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**UN MECHANISMS  
AND HUMAN RIGHTS  
IN SERBIA 2025**

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# I

## RESPONSES OF UN HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS TO DEVELOPMENTS IN SERBIA 2025

### 1. Introduction

Freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression are fundamental rights and among the cornerstones of any democratic society. The frequent protests held in the Republic of Serbia in recent years have put these values to a serious test, raising numerous questions regarding the permissible limits of action by state authorities. In the context of allegations of excessive use of force, arbitrary deprivations of liberty and various forms of pressure exerted on activists and citizens, the role of international human rights protection mechanisms acquires particular importance, both in ensuring independent and objective oversight and in holding the competent institutions accountable for any breaches of international human rights standards.

This analysis seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the responses of the United Nations (UN) human rights protection mechanisms to violations of fundamental rights and freedoms in the context of protests in the Republic of Serbia in the September 2024 – November 2025 period. The analysis focuses on the following three key levels:

1. **Reactions and oversight** – an examination of the manner in which UN treaty bodies and special procedures identified, monitored and documented human rights violations in the context of civic assemblies in the September 2024 – December 2025 period.

2. **Recommendations and guidance** – a detailed review of the recommendations these mechanisms addressed to the Government of the Republic of Serbia, concerning the alignment of practice and the relevant legislative framework with international human rights standards.
3. **Human rights situation and state conduct** – an analysis of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of association and the situation of human rights defenders, as well as an assessment of the Serbian Government's actions or failures to act upon receipt of these recommendations, with particular focus on the extent of their implementation in practice.

In addition to formal reports and recommendations, the analysis also encompasses statements by senior officials of various UN bodies, which often function as early warning mechanisms and indicators of the gravity of the situation on the ground, thereby providing additional political and moral legitimacy to calls for the protection of the protesters' rights.

The analysis draws on all available sources of information: official documents and communications of international bodies and Serbian authorities; reports by international organisations; and information published in the media. It also relies on information and findings provided by non-governmental organisations. The views expressed are those of the authors and are based on the above-mentioned sources. The overview of the human rights situation is based on the reports of the relevant domestic NGOs that have been systematically monitoring human rights violations, namely Civic Initiatives (Three Freedoms under the Magnifying Glass), the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights – YUCOM (map of attacks on human rights defenders), the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS) and the Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) (the SafeJournalists platform).

The analysis opted for this approach to ascertain the extent to which the UN human rights protection system has contrib-

uted to the advancement and protection of human rights in the Republic of Serbia and whether the issued recommendations have resulted in the alignment of the state authorities' conduct with international human rights protection standards.

## **2. Background**

The November 2024-November 2025 period in the Republic of Serbia was marked by a profound social and political crisis, triggered by the tragedy in Novi Sad in which 16 people lost their lives following the collapse of a canopy at the railway station. This event became the catalyst for mass civic and student protests across the country, centred on demands for accountability, institutional transparency, the fight against corruption and the protection of fundamental democratic and human rights.

Rather than creating space for dialogue and an institutional resolution of the crisis, the government's response was characterised by intensified repression, selective application of the law and the systematic shrinking of civic space. The protests, the overwhelming majority of which were peaceful and organised in accordance with international standards, were treated as a security threat. Their participants – students, teachers, activists, journalists and human rights defenders – were subjected to pressure, criminalisation and public stigmatisation.

A particularly troubling pattern emerged: institutional mechanisms – including the police, prosecutors, intelligence agencies and courts – were deployed as instruments of political pressure. This pattern was characterised by mass apprehensions and detentions, the initiation of criminal and misdemeanour proceedings against the protesters, the misuse of pre-trial detention and politically selective prosecution. In parallel, pro-government media intensified their smear campaigns, frequently targeting individuals, publishing their personal data and portraying the protests as an attempted “colour revolution” or a violent overthrow of the constitutional order.

The academic community and educational institutions found themselves at the centre of this conflict. Students and university staff, who publicly supported the protests, were subjected to police repression, disciplinary and administrative measures, media attacks and physical violence, resulting in serious interference with academic freedom and university autonomy. At the same time, civil society organisations and human rights defenders faced increased surveillance, financial inspections, institutional pressure and legislative initiatives aimed at stigmatising and delegitimising them.

In such a climate, international human rights protection mechanisms, in particular the UN special procedures, demonstrated heightened interest in the situation in Serbia during 2025. In a number of communications they addressed to the Serbian Government, the UN Special Rapporteurs drew attention to serious violations of the freedoms of peaceful assembly, expression and association, threats to the independence of the judiciary, academic freedom and the rights of human rights defenders, as well as to concerning patterns of surveillance, criminalisation and intimidation.

This background is essential for understanding the analyses that follow, as it demonstrates that the restrictions of fundamental freedoms in Serbia in 2025 cannot be viewed as isolated incidents, but rather as part of a broader and systemic pattern of conduct by the state institutions – a pattern international human rights protection mechanisms also clearly and consistently alerted to.

### **3. Responses of UN Human Rights Protection Mechanisms to Developments in Serbia in 2025**

The overall scope, frequency and substance of the reactions of the UN human rights protection mechanisms in 2025 indicate a significant erosion of their confidence in Serbia's ability and willingness to ensure the effective protection of fundamen-

tal rights and freedoms, particularly in the context of civic protests. Although formal supervisory mechanisms, such as the treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review, were not at the forefront in 2025, the intensified engagement of the special procedures, together with repeated interventions by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), attest to their perceptions of the seriousness and systemic nature of the registered violations.

The UN mechanisms' responses in 2025 went beyond the usual framework of individual expressions of concern and pointed to a pattern of state conduct producing a chilling effect on the exercise of the freedoms of peaceful assembly, expression and association, as well as on the work of human rights defenders, journalists and academia. In this regard, the interaction between UN mechanisms and the Serbia Government during the year may be qualified as involving heightened international scrutiny, coupled with the lack of the state's meaningful institutional response. This further raises questions as to the effectiveness of the existing protection mechanisms and the government's readiness to translate UN recommendations into tangible changes in practice.

In March 2025, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights assessed Serbia's efforts to implement the urgent recommendations it had made in its 2023 Concluding Observations. These urgent recommendations concerned the improvement of the situation of human rights defenders, the development of a national action plan on business and human rights and access to personal identity documents by certain vulnerable social groups as a precondition for the enjoyment of rights under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Committee noted partial progress with regard to the recommendations relating to human rights defenders and personal documents and insufficient progress in respect of the development of a national action plan on business and human rights. The Committee's assessment of Serbia's com-

pliance with its recommendation concerning the situation of human rights defenders is particularly important in the context of this analysis. The Committee noted with appreciation the measures Serbia had taken to create an enabling environment for human rights defenders, including the adoption of the Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2022–2030 and the establishment of the Council for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society. It, however, remained concerned about the lack of specific measures for the effective protection of human rights defenders, particularly in cases of harassment, intimidation and violence and the need to provide a safe and favourable environment for their work. The Committee regretted the absence of detailed information on the effectiveness of measures taken to ensure the safety of human rights defenders.

The UN Human Rights Council also issued Serbia recommendations back in 2023, within the framework of the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Nevertheless, 2025 may be characterised as a period during which the UN human rights protection system demonstrated marked interest in the situation in Serbia, clearly alerting to serious human rights violations and the need for the competent authorities to consistently apply and protect the rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant UN treaties ratified by the Republic of Serbia.

In response to allegations of human rights violations in various fields, UN special procedures addressed seven communications to the Republic of Serbia in 2025, raising specific questions concerning individual allegations of human rights violations. In addition, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights visited the Republic of Serbia in May 2025, after which he issued an official statement; he also addressed the concerning human rights situation in Serbia on two subsequent occasions during the

year.<sup>1</sup> In October 2025, the Republic of Serbia was also visited, for the first time, by the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights. Following the visit, it issued an end of mission statement, containing a detailed analysis of the situation and the broader socio-political context, with a view to assessing the impact of business activities on the enjoyment of human rights. Throughout the year, various UN bodies – in particular Special Rapporteurs – also reacted to allegations of human rights violations in Serbia in their public statements published on X.

## 4. UN Special Procedures

The UN special procedures, as one of the key international human rights protection mechanisms, were extensively utilised to highlight grave problems in the enjoyment and protection of human rights in the Republic of Serbia. UN Special Rapporteurs addressed a total of seven communications to the Serbia Government in 2025:

1. **Joint communication by five Special Rapporteurs** concerning allegations of ongoing attacks and pressure against human rights defenders, dated 3 April 2025 (Ref. AL SRB 1/2025).
2. **Joint communication by six Special Rapporteurs** concerning allegations of the use of a sonic device against peacefully assembled citizens at a gathering held in Belgrade on 15 March 2025, dated 2 April 2025 (Ref. AL SRB 2/2025).
3. **Communication by the Special Rapporteur on independence of judges and lawyers** concerning allegations of numerous instances of pressure by the executive

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1 See: HC Türk updates the Human Rights Council: “We need to safeguard eighty years of progress on freedom, equality and justice”, 8 September 2025; Serbian authorities need to speed up steps to ensure accountability – UN Human Rights Chief, 5 November 2025.

branch and the President on judicial office-holders in relation to proceedings aimed at establishing the facts and responsibility for the use of a sonic device against peacefully assembled citizens at the 15 March gathering in Belgrade, as well as in relation to events surrounding that incident, dated 5 May 2025 (Ref. AL SRB 3/2025).

4. **Communication by the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination**, concerning allegations of the participation of several hundred Serbian nationals in pro-Russian armed forces in the armed conflict in Ukraine, dated 19 May 2025 (Ref. AL SRB 4/2025).
5. **Joint communication by ten Special Rapporteurs and UN bodies** concerning allegations of violations of academic freedom, university autonomy and the right to education in the context of protests in Serbia, dated 30 July 2025 (Ref. AL SRB 6/2025).
6. **Joint communication by the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes and the Special Rapporteur on minority issues**, concerning the allegations of severe environmental contamination and human rights violations in the village of Krivelj, Bor district, Serbia, resulting from the mining activities of Serbia Zijin Copper DOO Serbia, dated 8 August 2025 (Ref. AL SRB 5/2025).
7. **Joint communication by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association**, concerning allegations of state pressure on the company United Media and its affiliated entities and an increased number of threats and attacks against the editorial staff and journalists of N1, which operates within

United Media, in the broader context of pressure on independent media in the country, including outlets belonging to United Media such as the N1 and Nova television networks, dated 26 November 2025 (Ref. AL SRB 7/2025).

