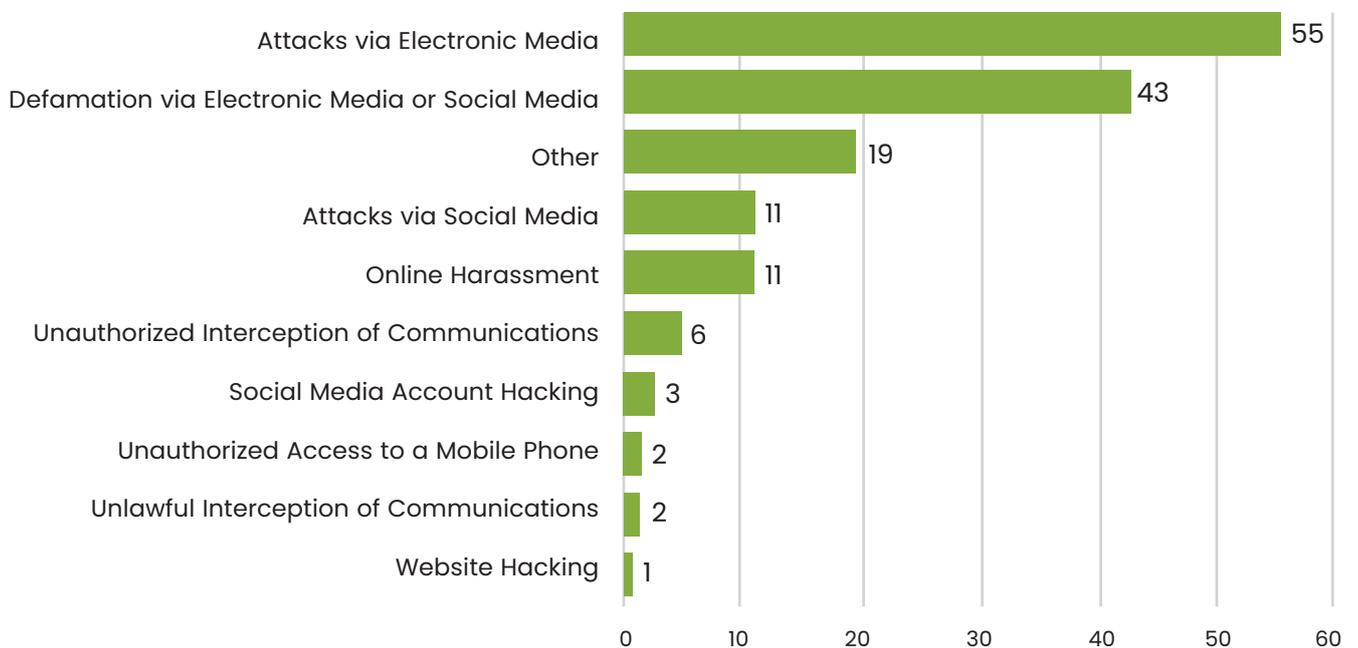
Women were frequently targeted by tabloid attacks and smear campaigns. In August, Dejana Stošić was **labeled** in headlines as an "anti-Serb of homosexual orientation" who had allegedly profited from her participation in the protests. In the same month, tabloids **justified** the apprehension of Ana Hebar in Belgrade, portraying her as someone who "adores Albania and Croatia while destabilising Serbia." Milena Orubović Đukić, an activist from Kosjerić, was **portrayed** as a "terrorist who teaches children." In April, students Jelena Popadić, Žana Pavlović, Katarina Milankov, Anita Ivanović, Željana Marković, Mirjana Berković, Sara Azarić, and Galina Đivujskij were publicly **labeled** as members of a "group of violent individuals" who had allegedly lynched the Dean of the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education in Novi Sad, Patrik Drid.

Attacks on women human rights defenders reveal a pattern of gender-based political repression. Women were targeted because of their visibility and public engagement, through a combination of physical violence, sexualized humiliation, and discrediting campaigns. The response of the authorities and pro-government media indicates a systemic convergence of misogyny and repression, aimed at intimidation, delegitimizing the protests, and suppressing civic resistance. In addition to common forms of violence, gender-based violence was increasingly employed against women, including threats of rape, the dissemination of sexually explicit private images, and discreditation based on their intimate relationships, among other tactics.