Given that the purpose of this analysis is to examine the reactions of UN bodies to developments in Serbia in the context of the civic protests, the following sections will discuss the key allegations about violations of the freedoms of peaceful assembly, expression and association, with particular focus on the situation of human rights defenders in order to assess these issues within their broader context.

#### 4.1. Summary of the UN Special Rapporteurs' Communication Letter to the Republic of Serbia (AL SRB 1/2025)

##### 4.1.1. Background and Purpose of the Communication

On 3 April 2025, five UN Special Rapporteurs (on the situation of human rights defenders; on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment; on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; and on the right to privacy) sent a communication letter to the Serbian Government concerning serious allegations of systemic pressure against human rights defenders, journalists and civil society organisations.

The communication brought the Serbian Government's attention to information they had received concerning the interference into the privacy of five human rights defenders regarding their personal financial data; the use of spyware against journalists and activists; criminalisation of environmental human rights defenders and raid on the offices of CRTA; as well as public smear campaigns against journalists, CSOs and human rights defenders.

#### 4.1.2. Violations of the Right to Privacy (Financial Data)

The Special Rapporteurs noted that, on 31 December 2024 and again in January 2025, the Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering requested from all banks in the Republic of Serbia personal data on bank accounts of five eminent human rights defenders: Maja Stojanović (Civic Initiatives), Katarina Đukić (ProGlas), Sofija Todorović (YIHR), Predrag Voštinić (Local Front) and Nebojša Petković (Ne damo Jadar). The Administration requested the same information: complete financial transaction records, account balances, information on authorised signatories, safety deposit boxes and all other available data and documentation related to the business activities of the mentioned persons. Although the authorities referred to “suspicion of multiple criminal offences”, they provided no concrete reasoning or specific legal basis for such broad and intrusive surveillance measures.

#### 4.1.3. Surveillance and Use of Spyware

According to the information received, the police and the Security Information Agency (BIA) allegedly used the spyware “NoviSpy” and forensic tools produced by the company “Cellebrite” to compromise the mobile devices of journalists and activists. The infection of devices reportedly occurred during police detention and interviews, when the journalists, environmental activists and individuals were compelled to surrender their mobile phones without adequate procedural safeguards.

#### 4.1.4. Criminalisation of Environmental Activists

The Special Rapporteurs referred to an escalation of repression against activists opposing the lithium mining project, including mass arrests, criminal and misdemeanour charges including calling for violent change of the constitutional order, disturbing public order and obstructing police work. Activists also reported having their phones confiscated, homes searched without warrants and being detained for their social media posts, which also violated their freedom of expression.

#### 4.1.5. Smear Campaigns and Stigmatisation of Journalists

The Special Rapporteurs also noted the existence of continuous campaigns aimed at discrediting independent journalists and media outlets, including public insults, threats and targeting of independent journalists. They, in particular, drew attention to the events of 11 March 2025, when approximately one hundred individuals, including public officials, blocked the *N1* TV's building in Belgrade; the police, although present, reportedly did not intervene to end the blockade.

#### 4.1.6. Police Raid on CRTA's Premises

On 25 February 2025, police officers entered the premises of CRTA without a warrant, seeking to obtain information concerning USAID donations received over the previous eight years. The police remained on the premises for 28 hours, during which time the organisation's director was forced to remain on-site, which the Special Rapporteurs qualified as *de facto* detention. Subsequent public statements by the President, which included inaccurate information concerning the organisation's funding and references to "colour revolutions", further contributed to the stigmatisation of civil society.

#### 4.1.7. The Special Rapporteurs' Assessment of the Situation

The Special Rapporteurs expressed serious concern at what appeared to be a systematic campaign aimed at discrediting and intimidating human rights defenders, journalists and civil society organisations in the Republic of Serbia. They said that the reported surveillance, use of spyware, criminalisation of activism and concerted media smear campaigns created an atmosphere of fear and mistrust that had a direct chilling effect on the exercise of the freedoms of expression, association and participation in public life.

The Special Rapporteurs were especially concerned by the deployment of armed police units while collecting information

from organisations and forcing the representatives of the organisations to remain on-site, which they described as intimidation and a serious interference with rights to privacy and personal liberty. The Special Rapporteurs also warned that the public labelling of civil society actors as “foreign agents” put them at risk of being attacked and recalled Serbia’s duty to put in place effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those exercising their right to freedom of expression.

#### 4.1.8. Requests and Recommendations Addressed to the Government of the Republic of Serbia

The Special Rapporteurs requested that the Government of the Republic of Serbia provide, within 60 days, detailed responses, inter alia, regarding any steps taken to:

- effectively protect journalists, human rights defenders and others from unauthorised surveillance, smear campaigns, discrediting public statements and unwarranted raids; and
- ensure a safe and enabling environment for the exercise of the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, association and peaceful assembly.

The Rapporteurs also recalled the recommendations made by the Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression after her visit to Serbia and Kosovo in 2023, which included, among others, the recommendation that Serbia conduct effective, independent and impartial investigations into all allegations of abuse and human rights violations.

#### 4.1.9. Serbia’s Response to Communication AL SRB 1/2025

In its response, the Serbian Government said that the institutional framework had been significantly strengthened by the Planning System Act, which provides for the involvement of civil society organisations in policy-making from the earliest

stages. It qualified the establishment of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue in 2020 as a key development, along with the adoption of the Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society (2022–2030), which defines support measures, transparent funding mechanisms and capacity-building at the national and local levels.

The Government further stated that, in September 2024, a group of 12 CSOs requested an urgent session of the Council for Creating an Enabling Environment due to alleged pressure and negative media campaigns, that the Ministry responded within 24 hours and convened an extraordinary session of the Council in the parliament building. CSO representatives asserted that certain media outlets were disseminating disinformation about their work, creating a negative image of civic associations and jeopardising the dignity and safety of employees in this sector. They proposed that the Government adopt a conclusion condemning such campaigns and that the Prime Minister make a public statement on this issue, highlighting the importance of the work and role of civic associations in the reform processes.

The Government further specified that the Council reviewed the findings of a survey indicating risks to the activists safety and privacy at its sessions held in Šabac and Belgrade at the end of 2024. However, on 24 January 2025, CSO representatives in the Council, led by Aleksandar Prica, informed the Ministry that they had unanimously decided to freeze their membership due to their support for the protests. The Government maintained that this cut off an important channel of communication, despite the state's continued readiness to engage.

As per police searches of the premises of CRTA, Civic Initiatives, the Trag Foundation, the Centre for Practical Policy and the National Youth Council of Serbia on 25 February 2025, the Government said that the investigation was initiated following public statements by US government officials alleging non-transparent spending of USAID funds in Serbia. It asserted that the

searches were conducted in accordance with the Criminal Procedure Code and the ECHR, in the presence of the associations' legal representatives and lawyers engaged by them and that the documentation seized related exclusively to USAID donations.

## 4.2. Summary of UN Special Rapporteurs' Communication Letter to the Republic of Serbia (AL SRB 2/2025)

### 4.2.1. Background and Purpose of the Communication

On 2 April 2025, six UN Special Rapporteurs (on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; on the right to education; on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; on the situation of human rights defenders; and on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment) addressed a communication to the Government of the Republic of Serbia concerning serious allegations of violence against peaceful protesters, the stigmatisation of civic and student gatherings and pressure exerted on human rights defenders during demonstrations held in Belgrade on 15 March 2025.

The Rapporteurs expressed particular concern regarding the reported use of an unidentified acoustic weapon to unlawfully disperse a peaceful assembly, which, according to the information received, resulted in serious injuries, panic and significant health consequences for a number of protesters.

### 4.2.2. Broader Context of the Protests and Social Tensions

The Special Rapporteurs noted that mass protests in Serbia followed the tragic incident in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, when 15 people were killed after a concrete canopy collapsed at the railway station. The tragedy sparked immediate public outcry and criticism over alleged corruption, lack of transparency

and negligence surrounding the station's reconstruction, valued at over USD 1.2 billion. Protests continued throughout Serbia in November. Citizens and students started to peacefully assemble in their cities to hold daily 15 minutes of silence for the victims of the tragedy. The "15 Minutes of Silence" were on several occasions disrupted by violent incidents, including an attack on students outside the Faculty of Dramatic Arts on 22 November 2024 by a group of people that allegedly included members of the ruling party and public officials.

#### 4.2.3. Escalation of Repressive Measures against Students and Demonstrators

From December 2024 to March 2025, students organised large scale protests (with more than 100,000 participants) in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Niš, alongside hundreds of smaller local protests taking place on a weekly basis. Peaceful protesters put forward specific demands, asking for full transparency about all the documents related to the restoration of the railway station, the investigation of the accident and prosecution of those responsible and of people who attacked the peaceful protesters; release from custody and dropping unlawful charges against peaceful protesters; and a 20% budget increase for higher education. According to the allegations, the authorities' response was characterised by mass apprehensions, several-week detention of the demonstrators and claims that those carrying out arrests and those responsible for maintaining peace and providing protection during the protest often concealed their faces and hid their identification when apprehending citizens, activists, human rights defenders and opposition members before, during and after protests.

#### 4.2.4. Stigmatisation of Protests and Discrediting Campaigns

The Special Rapporteurs noted that senior public officials publicly labelled the protests as "paid from abroad", led by "foreign mercenaries" with the aim of carrying out a "colour

revolution” and the “violent overthrow of the Government”. They also noted that high ranking government officials had released public statements indicating that all foreign aid recipients were “foreign agents” and “criminals involved in money laundering”, further contributing to stigmatisation and aggravating security risks.

#### 4.2.5. Events during the Belgrade 15 March Protest

The Special Rapporteurs said they had received information about the concerning statements and announcement of measures from officials, including the President, before the start of the 15 March protest, attended by approximately 300,000 people. The protesters were allegedly planning large-scale violence, while the President said that “the State will show that it is a State and we will blow the final whistle”. Before the main gathering, an incident occurred in the Žarkovo suburb, where a vehicle drove into a crowd, injuring three individuals. The Rapporteurs also received information about an attack by police officers against a lawyer representing two detained young men.

#### 4.2.6. Alleged Use of an Acoustic Device

Around 19:11, during the 15 minutes of silence honouring victims of the Novi Sad tragedy, participants in the gathering in Belgrade heard a loud and unpleasant sound accompanied by a sudden push of air, vibrations and a string wave, that ‘struck them from behind’, triggering panic and a stampede, the Special Rapporteurs said. According to the information they received, consequences included loss of consciousness, vomiting, paralysis of the lower limbs, heart attacks and epileptic seizures, with symptoms lasting from several minutes to several hours or longer. The Special Rapporteurs also noted reports of the presence of a police vehicle equipped with a device resembling an LRAD 450XL close to the location where the sound was heard.

#### 4.2.7. Conduct of State Authorities Following the Protest

High level public officials, including the President of Serbia, denied accusations of the use of a “sonic weapon” or “sound cannon” against peaceful protestors and stated that people “spreading ‘panic and lies’ would be held accountable”. The Chief Public Prosecution Service ordered the Belgrade First Basic Prosecution Service to identify individuals claiming that dozens of people were treated for the effects of a sound weapon and indicated that those claims may constitute the crime of causing “panic and disorder”. On 16 March 2025, more than 100 individuals sought medical assistance. Dozens of patients were reportedly denied medical attention. According to the information received, hospitals were required to report and send information concerning “protest-related patients” to the Serbian Security Information Agency (BIA). On 19 March 2025, the Prosecution Service said that there was no reason to believe that the security services had used a sound cannon. The Rapporteurs said they had received information that the Protector of Citizens was also investigating reports on the use of a sound weapon, but had not yet presented any conclusions of the investigation.

#### 4.2.8. The Special Rapporteurs’ Assessment of the Situation

The Special Rapporteurs expressed serious concerns at what appeared to be an increasing restriction on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in the country. The apparently unauthorised sound device that has led to multiple further allegations of injury and illness arising from this weapon also gave rise to concern about Serbian Government’s compliance with the absolute prohibition of torture and ill-treatment and obligations under the Convention against Torture and other relevant international standards, they said.

The Rapporteurs said that these reported episodes were bound to have a chilling effect and create an atmosphere of fear and result in the shrinking of civic space. They expressed

particular concern regarding the potential use of experimental weaponry, such as acoustic devices, the health consequences of which have not been fully researched and which may cause permanent hearing damage or lead to fatal stampedes. Additionally, use of such weapons to disperse an assembly that was peaceful, without posing any risk, would amount to an unlawful disbandment of a peaceful protest. The use of the alleged weapon at a time when the participants of the assembly were mourning in silence would be disproportionate and cruel and may have been intended to cause the greatest psychological and emotional impact, the Rapporteurs said.

The Rapporteurs further recalled that the public discourse of senior officials had direct impact on the safety of demonstrators and that labelling citizens and organisations as “foreign agents” could contribute to escalation of violence. The denial of medical assistance on the basis of political or civic engagement is considered a particularly serious violation of the right to health and the prohibition of discrimination, they said.

#### 4.2.9. Requests Addressed to the Government of the Republic of Serbia

The Special Rapporteurs requested that the Government provide, within 60 days, detailed information concerning:

- the above-mentioned allegations;
- the management and use of force during the above-mentioned protests and report on the numbers and types of injuries of protesters;
- any investigations opened concerning alleged violent acts that occurred during the protests (of both civilians as well as law enforcement personnel) and the stage and/or outcome of those proceedings and any investigation opened against participants in the protests and those exercising their freedom of expression;

- measures taken to carry out a prompt, impartial, independent and effective investigation into the allegations of excessive use of force against peaceful protestors and into the alleged use of a sound/acoustic weapon to unlawfully disperse the peaceful assembly on 15 March 2025, including the legislative basis for such a weapon, prior authorisation and chain of command involved and the description of the justification of such employment;
- plans to advance justice and reparation, including measures to ensure non-repetition plans to ensure justice, reparations and guarantees of non-repetition;
- stock of less-lethal weapons, including acoustic devices and other sound wave emitters purchased or manufactured by the state; and,
- the numbers and types of injuries caused by the deployment of this device.

#### 4.2.10. Serbia's Response to Communication AL SRB 2/2025

In its reply, the Government of Serbia stated that it had no knowledge of any violations of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) or the Convention against Torture in connection with the protests in question. It emphasised that all police actions were conducted strictly in accordance with the Constitution, domestic legislation and applicable rules of international law.

The Government further stated that, although the 15 March gathering had not been formally notified, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) had taken measures to ensure its safe conduct and the protection of participants. It categorically denied that the police had used physical force or coercive measures against participants and asserted that police actions could not therefore have caused any injuries.

The Government said that six incidents, in which a total of 10 individuals sustained minor injuries, had been registered. The

gravest occurred in the suburb of Čukarica, where three participants were injured when they were struck by a vehicle driven by a civilian who was subsequently arrested for causing general danger. At the same time, several attacks against police officers were reported when unidentified individuals threw stones, pyrotechnics and a bottle filled with acid at them; one of the officers was injured.

The letter further stated that the MIA Internal Control Sector received five anonymous electronic complaints regarding the student protest on 15 March; that 31 persons were apprehended; and that three criminal charges (causing general danger, document forgery, possession of narcotics) and 24 misdemeanour charges (breach of public order, illegal weapons possession, lack of identity documents) were filed.

The Government devoted much of its response to allegations concerning the use of the so-called “sound cannon” (a high-powered sound-emitting device). It said that the First Basic Public Prosecution Service in Belgrade sought urgent clarification from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, BIA and the Ministry of Health. All institutions stated that none of their personnel had seen, heard or used such a device.

The Government emphasised that “sound cannons” were not prescribed as a means of coercion under the Police Act and stated that, in order to dispel any doubt, it had invited experts from the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) to conduct independent analyses and assist domestic authorities in establishing the facts.

Finally, the Government refuted allegations that anyone died during the events. It said that all health institutions in Belgrade provided emergency assistance professionally and impartially that evening, in accordance with ethical standards and with due respect for patient privacy. The Government concluded that all of the undertaken evidentiary actions were conducted exclusively in accordance with the Criminal Procedure Code.

### 4.3. Summary of the Communication of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers (AL SRB 3/2025)

#### 4.3.1. Background and Purpose of the Communication

On 5 May 2025, the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers addressed a communication to the Government of the Republic of Serbia concerning information received about public statements by the Serbian President and alleged pressure by the executive branch on prosecutorial authorities.

The communication arose in the context of investigations that were initiated after the alleged use of an acoustic (sonic) device against participants in a mass peaceful protest in Belgrade on 15 March 2025. The Special Rapporteur expressed serious concern regarding threats to judicial independence and the instrumentalisation of the prosecution service to criminalise public speech about an event of great public importance.

#### 4.3.2. Link to the Events of 15 March 2025

The communication builds upon the events that occurred during what was described as the largest protest in Serbia's contemporary history, reportedly attended by between 275,000 and 325,000 participants and organised in response to the tragedy in Novi Sad. According to the information received, a powerful sonic airwave was deployed during the protest, triggering panic, a stampede and serious health consequences for many present.

#### 4.3.3. Executive Pressure on the Prosecution Service

Rather than directing the focus of the investigation towards the circumstances of the incident and the potential unlawful use of a dangerous device, the President of the Republic publicly called on 16 March 2025 for the prosecution of all persons who had claimed that a "sound cannon" had been used. At a Govern-

ment session, the President directly urged the Minister of Justice and the prosecution service to initiate proceedings against those who, in his words, were “spreading lies”, thereby allegedly suggesting the outcome of the investigation in advance.

#### 4.3.4. Prompt Action Following Political Instructions

Immediately following these public statements, the relevant ministries and prosecutorial authorities undertook actions aimed at identifying and prosecuting victims and individuals who had reported the incident. The Belgrade Higher Public Prosecution Service ordered the identification of individuals suspected of causing panic and disorder.

#### 4.3.5. Intimidation of Lawyers and Other Citizens

On 17 March 2025, upon instructions from the prosecution service, officers of the Criminal Police Directorate interviewed BCHR representatives in connection with reports NGOs received from citizens. At the same time, the Serbian President publicly set a 48-hour deadline for the completion of the investigation and announced accountability for what he described as “brutal fabrications,” which was assessed as an attempt to induce self-censorship and impose the official narrative.

#### 4.3.6. Contradictory Statements by Public Officials

While the President publicly denied the possession of acoustic weapons, the Minister of Internal Affairs confirmed on 19 March 2025 that the Gendarmerie possessed a vehicle equipped with a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), asserting that it had not been activated during the relevant event.

#### 4.3.7. Reaction within the Judiciary

On 22 March, the President threatened police officers and public prosecutors, stating that any officials “who do not wish to

protect state order and the law will be replaced.” In response to these pressures, more than 600 judges and prosecutors – nearly 20 per cent of the total number in the country – signed a public statement condemning the long-standing subordination of the judiciary and degradation of its independence.

#### 4.3.8. Special Rapporteur’s Assessment of the Situation

The Special Rapporteur expressed deep concern at reports indicating that prosecutors and other justice officials in Serbia were being subjected to public disparagement and harassment by high-ranking officials, recalling that, in accordance with international standards and Article 14 of the ICCPR, states must ensure that those who perform a judicial function are free from interferences, intimidations, obstacles or harassments.

Public statements by public officials calling into question the professional integrity of the judiciary constitute a form of direct harassment and generate a significant chilling effect on judicial independence. Of particular concern is the instrumentalisation of the prosecution service to criminalise public speech on matters of exceptional public interest, including allegations of excessive use of force.

The Special Rapporteur recalled that prosecutors had to be insulated from politically motivated punishment or reward for undertaking their professional duties. Politicians and public officials play an important role in shaping the media agenda, public debate and opinion and, as a result, ethical behaviour and attitudes on their part, including in their public communications, are essential for promoting the rule of law, the protection of human rights and for ensuring public trust in democratic systems of governance. Incitement and threats against justice operators, including at the international level, can diminish the rule of law, jeopardise the judges’ and lawyers’ personal and professional interests and undermine judicial independence, she said.

#### 4.3.9. Requests Addressed to the Government of the Republic of Serbia

The Special Rapporteur requested that the Government of the Republic of Serbia provide, within 60 days:

- any additional information and/or comments concerning the above-mentioned allegations;
- updates on the progress of investigations into the incident;
- information on the measures taken to protect and ensure the respect of justice operators in Serbia, namely judges and prosecutors;
- information on measures taken to ensure that judges and prosecutors are able to work without undue interference and harassment in Serbia; and,
- information on the legal and institutional safeguards in place to guarantee the independence and impartiality of judicial appointments, promotions and disciplinary proceedings, including the role of the High Judicial Council and State Prosecutorial Council.