5.3. THREATS TO THE DIGITAL SECURITY OF ACTIVISTS

When the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights began systematically documenting incidents against activists in 2020, cases falling within the realm of digital security were rare. At that time, the internet was primarily used as a tool for smear campaigns and discreditation,

while direct cyberattacks against the websites of non-governmental organizations and media outlets were sporadic. In 2025, however, an escalation of more sophisticated forms of surveillance and technological abuse was recorded, including the installation of spyware, unlawful access to mobile devices, and coordinated attacks on social media accounts.



Graph 10: Number and Types of Electronic Attacks

Following the publication of [Amnesty International's 2024 Report](#), which forensically confirmed the use of spyware on activists' phones, ten civil society organizations filed a [criminal complaint](#) against members of the police and the Security Information Agency with the Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime. Requests were also submitted to the Ombudsperson, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, as well as to the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Special Procedures. While international institutions responded through [statements](#), [open letters](#), [communications](#) addressed to Serbia, and the adoption of [resolutions](#), information regarding the actions taken by domestic authorities remains limited and discouraging.

After two individuals received [notifications](#) from Apple at the end of 2023 indicating that their phones had been targeted in attacks linked to state actors, a forensic analysis conducted by the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab and Amnesty International confirmed the use of the Israeli spyware Pegasus.

The report published by Amnesty International revealed that, during interviews with members of the Security Information Agency, a domestically developed spyware known as Novi Spy was installed on the phones of a number of activists. Unlike Pegasus, Novi Spy can only be installed with physical access to the device and transmits the collected data to an IP address linked to a Agency's officer. Notably, the name of that officer was partially embedded in the name of the computer receiving the data. Based on an analysis of the formatting of the victims' phone identification codes, Amnesty International concluded that there is a possibility that the spyware had been installed on more than 600 mobile devices. At the same time, the organization cautioned that the identification numbers may not have been generated sequentially from zero and that it is not certain that all identified samples of the spyware were actually used to infect devices.

In at least two cases, Amnesty International concluded that the phones on which Novi Spy had been installed were unlocked using Cellebrite software, a forensic tool lawfully used by police forces worldwide. This tool enables the unlocking of devices, extraction of data, and installation of the aforementioned spyware. Following the publication of Amnesty's report, the license for the use of Cellebrite software was [revoked](#).

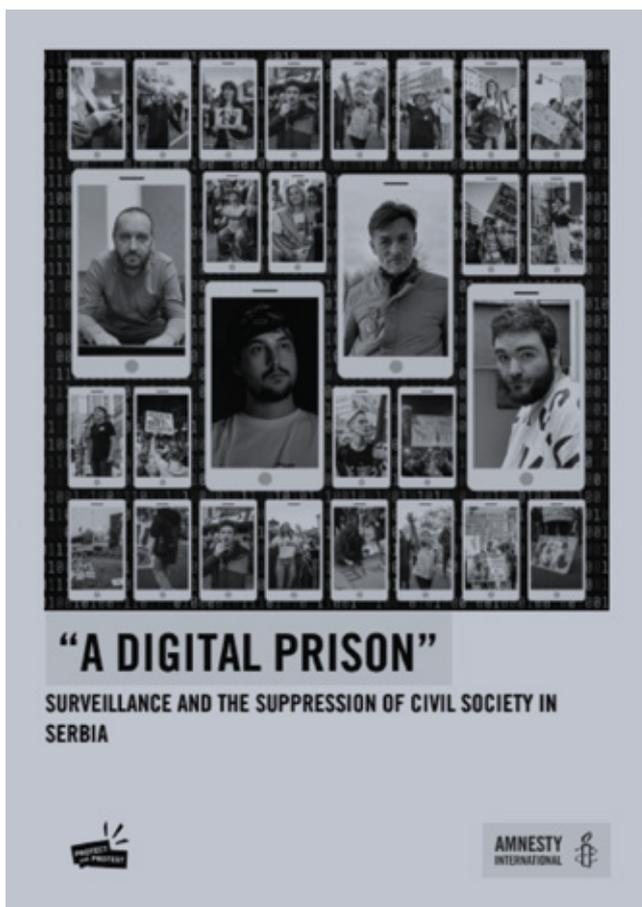


Image 6: "A Digital Prison" – Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia

However, following Amnesty International's Report, the practice appears to have changed. Instead of returning phones to activists after extracting the data, the devices are now reportedly destroyed in order to conceal traces of the information that had been copied. Students have on several occasions informed the public that police officers broke their phones, further indicating attempts to cover up evidence of unlawful data extraction.