The Serbian Government did not respond to this Communication by the time this Analysis was completed.

#### 4.4. Joint Communication by UN Special Procedures to the Republic of Serbia on academic freedom and the right to education (AL SRB 6/2025)

##### 4.4.1. Background and Purpose of the Communication

On 30 July 2025, eleven UN special procedures addressed a joint communication to the Government of the Republic of Serbia concerning alleged violations of academic freedom, university autonomy and the right to education within the context of the recent protests in Serbia. The communication refers to information regarding violence against peaceful protesters, arbitrary

arrests, surveillance and the stigmatisation of students, academic staff, human rights defenders and other civil society actors in the context of the protests that followed the tragedy in Novi Sad.

#### 4.4.2. The Student Movement and Its Demands

The “Students in Blockade” movement was formed in response to the deaths of sixteen people caused by the collapse of a railway station canopy in Novi Sad. This tragedy, widely attributed to corruption and substandard construction practices, ignited widespread public outrage. The movement’s demands include full transparency of infrastructure projects, accountability for the tragedy and violence against students, increased investment in education, media freedom and strengthening the independence of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM).

#### 4.4.3. Escalation in Use of Force and Arbitrary Arrests

Since June 2025, police responded to more than 200 peaceful protests with excessive use of force. At least 274 arrests, including of minors, have been documented. Reports indicate that several detainees sustained serious injuries – including broken jaws, collarbones and ribs – allegedly because of beatings during protests, during arrest, in police vehicles, or in detention.

#### 4.4.4. Police Intervention on University Grounds

Particularly alarming were accounts from the night of 3 July 2025, when riot police reportedly stormed the area in front of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade, forcibly removing students attempting to seek refuge inside the building. At least 23 students were arrested and four hospitalised with serious injuries, said the Special Rapporteurs, who were also concerned that a significant number of officers were observed either without any visible identification or operating in plain clothes, making it impossible to determine their affiliation or hold them accountable for their actions.

#### 4.4.5. Digital Surveillance and Repression

The communication indicates that student plenums at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and the Faculty of Civil Engineering were subjected to surveillance, including interception and monitoring of communications via applications such as WhatsApp. Based on such surveillance, students were accused of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order.

#### 4.4.6. Attacks against and Discreditation of Academic Leaders

The Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš was knifed following a months-long media campaign of discreditation in which senior state officials reportedly participated. At the same time, the Rector of the University of Belgrade was the subject of more than 300 defamatory media reports within a single month, portraying him as a symbol of corruption and an alleged instigator of student blockades.

#### 4.4.7. Administrative and Financial Pressure on Universities

The communication also highlights threats to annul the entire academic year, as well as significant changes to the salary structure for academic staff. In early March 2025, the share of scientific research in calculating staff salaries was reduced from 50% to just 12.5%, a step assessed as a form of institutional pressure. Additionally, the withholding of enrolment quotas was perceived as an instrument of financial punishment against faculties perceived as “disobedient”.

#### 4.4.8. The Special Rapporteurs’ Assessment of the Situation

The Special Rapporteurs expressed deep concern regarding the mounting pressure on the education system, especially higher education, academic community, human rights defenders and civil society actors in the Republic of Serbia. They said

that the sector was under growing strain, marked by a troubling decline in university autonomy, academic freedoms of assembly and expression and the broader enjoyment of fundamental rights by students and academic personnel.

Attacks on academic leaders and sustained campaigns of discreditation indicate an increasingly hostile environment for the academic community, creating a climate of intimidation with serious implications for personal safety and professional integrity, they said. The Rapporteurs particularly alerted to political interference, censorship, surveillance and repressive measures directed against students, teaching staff and other civil society actors.

The Special Rapporteurs were further concerned by the labelling of protesters as “terrorists” by media outlets, government representatives and the President himself, which in addition to appearing contrary to the presumption of innocence under Article 14 of the ICCPR with respect to protesters charged with criminal offences, risked having a chilling effect on the exercise of protected rights and freedoms.

#### 4.4.9. Requests Addressed to the Government of the Republic of Serbia

In Communication AL SRB 6/2025, the UN special procedures requested that the Serbian Government provide, within 60 days:

- Any additional information and/or comment(s) on allegations of violations of academic freedom, university autonomy and the human rights of students, academic staff and other civil society actors;
- An explanation of measures that are currently in place, or will be introduced, to ensure physical safety, psychological well-being, institutional protection, academic freedom and the enjoyment of human rights, including the right to education and freedom of expression, asso-

ciation and participation in public affairs, of university personnel and students; and, in particular, an indication of the measures taken to provide access to remedies, particularly for those involved in protests or whose rights have been unduly violated;

- Information regarding how the protests were being managed, the use of force during protests and the numbers and types of injuries sustained by protesters.
- Detailed information on any investigations initiated into alleged violent acts committed by law enforcement officers during the protests, including reports of excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and potential acts of torture or other forms of inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; specify the number of such investigations, their current status and any outcomes or disciplinary measures taken.
- Information on any investigations or legal proceedings initiated against participants in the protests, including students and individuals exercising their rights to education and freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including, notably, details on the number of individuals arrested or charged, the legal basis for such actions and the current stage or outcome of these proceedings.
- An explanation of the immediate steps that the Serbian government will take to halt ongoing smear campaigns and defamatory narratives targeting students, academic representatives, student activists, human rights defenders, civil society actors and journalists, in state-affiliated media and public discourse; and information on the measures taken by the Government to ensure that these groups are able to carry out their legitimate work in a safe and enabling environment without fear of threats or acts of intimidation and harassment of any kind.
- An explanation of what concrete actions will be taken to initiate transparent, inclusive and good-faith dialogue

with university leadership and student representatives to restore trust and uphold the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

- Information on measures taken by the Government concerning the plans to advance justice and reparation, including measures to ensure non-repetition and access to justice and effective remedies.
- Information on the plans and measures adopted by the Government to ensure the proper functioning of the education system for the 2025/2026 academic year, in particular, details regarding the organisation of new enrolments in primary and secondary schools as well as universities, the allocation of funding for public universities and faculties and the steps taken to guarantee the right to education and uphold academic freedom; also indicate how the authorities intend to address the disruptions experienced in the previous academic year and ensure that students and educators are not adversely affected moving forward.

The Serbian Government did not respond to this Communication by the time this Analysis was completed.

A comparative analysis of the requests and questions addressed to the Government of the Republic of Serbia in Communications AL SRB 2/2025, AL SRB 3/2025 and AL SRB 6/2025 reveals a clear and consistent pattern of concern on the part of the United Nations regarding the systemic restriction of fundamental rights and freedoms during the civic protests in 2025. Regardless of the thematic focus of the individual mandates — ranging from freedom of peaceful assembly and the prohibition of torture, to judicial independence, academic freedom and the right to education — the UN special procedures have consistently demanded the same core elements: *prompt, independent and impartial investigations into allegations of excessive use of force and abuse of powers; protection of protesters, students, human rights defenders, journalists and judicial actors from in-*

*timidation and repression; an end to stigmatising and inflammatory rhetoric by public officials; and the provision of effective remedies, reparations and guarantees of non-repetition.*

The structure of these requests indicates that UN mechanisms do not regard the documented violations as isolated incidents, but as part of a broader pattern of state conduct producing a chilling effect on the exercise of civic, political, academic and professional freedoms. At the same time, the UN's insistence on transparency, institutional accountability and dialogue with affected groups confirms that relations between the United Nations and the Republic of Serbia in 2025 were marked by heightened scrutiny and growing expectations that the state demonstrate genuine readiness to translate recommendations into concrete and sustainable changes in practice.

## II EXERCISE OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS IN 2025

### 1. Freedom of Assembly

Exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in the Republic of Serbia was severely restricted in 2025. Protests held across the country, especially the mass gathering in Belgrade on 15 March 2025, were accompanied by allegations of excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and conduct incompatible with international human rights standards. These patterns point to systemic shortcomings in the competent authorities' management of public assemblies and response to civic protests.

The serious allegations voiced about the authorities' response to the March 15 rally, which was attended by hundreds of thousands of people, concerned the violent dispersal of an otherwise peaceful assembly, including the use of coercive measures. According to testimonies of citizens and CSO reports, a powerful sonic airwave was deployed during the protest, triggering panic, a stampede and serious health consequences for many participants.

The competent institutions' response in the aftermath of the protest was marked by public denials, public officials' contradictory statements and the absence of an independent, transparent and effective investigation into allegations of excessive use of force. Rather than establishing accountability for the conduct of law enforcement authorities, the institutional response focused mostly on identifying and prosecuting protesters and individuals who had publicly spoken about the alleged violations.

Alongside the authorities' denial of allegations of excessive use of force, a pattern of selective criminal and misdemeanour proceedings against protesters was observed, including the imposition of prolonged pre-trial detention and the initiation of cases with a clear chilling effect on the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly. Such practices further contribute to the intimidation of citizens and the shrinking of space for legitimate public dissent.

The narrative promoted by the topmost state officials – framing the protests as a security threat or an attempt to destabilise the state – further fuelled the stigmatisation of demonstrators. Such labelling fosters a hostile environment and has a direct negative impact on people's willingness to exercise their rights guaranteed by the Constitution and international treaties.

As noted also by the UN special procedures in 2025, this pattern of conduct produces a pronounced chilling effect on the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression and participation in public affairs. The absence of effective investigations and accountability, combined with stigmatising public rhetoric, indicates a systemic problem in the protection of this right, requiring urgent institutional and legislative measures to prevent further deterioration and to restore public confidence in state institutions.

### 1.1. Attacks on Student Protests

Rather than establishing accountability for the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad and the deaths of 16 individuals, the authorities in 2025 redirected their focus towards suppressing the protests triggered by the tragedy. Those targeted by such measures included university students, secondary school pupils, university professors, college deans and the university rector, as well as transport operators and other actors who publicly expressed support for the students' demands. The highest state officials, including the President, police officers, members and supporters of political parties, as well as pro-government media outlets, engaged in the attacks and pressures.

The aim of this approach was not confined to intimidating protest participants; it extended to suppressing the broader wave of social solidarity that had formed around the student movement. In doing so, the authorities sent a clear message that any form of civic resistance or public criticism could become subject to institutional pressure, thereby further constricting the space for freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly in Serbia. Available data indicate that nearly 93% of the documented cases relating to the student protests were not isolated incidents, but rather reflected sustained and repetitive patterns of coordinated attacks that persisted for months and intensified as the strength of the student movement grew.

## 1.2. The Right to Information and Visibility of Protests – The Autokomanda Example

A 24-hour protest, dubbed “Under Our (Auto)Command” and organised in the form of a blockade of the Autokomanda roundabout in Belgrade on 27 January 2025, proceeded peacefully, without major incidents. Given that Autokomanda is one of the city’s key traffic junctions, the organisers took measures to maintain order and safety and to mitigate the impact on public traffic, while the presence of the police was visible yet non-intrusive.

Protesters displayed banners and slogans and the gathering featured non-violent symbolic activities. Volunteer stewards effectively coordinated the movement of the participants and ensured that major roads remained passable. Police conduct was professional and proportionate. Traffic proceeded with minor diversions and without significant disruption.

Stewards reacted swiftly and in cooperation with the police to isolated incidents, such as provocations or attempts to display flags on the motorway, and prevented their escalation. The protest did not cause disproportionate disruption to traffic or last longer than was reasonable, indicating that the assembly

was organised in accordance with the standards the ECtHR developed in its case-law.

Despite the importance of providing timely and objective information to the public, none of the TV stations with nationwide coverage broadcast the protest live. The public service broadcaster, *Radio Television of Serbia (RTS)* referred to the event only briefly, stating that its crew had not been permitted to report live from the scene. In contrast, *NI TV* covered the entire protest live; however, its availability through a single cable operator significantly restricted access to information for citizens outside major urban centres.

At the same time as the Autokomanda protest, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) held a rally in Jagodina, which was broadcast by almost all television stations with nationwide coverage. In contrast, their coverage of the Autokomanda protest was limited and largely characterised by the distortion of facts, the downplaying of participant numbers and attempts to discredit the organisers, further highlighting the unequal and politically skewed treatment of different forms of public assembly in the media landscape.

### 1.3. Attacks against Journalists

Coverage of protests as matters of public interest constitutes one of the core functions of journalism in a democratic society. Accordingly, any accusations against the media, any obstruction of journalists' work in the field and any assaults on them essentially amount to an attack on freedom of expression itself.

The safety of journalists in Serbia deteriorated to a deeply concerning level following the 1 November 2024 tragedy, driven in particular by inflammatory and stigmatising statements directed at critical media outlets, most notably by the President and other senior public officials. A record high number of threats, acts of pressure and physical attacks against representatives of professional and independent media were documented

until the end of 2025: The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS) registered as many as 344 cases of threats and pressure — the highest number registered since the establishment of its database.

TV NI reporters were among the most frequent targets, receiving repeated death threats via email and social media in November 2024, July and October 2025, as well as in anonymous letters during the summer of 2025 and directly, while covering the August protests. Similar threats were voiced against journalists of the daily *Danas* and the editorial teams of *Insajder*, *Mašina* and *Južne vesti*.

Particularly troubling is the fact that such attacks occurred continuously as part of a broader narrative shaped by statements of senior public officials, who portrayed certain media outlets and journalists as “enemies of the state” or as a “destabilising factor”. Such discourse not only delegitimises professional journalistic work, but also creates an environment conducive to threats and violence, encouraging individuals to perceive calls for violence as a legitimate response to critical reporting.

According to the records of the Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists, 14 proceedings in connection with attacks on journalists were initiated before the competent public prosecution services between 1 November 2024 and 1 November 2025. By contrast, 108 such proceedings were initiated in the period from 1 January to 1 November 2025 alone.

In 2025, the prosecutors opened 117 cases (six in January, seven in February, ten in March, eight in April, seven in May, ten in June, 22 in July, 21 in August, eight in September, nine in October and nine in November) concerning incidents affecting 121 injured parties, 94 of them media professionals. Of these, 49 (52.13%) were male and 45 (47.87%) were female.

Of the total number of cases, 54 (46.15%) were opened by the Special High-Tech Crime Public Prosecution Service. These cases concerned incidents affecting 51 injured parties, namely 43

media professionals, 17 (39.53%) of them male and 26 (60.47%) of them female.

Herewith the status of these cases as of 30 November 2025:

- Two cases ended in a conviction;
- The trials of three cases were ongoing;
- The criminal reports were dismissed in 11 cases;
- Prosecutors issued official memos concluding that there were no grounds to initiate criminal proceedings in 15 cases;
- Evidentiary actions were ongoing in 15 cases;
- Requests to collect the necessary information were submitted in 50 cases;
- The prosecutors were reviewing allegations contained in the criminal report or in reports compiled during the pre-investigation phase in 10 cases;
- Despite measures undertaken during the pre-investigation phase, the potential perpetrators had not been identified in 11 cases.

A first-instance or final decision was adopted in 28 (23.93%) cases.

#### 1.4. Vehicle Attacks

Protesters were victims of numerous physical and verbal attacks, while the number of incidents involving vehicles ramming into the people who had rallied measured in dozens since the beginning of the protests. Repeated cases of cars violently breaking through blockades and injuring protesters point to organised attempts to intimidate the demonstrators. Of particular concern is the fact that pro-government media systematically downplayed the seriousness of these attacks and sought to justify the drivers' conduct, thereby normalising violence and fostering a climate of impunity. At the same time, the aggressive media campaign in which protesters were labelled "blockading terrorists" further

fuelled hostility and stigmatisation, framing legitimate the civic protest as a security threat.

One of the gravest incidents occurred on 16 January 2025, during a fifteen-minute blockade at the intersection of two Belgrade streets (Ruzveltova and Kraljice Marije), when a vehicle accelerated into a group of assembled citizens and struck student Sonja Ponjević who was standing on the pavement so hard that she was thrown onto the roof of the car. The trial against the driver, who is charged with attempted aggravated murder, continued in October 2025. This is one of the rare instances in which a driver was actually prosecuted for ramming into protesters.

Four musicians from the Belgrade Philharmonic, who had joined one of the protest actions entitled “Stop, Serbia”, were injured when a car drove into a group of citizens standing in the heart of Belgrade paying tribute to those who died at the Novi Sad railway station. In late December, the Belgrade Higher Court delivered a first-instance judgment sentencing the driver to three years’ imprisonment for the grave crime against public safety.

The state authorities’ lenient response to such attacks, coupled with the President’s decision to pardon the young woman who drove her vehicle into protest stewards in New Belgrade on 24 January 2025, produced a strong chilling effect, conveying a message of impunity for violence against citizens expressing dissent.

In late January, two doctors were struck by a vehicle near Palmotićeve Street in Belgrade. In June, the police forced the protesters off Vojvode Stepe Street in Belgrade by advancing towards them with police vans across all lanes at speed.

### 1.5. Physical Attacks

Numerous assaults against the protesters were also documented but it is quite likely that many incidents were never reported to the authorities nor made public. In January 2025, students of the Belgrade Faculty of Law were attacked and pelted

with glass bottles; a similar incident occurred involving students of the Faculty of Technical Sciences. The perpetrators of that attack arrived in ambulances with obscured licence plates. The misuse of ambulances became a recurring feature, ranging from their use in staged scenarios portraying blockading protesters as obstructing emergency services, to their use for transporting masked attackers and weapons. In one instance, a reckless ambulance driver ran over a dog. In January, a group of masked assailants threw stones at the building of the Faculty of Sports in Niš. Later that month, young men armed with baseball bats attacked students in Novi Sad while they were distributing protest stickers. Several were injured, including a female student who sustained serious bodily injuries. Although four attackers were arrested, the President subsequently pardoned them after minimising the attack by suggesting that they had merely been defending party offices. Four students of the Novi Sad Faculty of Sports and Physical Education were beaten up in March. In June, a law student and prominent student representative was attacked by masked assailants wearing Red Star insignia. Another student involved in protest marches was beaten by three individuals in June as well.

### 1.6. Alleged Use of a Sonic Device

The public assembly entitled “15 (March) for 15 (Victims)” was announced and organised as the next major gathering in a series of demonstrations in university centres across the country. This protest, attended by approximately 300,000 citizens, was held in the heart of Belgrade, in the area surrounding the Serbian parliament, spanning Nikola Pašić Square, King Aleksandar Boulevard towards the Faculty of Law and parts of Knjeza Miloša and Resavska Streets. The central part of the gathering took place at Slavija Square, while Kralja Milutina Street was designated a “Silent Street” in memory of the victims of the 2023 school shooting at Vladislav Ribnikar Primary School. The central public gathering lasted from 4 pm until approximately 7

pm. Initially scheduled to continue until 10 pm, the gathering was brought to a premature close due to a deterioration in the security situation affecting volunteer stewards near the National Assembly.

The area was heavily policed, with intervention units and the Gendarmerie deployed. Traffic police were present prior to the gathering around the designated starting points in various parts of the city. Intervention police units were deployed not to protect protesters but to secure a counter-rally located at Pionirski park and the plateau in front of the Belgrade City Hall. The Gendarmerie was heavily deployed around the National Assembly. Regular police were not present in significant numbers. Serbian Army personnel (in plain clothes) were seen in the crowd.

Media coverage of the student protest on 15 March 2025 was highly polarised. Public broadcasters mentioned the event but did not devote much airtime to it, while *N1* and *Insajder TV* provided continuous live coverage. Tabloids largely framed their coverage around narratives of alleged violence, political manipulation and the failure of the protest, while social media and online portals facilitated broader dissemination and discussion, albeit amid sharp divisions.

The protest proceeded peacefully until 6 pm. The situation escalated around 7 pm near Pionirski park after clashes and the throwing of objects prompted the withdrawal of stewards and the early conclusion of the gathering. Shortly thereafter, at 7:11 pm, during the 15 moments of silence in Kralja Milana Street, a powerful sound resembling a “sound cannon” was emitted, triggering panic and injuries. The Belgrade First Basic Public Prosecution Service initiated proceedings to determine what had occurred.