During the protests, incidents were also recorded such as the one in July, when a plainclothes police officer harassed a female student of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts by pulling her hair in front of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade in an attempt to compel her to unlock her phone. According to the attorney at law representing protest participants, footage obtained from confiscated phones has been forwarded by the police to pro-government tabloids such as Informer and Pink.

In December, information emerged that farmers and environmental activists were also among those targeted with spyware installations on their mobile phones. This indicates that such practices are not limited to well-known civil society organizations, students, or protesting citizens, but also extend to individuals and groups who express criticism in various ways within their local communities. The use of spyware represents a significant – yet predictable – escalation, given that civil society organizations have for years unsuccessfully warned about the misuse by the Security Information Agency of access to citizens' metadata¹⁴ retained by mobile and internet service providers.

The use of recordings obtained unlawfully is prohibited by law, and such evidence cannot be used in judicial proceedings. Nevertheless, after the television channel Informer broadcast an audio recording from a meeting of activists from the Movement of Free Citizens and the STAV group

in a special program in March 2025, several participants in the meeting were apprehended on suspicion of preparing a criminal offense against the constitutional order, while those who were abroad at the time effectively went into exile.¹⁵ At the end of June 2025, following another special broadcast in which a recording of students discussing plans ahead of an upcoming protest was aired, eight students were apprehended. The court rejected the prosecution's request for pre-trial detention, and all those arrested were released pending trial.

At the end of November, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) received a notification from the Microsoft Threat Intelligence Center stating that it had been the target of a cyberattack linked to the hacking group Forest Blizzard, which is reportedly controlled by Russian military intelligence. The same organization had also been targeted in October, when a phishing campaign was uncovered involving attackers impersonating members of the BCSP team, as well as the creation of a website mimicking the Belgrade Security Conference with the aim of deceiving participants and collecting their data.

The unlawful application of secret surveillance measures and spyware has serious and far-reaching consequences for the safety and work of human rights defenders. The mere knowledge of its use creates a chilling effect and fosters self-censorship, which persists as long as those responsible for such practices remain unaccountable and there is no clear institutional protection for those affected. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that digital surveillance is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a broader institutional approach aimed at identifying, intimidating, and controlling civic activism.

¹⁴ For example, data concerning the time, duration, and parties involved in a communication, as well as the location of the device at the moment the connection was established.

¹⁵ The lawfulness of the published audio recording was seriously called into question after journalists from Insajder, acting on a request for access to information of public importance, received confirmation that the recording had been obtained through the surveillance of a third person who does not appear in the recording itself. That individual was subject to secret surveillance measures during the relevant period, and it was subsequently established that the person in question was Ana Oreg, Vice-President of the Movement of Free Citizens and a Member of Parliament.

In mid-November, the social media profiles of Students in Blockade, several faculties participating in the blockades, and independent media outlets were **targeted** in coordinated attacks aimed at having their accounts shut down. The Instagram profile of Students in Blockade, for example, **gained** more than 150,000 new followers overnight, primarily “bot” accounts. Administrators assessed this as a deliberate attempt to trigger the platform’s detection systems by creating the appearance of suspicious activity and violations of platform rules. These attacks resulted in the automatic – though temporary suspension of affected accounts on TikTok and Instagram, due to artificially inflated follower numbers or mass reporting of allegedly inappropriate content.

The documented cases clearly indicate a systemic and ongoing escalation of digital surveillance and the misuse of technology directed against various actors of civic activism in Serbia. What began as sporadic smear campaigns has evolved into a sophisticated mechanism of monitoring, intimidation, and control, involving spyware, coordinated cyberattacks, and the use of unlawfully obtained recordings for repressive purposes. The absence of an effective response by domestic institutions, despite serious findings by international organizations, further deepens mistrust and creates a lasting chilling effect, undermining freedom of expression, the right to privacy, and the fundamental preconditions for democratic participation.