A large number of citizens commemorating the victims of the Novi Sad tragedy at the peaceful assembly on 15 March experienced serious health problems following the deployment of the device resembling a sonic weapon. Around 4,000 people

contacted civil society organisations and shared their experiences, describing panic, fear, hearing difficulties, headaches, dizziness and, in some cases, loss of consciousness. On the basis of these testimonies, criminal reports were filed with the competent public prosecution service and an application for an interim measure was submitted to the European Court of Human Rights. The ECtHR upheld the application and ordered the Republic of Serbia to refrain from using acoustic weapons during peaceful assemblies. Another application related to the incident was still pending before the ECtHR at the end of the reporting period. Proceedings before the Serbian public prosecution service were also ongoing, with hundreds of citizens being interviewed and medical documentation and other evidence collected. It is worth noting that the Serbian authorities did not respond to the offer the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights during his visit to Serbia in June 2025 – that UN experts conduct an independent investigation. In her article on the use of torture weapons on Europe’s streets to put down protests published in the *EU observer* in early October, the UN Special Rapporteur on torture mentioned alarming reports that experimental acoustic weapons were unleashed on the protesters in Belgrade on 15 March.

The analysis of the “15 (March) for 15 (Victims)” assembly reveals serious shortcomings in the state’s fulfilment of its positive obligations under domestic law and international standards on freedom of assembly. Rather than ensuring the peaceful and safe conduct of the gathering, the competent authorities’ actions and rhetoric contributed to the creation of a hostile and discouraging environment. The alleged use of an acoustic device during a peaceful assembly, which caused panic and health problems among numerous citizens, is particularly alarming.

### 1.7. Attacks on University and School Teachers

Attacks and pressure were also directed at school and university teachers who publicly supported the student protests. Throughout the year, numerous cases were recorded of edu-

cators being targeted in tabloids, subjected to physical assaults and threats and exposed to disciplinary and employment-related sanctions. In January, for example, the tabloid *Alo* singled out a secondary school teacher in Bajina Bašta, while the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš was the victim of threats and a physical assault in February and a knife attack in March. In Novi Sad, a physical education teacher was dismissed for publicly supporting the students, while, in September, the media reported on a broader pattern of repression, including dismissals and removals of school principals for supporting the protests.

The Independent Trade Union of Education Workers of Serbia (NSPRS) reported that more than 100 teachers had lost their jobs or were denied contract renewals during the 2024/2025 school year in retaliation for participating in or supporting protests. The NSPRS and other unions warned that informal criteria – such as political loyalty and alignment with the authorities – were increasingly being applied in practice, supplanting professional competence and objective standards.

Pressures extended to university leadership. The Rector of the University of Belgrade was the target of public attacks, including a statement by a minister on *Pink TV* that he “must be arrested”. The police used force against Professor Smiljana Milinkov during a protest in late April. In June, three professors of the University of Novi Sad were arrested while serving as volunteer stewards. That same month, the Dean of the Novi Sad Med School and five other individuals were arrested for alleged financial irregularities, although the case concerned the payment of staff salaries.

These actions indicate that the aim of the pressure was not merely to intimidate individual educators, but also to prevent the spread of solidarity with the student protests to other sectors of society, which would significantly strengthen their political and social impact.

## 1.8. Police Brutality

Numerous cases were documented in 2025 of excessive use of force and inappropriate police conduct towards citizens, activists and students participating in peaceful protests or providing legal aid to detainees.

In the night of 15/16 March 2025, a police officer injured YUCOM lawyer Kristina Todorović, who was extending free legal aid in the Zvezdara Police Station to students hauled in during the protest. The officer first insulted and cursed her and then grabbed her by the arm and forcibly removed her from the office. CSOs called on the Ministry of Internal Affairs to conduct an urgent investigation and initiate disciplinary proceedings against the officer.

On 28 April 2025, Professor Smiljana Milinkov of the Novi Sad Faculty of Philosophy was attacked outside the Faculty of Sports and Physical Education by members of an intervention police unit. An officer reportedly threw her to the ground, causing injuries to her neck, legs and head.

On 28 June, Luka Mihajlović, a technical sciences student, was beaten and detained by the police during a protest and subsequently hospitalised at the Zemun Clinical Hospital Centre. The Ministry of Internal Affairs first denied and then confirmed his mother's claim that he was handcuffed to the hospital bed.

During a protest on June, the police forced the protesters off Vojvode Stepe Street in Belgrade by advancing towards them with police vans flashing lights across all lanes at speed, causing panic and injuries. At least 16 people were detained. The following day, on 1 July, police officers severely beat Aleksa Stanković, a student and photojournalist who had previously published footage of police officers insulting female protesters. He was repeatedly punched and slapped by two police officers.

On 11 July, a plain-clothes police officer ill-treated a student of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, pulling her by the hair outside 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. According to reports, officers of the Belgrade Criminal Police Directorate and the head of the Kula Police Department, Milan Stanković, beat him, slapped him and threatened him during detention without a warrant and without parental presence. Doctors documented injuries to his head, shoulder and abdomen. The police characterised the incident as an “unfortunate event”. Starčević was released late that evening after the police attempted to pressure him into signing a statement he had not given.

The most horrific cases of police brutality were recorded in Valjevo on 14 August. Police began dispersing assembled citizens and severely beating the town’s residents, including minors. Footage shows numerous officers kicking two young men lying on the ground and striking them with their batons. Another recording shows the severe beating of an underage boy whose state of health still remains unknown. In a separate location, officers beat a man lying on the ground, with one officer deliberately striking him between the legs. During the beating of another individual, an officer is heard asking, “Are you an opposition supporter?” According to testimonies, police attacked individuals at multiple locations across the city. More than 60 citizens assaulted by the police were admitted to the Valjevo hospital.

The Belgrade police deployed armoured vehicles onto the streets on the night of 15 August. They threw tear gas at the people and attacked several of them. At the same time, police officers stood by and refrained from intervening when individuals described as SNS-affiliated groups dragged people through the streets. Police intervention appeared to be reserved only for protesting students and citizens.

On 15 August, law student Aleksandra Nikolić sustained serious injuries after falling during a police onslaught and being repeatedly struck on the head with batons, resulting in several broken teeth. Emergency medical personnel refused to provide

her assistance, stating that they were deployed there only to extend assistance to police casualties.

On the same day, student Nikolina Sinđelić publicly claimed that Marko Kričak, the commander of the Unit for the Protection of Designated Persons and Facilities (JZO), slapped her, struck her head against a wall and threatened her with rape in a government garage while hauling her and other protesters in.

The police again used tear gas to disperse the crowd during another protest held in Belgrade on 16 August. Armoured vehicles were deployed and an individual wearing a badge drew a firearm on citizens. An ambulance took to the hospital a group of young men the police beat up near Vuk's Monument. Officers also reacted aggressively when they noticed citizens filming an arrest. Further unrest occurred on 18 August, when stun grenades, tear gas and pyrotechnics were used and several individuals broke the SNS office window.

The local police chief in Čačak approached civic activist Draško Darijević, who was being hauled in and punched him in the stomach.

Similar incidents continued into the autumn. Environmental activist Milena Orubović Đukić was struck on the head with a baton during a protest in September in Kosjerić, and arrested the following day along with six other activists. She was detained for 48 hours for assaulting an officer although footage showed she had not acted violently.

Aleksandra Božić from Šid was detained during a protest in Novi Sad on 11 September 2025. She alleged police torture and disregard for her medical condition. The Ministry of Internal Affairs denied the allegations, specifying she was suspected of obstructing an officer in the performance of his duties.

Additional concern arose from the fact that many police officers were masked and did not wear identification badges, raising doubts among experts as to whether all those in uniform

were in fact police officers. BCHR filed criminal reports against police officers and individuals presenting themselves as such for unlawful conduct and excessive use of force.

Students of the Novi Sad Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics published the results of a laboratory analysis of tear gas canisters recovered on campus after the 5 September protest, proving that the police had used the prohibited and hazardous CN gas. The MIA denied the allegation, claiming it neither possessed nor used CN gas (just like it initially denied possessing a sonic device). The health effects reported by exposed protesters included breathing difficulties, skin burns, nasal discharge, throat irritation and eye tearing. Footage of the 5 September protest also showed police officers experiencing adverse effects of the gas. Domestic institutions have not yet responded to concerns regarding the safety of citizens. No proceedings are expected concerning the potential use of this toxic gas, the possession and use of which by the police are prohibited by law.

These cases reveal a troubling pattern of police violence, absence of oversight and impunity within police structures. Excessive force, unpunished violence and intimidation of individuals and activists have apparently become a routine response to peaceful assemblies and public protests. The absence of prompt and effective investigations further deepens public distrust in institutions and reinforces a climate of impunity. Although civil society organisations have continued to support victims, the responsibility to protect human rights rests with the state. The 2025 developments demonstrate that such protection has been gravely lacking in practice.

This pattern of pressure and retaliation against educators and university leadership is reflected fully in the findings of the UN special procedures in communication AL SRB 6/2025, which identified systemic threats to academic freedom, university autonomy and the right to education in the context of protests in the Republic of Serbia.

## 1.9. Criminalisation of the Protests

A clear trend towards the criminalisation of the mass protests emerged from the outset. Senior executive officials publicly characterised certain forms of conduct as serious criminal offences, which was followed by the initiation of expedited criminal proceedings. In some cases, proceedings were concluded on the same day through the acceptance of plea agreements and the issuance of convictions. The practice of fast-tracking criminal cases against protesters continued throughout 2025, with duty prosecutors and pre-trial judges deciding on the negotiation and confirmation of plea agreements.

Such practice constitutes a serious interference with the right to a natural judge, given that duty prosecutors and judges are designated by the chief public prosecutors and court presidents respectively, thereby creating scope for selectivity and institutional pressure. Of further concern is the fact that, in almost all proceedings against protesters, acting public prosecutors sought the imposition of pre-trial detention, suggesting that the most restrictive measures were applied as a rule rather than as an exception.

The narrative portraying the student protests as an attempt at a “colour revolution” and an alleged coup did not remain confined to media propaganda; it was institutionally reinforced through the misuse of the justice system. The most pronounced form of such a practice was the prosecution of activists on charges of incitement to a violent change of the constitutional order, opening space for BIA’s involvement in actions taken against protesters. Activists were apprehended and questioned by plain-clothes BIA officers who used unmarked vehicles. For instance, it turned out that a number of students initially reported as missing had in fact been deprived of liberty by BIA.