5.4. SHRINKING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

The year 2025 was marked by intense pressure on civil society organizations and individuals engaged in the protection of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Rather than recognizing their work as a contribution to societal development, government representatives and media outlets aligned with them, systematically labeled and portrayed these actors as a threat to the stability of the state.

As early as January, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, publicly mocked the findings of the Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) regarding public trust in institutions and the electoral process through his official Instagram account. Such a statement, issued from the highest level of government, sent a clear message that organizations independently monitoring elections and institutional performance are treated as political adversaries. At the same time, it served as a signal for pro-government tabloids to launch a campaign of attacks. The following month, the newspaper *Novosti* published an **article** portraying Vukosava Crnjanski, CRTA’s Executive Director, as part of a plan to overthrow Vučić.

Media attacks soon became a daily occurrence. Pro-government tabloids and online portals accused individual activists and organizations of participating in an “operation to overthrow the President,” portraying them as instruments of foreign influence. In these articles, particular attention was directed at organizations such as CRTA, YUCOM, CEPRIS¹⁶, Civic Initiatives, and the Policy Center, among others. Projects dedicated to the rule of law – including “**Open Doors of the Judiciary**” – were depicted as attempts to “control the judiciary.”

The culmination of institutional pressure occurred on 25 February 2025, when the Criminal Police Directorate, acting upon an order of the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade, **entered** the premises of several civil society organisations – including CRTA, Civic Initiatives, the Policy Center, and KOMS (National Youth Council of Serbia). Police officers entered without prior notice and in significant numbers, requesting extensive documentation and insisting that materials be submitted in hard copy, despite the fact that many of the requested documents were already publicly available in electronic form.

¹⁶ Center for Judicial Research (CEPRIS)

The operation lasted for several hours, with staff remaining in their offices until late in the evening, and the action itself created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. In the absence of a publicly communicated international request or a clearly articulated legal basis, these entries appeared more as a demonstration of force than as a proportionate and lawful procedural measure.

At the same time, public statements by high-ranking officials further fueled negative narratives. The Minister of Defense, Miloš Vučević, stated on the social media platform X that non-governmental organisations represented a “foreign factor influencing in educational institutions,” while President Aleksandar Vučić, in an appearance on the public broadcaster RTS, described CRTA as part of a “blockading colored revolution against the state.” Such messaging reinforced an atmosphere of stigmatization and contributed to an increase in hostility towards civil society organizations.

The discrediting campaign also extended to individuals. Women activists were subjected to misogynistic and homophobic attacks, while journalists and university professors received death threats. Among them is the case of Professor Dinko Gruhonjić, who has for an extended period been the target of insults and threats due to his public engagement and critical stance.

One of the methods used to narrow the operating space for civil society organizations is the establishment of so-called GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations), which often function as pro-government platforms, as well as instruments for attacking and delegitimizing credible civil society actors.

In this context, the Centre for Social Stability created a three-part series entitled “NGO Dossier”, which, according to its own claims, aimed to expose the alleged role of civil society organizations in manipulation, money laundering, undermining the state, and carrying out a so-called “colored revolution.” The series was broadcast on television channels with national coverage. After targeting CRTA in the second episode - portraying it as part of a network allegedly preparing coordinated “guerrilla-style” street actions - the third episode labelled the SHARE Foundation and the Trag Foundation as organizations operating in the interests of foreign centers of power.

Taken together, these developments indicate a deterioration of the enabling environment for civil society and a marked narrowing of civic space in Serbia. Organisations and individuals advocating for institutional accountability, transparency, and respect for human rights have faced sustained attacks, the misuse of state resources, and attempts at intimidation. Rather than fostering dialogue and cooperation, the authorities have opted for confrontation and stigmatization, thereby eroding public trust and undermining what should constitute the foundation of any democratic society - the freedoms of expression, association, and civic engagement.

6. CONCLUSION

Data collected throughout 2025 indicate a qualitative shift in the patterns of attacks against human rights defenders in Serbia. Unlike previous years, when pressures were often fragmented or selective in nature, 2025 was marked by a high degree of intensity, frequency, and coordination of repressive measures, particularly in the context of the student protests that followed the tragedy in Novi Sad.