One of the most striking examples concerns the publication of a covert audio recording of a meeting of members of

the Free Citizens' Movement (PSG) and the group STAV, held on 12 March 2025, during which they discussed the possibility of forcing their way into the RTS building. On the basis of that recording, the activists were charged with preparing criminal offences against the constitutional order; six were remanded in custody, while the other six were out of the country when the warrants for their arrest were issued and did not return for fear of arrest.

The court replaced the detained activists' custody with house arrest two months later and lifted it in October 2025, but the six activists remained outside Serbia. This case is one of the clearest examples of the criminalisation of political dissent and pressure on civic activism. Furthermore, the lawfulness of the audio recording has been seriously called into question. According to information obtained by *Insajder* in response to its request for access to information of public importance, the conversation was taped accidentally, during the wiretapping of another individual who does not appear on the recording, but who was reportedly subject to special surveillance measures during the relevant period.

A similar pattern of criminalisation was applied in the case of student Stefan Tomić, who was arrested on the basis of handwritten messages shared in a WhatsApp group, allegedly referring to a plan to force their way into state institutions during the protest on 28 June, following which he was placed under house arrest.

This practice of criminalising protests and political dissent, including through the abuse of criminal law and security services, is reflected in the concerns expressed in the communications of the UN special procedures AL SRB 2/2025 and AL SRB 3/2025, which highlight the disproportionate use of repressive measures, the instrumentalisation of the judiciary and the serious chilling effect on the exercise of the freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression in the Republic of Serbia.

### 1.10. Draft Amendment Aimed at Incriminating Traffic Disruption

In September and October 2025, the Ministry of Justice proposed draft amendments to the Criminal Code introducing a new criminal offence against road traffic safety. The draft amendment reads as follows: “Whoever destroys, removes or seriously damages traffic devices, equipment, signs or signalling or protective or guard rails serving the safety of public road traffic; makes false signs or signals; places obstacles on roadways or stops vehicles in traffic contrary to regulations shall be punished by imprisonment of up to one year.”

This draft amendment introduces criminal liability for conduct affecting traffic resulting in only one consequence – stopping vehicles. The proposed provision constitutes a repressive measure aimed at deterring citizens from protests involving road blockades and is also apparently designed to be used against students and citizens participating in blockades organised following the deaths of 16 people under the collapsed canopy at the Novi Sad railway station. There is no clear need to introduce a new form of a “consequence-free” criminal offence of this kind, given that misdemeanour mechanisms suffice in situations where disruption of traffic does not cause any actual danger – an approach reflected in many European legal systems. In addition, Article 290 of the Criminal Code already incriminates serious and socially dangerous conduct. It reads as follows: “Whoever, by destroying, removing or seriously damaging traffic devices, equipment, signs or signalling devices or protective or guard rails serving the safety of public road traffic, by giving false signs or signals; by placing obstacles on roadways, by stopping a vehicle in railway traffic contrary to regulations, or in another similar manner endangers public traffic and thus the life, limb or property of a significant value, shall be punished by imprisonment of up to three years.”

### 1.11. Misdemeanour Proceedings

In 2024 and 2025, the police filed a large number of misdemeanour reports against protesters in Serbia under various laws, including the Public Assembly Act, the Road Traffic Safety Act and other substantive legislation. Misdemeanour proceedings were most frequently initiated in relation to road blockades and alleged breaches of public law and order.

There were cases in which misdemeanour charges were served on citizens whose identity the police had not checked on the spot, but were identified later through video surveillance or by police officers who personally knew them. Following frequent nationwide blockades, the practice of apprehensions was largely replaced by the mass service of misdemeanour charges, often without prior explanation or a clear legal basis. Participants in blockades were fined 5,000 RSD in certain towns, such as Sremska Mitrovica and Leskovac.

The courts responded to this practice in a number of cases. The Misdemeanour Appeals Court quashed first-instance judgments due to procedural deficiencies and remitted cases for reconsideration, while in certain cities, such as Niš, courts dismissed police requests on the grounds that the conduct described did not constitute a misdemeanour.

Several important examples that were publicly available are set out below.

On 4 July 2025, according to information from the Belgrade Misdemeanour Court, 40 participants in protest blockades were apprehended at multiple locations in the city, including Belgrade's main Republican Square, in Zemun and Kraljice Marije Street. Two convictions and one acquittal were delivered in summary proceedings, while the court decided to adjudicate the remaining cases in ordinary proceedings. Following the arrests, citizens gathered outside police stations in an attempt to obtain information about the detainees.

In Subotica, misdemeanour proceedings were initiated against a journalist for allegedly organising an unnotified protest in front of the police station under the slogan “Against Police Brutality in Novi Sad” on 6 September.<sup>2</sup> The Subotica Misdemeanour Court fined Elemer Priboj 50,000 RSD for allegedly insulting the police during a civic protest held at a roundabout in the city centre in July. Priboj denied that he had insulted the police, while the police failed to submit any evidence that he had insulted them.

Misdemeanour proceedings were also initiated against student Nikolina Sindelić, who publicly spoke about the violence she had suffered at the hands of the commander of the Unit for the Protection of Designated Persons and Facilities (JZO). Proceedings were brought against her for disturbing law and order, insulting police officers and the use of explosive devices, although she maintains that she had only a flare and had not even used it. This misdemeanour report is yet another form of pressure against Nikolina, in retaliation for speaking publicly about the abuse. It is a stark illustration of the authorities’ treatment of the victims and their unwillingness to properly investigate such allegations and punish the perpetrators.

The Misdemeanour Court questioned the Rector of the University of Arts on 11 September following a report by the Education Inspectorate concerning the suspension of classes. The academic community interpreted this as a continuation of pressure on rectors and deans who had supported student protests and blockades. The timing of such reports and hearings was perceived as a clear warning to university staff of the consequences of continued support for the student movement. The Dean of the Faculty of Philology was also summoned for questioning before the Misdemeanour Court following an Education Inspectorate report alleging that she had failed to organise classes during student blockades.

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2 Suđenje Subotičaninu zbog neprijavljenog protesta ispred policijske stanice – on tvrdi da je bio samo reporter, *Magločistač*, 22 October.

Police checked the identities of Obrenovac residents who were repainting graffiti opposing protests and student blockades at a protest supporting the assaulted student Nikolina Sindelić. Although the citizens had covered the graffiti with white paint matching the colour of the wall, the police nonetheless checked their identities and said they would face misdemeanour charges.

A Novi Sad police officer filed two reports against activist Robert Silberholc. The first misdemeanour report relates to a protest held on 15 July 2025 in front of the building where SNS leader and former PM Miloš Vučević lives, during which the activist chanted “Miloš, you scoundrel”. The second report is nearly identical but relates to a different event and date, specifically his entry into the already damaged SNS offices on 14 August. Robert was apprehended for entering the premises, although he claims he did not participate in vandalising them. The reporting officer sought a custodial sentence for this misdemeanour (indecent and reckless behaviour).

This broad and selective use of misdemeanour law against participants in peaceful protests also caused concerns raised in the communication of the UN special procedures AL SRB 2/2025, which points to disproportionate restrictions of the freedom of peaceful assembly and the chilling effect that repressive measures have on the exercise of this right in the Republic of Serbia.

### 1.12. Abuse of the Freedom of Assembly – the Ćaciland Example

A “continuing public assembly” was registered in Belgrade by a group presenting itself as “students who want to study” on 6 March, 9 days before the mass protest scheduled for 15 March. The assembly occupied Pionirski park, between the National Assembly, the Presidency and Belgrade City Hall. The stated purpose of the assembly was to enable the continuation

of education. The gathering – a tent encampment later labelled “Ćaciland” – was soon physically cordoned off, first by tractors and later by metal fencing and was maintained continuously, 24 hours a day, until the end of the year. However, students were not observed on site; most of those present appeared to be older supporters the ruling party. The visibility of the gathering was ensured almost exclusively through reporting by pro-government media, often accompanied by public officials, including the Serbian President.

The competent police station received multiple notifications of public assemblies without a specified duration, including notifications submitted by senior SNS officials. At the same time, the assembly area was physically separated by metal barriers and safeguarded by private security and the police, with restricted public access. A series of incidents were recorded involving citizens, journalists, MPs and passers-by who were prevented from moving through the park and across the road at one of Belgrade’s key traffic junctions.

On 22 October, V.A. (70), a former BIA officer, entered the area of the “continuing public assembly”, discharged a firearm he was carrying unlawfully and poured petrol on and set fire to tents located in front of the National Assembly. He remained silent during questioning, while the tabloids portrayed him as a “blockader” in their reports, disseminating stigmatising narratives. The public assembly at that location was not discontinued despite this serious endangerment of people and property and the risk of the fire spreading.

This example of selective enforcement of the law, unequal treatment of public assemblies and tolerance of serious security risks was also noted in the communication of the UN special procedures AL SRB 2/2025, which highlights the authorities’ discriminatory practices, disproportionate restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly and the absence of adequate measures to protect participants and the public in the Republic of Serbia.

### 1.13. Police Conduct during Counter-Protests – the St. Vitus Day Protest Example

The protest “See You on St. Vitus Day”, held on 28 June 2025, was organised by the informal group Students in Blockade at Slavija Square in Belgrade, as part of a broader student-civic movement. The civic initiative Archive of Public Gatherings estimated that approximately 140,000 people attended. A counterrally was organised at the same time in response to the scheduled student protest. It was held in Pionirski park near the parliament, enjoyed strong institutional backing and support of the state leadership and was safeguarded by strong police forces. It was attended by representatives of the group publicly identifying as “students who want to study”, as well as supporters of the ruling party.

The student protest proceeded peacefully and without incident until its conclusion at approximately 9:40 pm. Stewards were actively engaged in securing the area, enabling ambulances to pass and preventing contact with the counter-protesters. However, at around 10 pm, direct confrontation occurred between the police and protesters who reportedly headed towards those rallied in Pionirski park. The police’s sudden and indiscriminate pushback came without prior warning and involved use of batons, shields and chemical agents. They injured a number of people, including demonstrators lying on the ground and several journalists. The police did not distinguish between violent and peaceful protesters.

The police used disproportionate force against individuals who did not resist and violated the procedural safeguards of those arrested (including by plain-clothes officers), denying them the right to counsel of their own choosing and to notify their families. Those detained included secondary school pupils and university students. Lack of information about people remanded in custody was also documented. Prior to the protest, the police arrested individuals they accused of preparing

attacks on the constitutional order, relying on disputed recordings broadcast by pro-government media.