More than 80% of all recorded incidents were linked to these protests, clearly demonstrating that civic assembly and the public expression of dissent have become a central target of institutional pressure. Documented cases include mass detentions, physical assaults, instances of police brutality, the initiation of criminal and misdemeanor proceedings, as well as intensive media-driven stigmatization campaigns. This combination of measures goes beyond isolated incidents and points to a pattern of conduct with a pronounced chilling effect on civic engagement.

A particularly alarming trend has been the increasing severity of attacks, ranging from vehicles being driven into protest participants, to reports of the use of a sound cannon, and documented cases of ill-treatment in police stations. Despite the seriousness of these incidents, the lack of effective investigations and accountability mechanisms has further entrenched a climate of impunity. At the same time, there has been a noticeable escalation in digital surveillance and the misuse of technological tools, further jeopardizing the privacy and security of activists and contributing to the growing prevalence of self-censorship.

During 2025, the space for civil society organisations to operate has been drastically reduced through police raids, public targeting by senior officials, and sustained discrediting campaigns in pro-government media outlets. Rather than engaging in dialogue or ensuring institutional protection, organisations and individuals advocating for human rights, accountability, and transparency have faced systematic pressure and attempts to delegitimise their work.

Despite this environment, citizens, students, professors, journalists, and civil society organizations have demonstrated a high degree of solidarity and resilience. Their persistent engagement constitutes a crucial counterbalance to authoritarian practices and remains one of the few remaining pillars in the defense of fundamental freedoms.

However, the responsibility for the protection of human rights cannot be left on individuals and the civil sector alone. It is, first and foremost, a primary obligation of the state. The record number of attacks documented in 2025, their severity, and the absence of an adequate institutional response clearly indicate that this obligation has not been fulfilled.

As long as violence, intimidation, and the abuse of power are tolerated or relativized, there can be no meaningful discussion of the rule of law or of a safe and enabling environment for civic engagement. Serbia faces a clear task: to ensure that those who defend the rights of others can do so without fear. Until that is achieved, the Map of Incidents remains both a record of institutional shortcomings and a testament to a society that refuses to remain silent.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Police

- Urgently ensure independent and effective investigations into all cases of excessive force, unlawful detention, torture, and abuse of authority.
- Introduce mandatory visible identification markings for police officers, without exception.
- Suspend the use of LRAD devices and the practice of police vehicles driving at high speed toward demonstrators, as such actions endanger lives.
- Establish an external oversight mechanism for police conduct in line with international standards.

2. Security Information Agency

- Cease all unlawful use of spyware and physical access to activists' mobile phones.
- Cease the practice of subjecting activists to so-called "informative interviews" without guaranteeing their right to the presence of the attorney.

3. Prosecutors and Courts

- Ensure that proceedings against protest participants are conducted impartially, with strict respect for the right to defense and fair trial guarantees.
- Ensure rigorous judicial scrutiny of evidence and of the methods used to obtain it in politically sensitive cases, particularly where there are credible indications that such evidence may have been obtained unlawfully, including through the use of spyware or surveillance measures carried out without prior judicial authorisation.
- Ensure that pre-trial detention is applied restrictively and strictly as a measure of last resort, only where its legitimate purpose cannot be achieved through less intrusive measures.

4. Government of the Republic of Serbia

- Abandon normative solutions that stigmatize civil society, including initiatives resembling "foreign agent" laws.
- Cease public rhetoric that labels activists, students, professors, informal groups, and civil society organisations as "enemies of the state".

5. Pro-government and Commercial Media

- Stop smear campaigns and the publication of activists' and students' personal data.
- Respect professional and ethical standards of reporting, particularly regarding vulnerable groups and victims of attacks.

6. Civil Society Organizations

- Strengthen joint mechanisms for documenting incidents, providing legal aid, and offering psychosocial support to victims.
- Develop solidarity networks between student groups, trade unions, political and other activists, professional associations, and local initiatives.
- Intensify international advocacy efforts to ensure that Serbian institutions comply with their international human rights obligations, with the aim of securing effective protection for human rights defenders.

7. International Organizations and Partners

- Continue and strengthen monitoring of the human rights situation in Serbia, particularly in the context of repression against protests.
- Demand that authorities comply with recommendations of the European Commission, UN mechanisms, and the Council of Europe regarding freedom of assembly and expression.
- Support independent organizations, media, and universities through protection programs, exchanges, and emergency assistance initiatives.