Police conduct following the conclusion of the rally constituted a serious departure from the domestic legal framework and international standards, in particular Articles 3, 5, 6 and 11 of the ECHR. The use of force was disproportionate; protesters were not consistently given prior warning; and the restrictions imposed on their rights were neither necessary nor justified. The absence of visible identification markings on officers further undermined accountability.

The protest received only marginal coverage by the public service broadcaster, while private pro-government media conducted a campaign criminalising the participants. By contrast, continuous coverage was provided by *NI*, which is available only to cable TV subscribers.

The protest “See You on St. Vitus Day” demonstrated a high level of organisation and predominantly peaceful civic resistance, but also revealed troubling institutional patterns of state force and political pressure, warranting urgent and independent legal and institutional review and an appropriate response by the competent institutions.

#### 1.14. Civil Disobedience – Užice

During a protest in Užice on 6 July, a large group of people, who rallied to blockade the main road, succeeded in breaking through a police cordon. The police used pepper spray against them. The following day, the police detained lawyer Radovan Novaković, a member of the Užice Action local council, suspecting him of assaulting an officer during the blockade. Eight other people were also arrested. All of them were remanded in custody for 30 days. They were suspected of “violent conduct” and assaulting police officers during the previous protests.

In response to the conduct of the Gendarmerie and the judiciary, spontaneous gatherings were held every day in Užice, culminating in a mass rally entitled “Serbia, Užice is calling you”,

held on 13 July 2025. Despite heightened tensions, the event proceeded peacefully and without major physical clashes with the police. It was essentially staged as a reaction to earlier instances of violence and repression. Although the main road was blocked for nine hours (until one a.m.), no incidents were registered. Participants danced the “Užice kolo” and lit flares as an expression of solidarity.

The day after the rally, on 14 July, the Užice Basic Court lifted the detention order for seven citizens, while placing two of them under house arrest.

### 1.15. Police Clearing of Road Blockades – Arrests, Identity Checks and Misdemeanour Reports

The Serbian MIA regularly reported on measures undertaken by the police during civic protests and road blockades across the country. For instance, according to MIA’s official press releases issued in the 11–18 July period: on 11 July, all road blockades were removed and the identities of 172 persons were checked, with one misdemeanour report filed; on 12 July, the identities of 339 persons were checked, with no detentions, while six misdemeanour reports were issued; on 13 July, the identities of 99 persons were checked and 24 misdemeanour reports were filed; on 14 July, the identities of 263 persons were checked and four misdemeanour and three criminal reports were filed; on 15 July, the identities of 119 persons were checked; on 16 July, the identities of 138 persons were checked and four misdemeanour reports were filed; on 17 July, the identities of 110 persons were checked and 19 misdemeanour reports filed; and on 18 July, the police checked the identities of 44 persons, detained three people and filed five misdemeanour reports.

### 1.16. Violent Counter-Rallies

Both spontaneous and unnotified albeit organised counter-rallies of SNS supporters took place in August. These gath-

erings involved attacks on protesters, as a rule in the presence of police who did not intervene. Attacks were documented in Bački Petrovac, where an exhibition of the Slovak national minority was prevented on 9 August; in Novi Sad's Liman neighbourhood, where clashes broke out with SNS supporters who were painting Serbian flags on buildings, after residents removed hate graffiti on 10 August; in Vrbas on 10 August; and in Bačka Palanka on 11 and 12 August. Police passivity and the organised arrival of thugs prompted pro-student protesters to cancel the rallies they had planned due to safety concerns.

The attacks in Vrbas escalated on 12 August. That evening, SNS supporters intensified their aggression, resorting to pyrotechnics (fireworks and firecrackers) and throwing stones and frozen bottles of water at citizens. The police did not act against violent SNS supporters or prevent the attacks, during which multiple people were injured and sustained cuts and wounds from pyrotechnics and stones. Vrbas residents reported being struck by various objects, including tools, nunchakus and wooden planks. An activist of "Studentski glas Vrbas" said she had information indicating that more than 60 people were admitted to an emergency unit due to the consequences of the attacks by SNS supporters.

**In response to unpunished violence by SNS supporters,** protests were held in front of SNS offices in several cities – Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Valjevo – between 13 and 16 August. Numerous attacks on the protesters, involving the use of pyrotechnics, sticks and bottles, were registered at these protests, along with clashes between the demonstrators and police. SNS premises were destroyed. Excessive use of force by the police was recorded, including the use of tear gas, multiple detentions of peaceful citizens and degrading treatment of protesters. These events were marked by the presence of police in full riot gear, armoured vehicles, the Gendarmerie, members of special units for the protection of designated persons and facilities, as well as members of the "Cobras" special unit, one of whom drew his firearm and fired into the air.

The Serbian President twice addressed his supporters in the street twice on 13 August. While in “Ćaciland”, he accused the media of conducting the “dirtiest campaign”. The police indiscriminately arrested peaceful citizens, while no publicly documented arrests were made of SNS supporters who attacked protesters. The MIA stated that 223 individuals were arrested over four nights of incidents. Six persons were arrested in Novi Sad for allegedly attacking Cobra unit members during the protest on 13 August.

On 14 August 2025, Bogdan Jovičić, a student of the Faculty of Technical Sciences (FTN), was detained in connection with damage to SNS premises in Novi Sad during a protest held the previous day. He was charged with violent conduct at a public assembly and spent more than six weeks in detention. He was brought to his father’s funeral with restraints on his legs, which prompted widespread public condemnation. He began a hunger strike on 11 September and was transferred five days later to the Special Prison Hospital in Belgrade. He ended the hunger strike on 23 September, at the request of his lawyer, after the ECtHR agreed to review his application. The prosecutor was also contemplating charging Jovičić with breaking windows on a vehicle. On 13 October, the court replaced his PTD by three-month house arrest with electronic monitoring.

### 1.17. Media Campaign

The tabloids’ smear campaign was virtually uninterrupted throughout 2025. The beginning of the year was marked by these outlets’ individual targeting of students, including the publication of their personal data. Following the publication of Croatian passports belonging to the Stojaković brothers as alleged “proof” of Croatian intelligence involvement in the organisation of the protests, a list resembling a “wanted notice” was published with the names and personal details of 12 students of the Faculty of Technical Sciences. This was the second such incident within

only two days, following the earlier publication of a list containing the details of 11 students of the same college. The narrative of the so-called “colour revolution” and alleged involvement of foreign intelligence agencies — particularly Croatia’s Security and Intelligence Agency (SOA) — was continuously used as a basis for delegitimising the student protests.

Student Mila Pajić became one of the central targets of these campaigns. In February, the Serbian President publicly labelled her as a proponent of “anti-Serb ideology”. In March, pro-government media intensified the targeting by portraying her as the alleged organiser and financier of the “colour revolution”. In April, the tabloid *Informer* launched a new campaign against students of the Faculty of Sports and Physical Education, depicting them as “violent” and publishing the names of 18 students alongside unfounded accusations, obviously with the aim of publicly discrediting and intimidating them.

The tabloids also intensified smear campaigns against human rights defenders and CSOs providing legal, logistical or public support to the protests. Organisations and individuals were portrayed as “foreign agents”, “mercenaries” and “instigators of unrest”, accompanied by disinformation regarding their funding and activities. Such reporting contributed to the creation of a hostile environment for civil society and increased the risk of pressure, threats and institutional reprisals.

In addition to students and activists, tabloids also targeted judges of the Novi Sad Court of Appeal ruling on the detention of PSG and STAV activists. The smear campaign thus expanded to include holders of judicial office. Judges and prosecutors who lifted detention orders or dismissed criminal reports became targets of tabloids, who as a rule labelled them “blockader judges” and “blockader prosecutors”.

These coordinated media attacks on students, human rights defenders and CSOs were also noted by the UN special procedures in their communication AL SRB 1/2025, in which they expressed their concern about the systematic stigmatisation of

civil society, discreditation campaigns and their connection to the narrowing of civic space in the Republic of Serbia.

The smear campaign against members of the judiciary following decisions not aligned with the preferences of the executive was also noted by the UN special procedures in their communication AL SRB 3/2025, which alerts to political pressure on the judiciary.

## **2. Freedom of Association: Position of Human Rights Defenders**

Freedom of association in the Republic of Serbia was seriously undermined through a series of legislative initiatives, institutional pressures and repressive practices directed against CSOs, informal groups and individual activists from 1 November 2024 to 1 November 2025. Announcements of the adoption of an Act on a Special Register of Foreign Influence Agents, alongside the frequent deployment of security and repressive institutions – including BIA, the MIA and public prosecution services – created a climate in which civil society activities were systematically delegitimised and subjected to pressure. There are also serious indications that other institutions became involved in these processes, including the National Bank of Serbia, through intensified financial checks and oversight.

As civic resistance decentralised and spread beyond the seat of state institutions, repressive practices followed this dynamic, extending to local communities, schools, colleges and city streets. Data indicate that the most frequent targets were individual activists, that associations were attacked directly less often, while the largest share of documented pressures related to informal groups. This pattern points to a strategy of fragmentation and intimidation aimed at weakening organised civic engagement and discouraging association outside formal institutional frameworks. At the same time, an increase was registered in attacks directed at individual activists (90), while the number

of attacks on associations (42) was significantly lower, while the highest number of attacks related to informal groups (130).<sup>3</sup>

Institutional mechanisms designed to improve cooperation between the state and civil society effectively ceased to operate. Although formally established, the Council for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society did not address increasing pressures on the civil sector. Following the adoption of the 2025–2026 Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, representatives of CSOs froze their participation in the Council due to escalating threats and pressure. The body did not meet once until the end of the year. Likewise, in early February 2025, a broad coalition of organisations focusing on human rights, the rule of law and democratisation suspended cooperation with the legislative and executive authorities, stating that the political crisis and sustained pressures rendered impossible meaningful dialogue and participation in EU accession processes.

The legislative agenda was a particularly alarming aspect of the threats to freedom of association. On 29 November 2024, MPs of Aleksandar Vulin’s Movement of Socialists, part of the ruling coalition, submitted to the National Assembly a draft Act on a Special Register of Foreign Influence Agents. The draft defines as an agent “any association or non-profit organisation primarily financed or otherwise supported by foreign states, their institutions, international and foreign organisations, foreign citizens, or registered non-governmental organisations financed from abroad”. The draft law, which would oblige civil society organisations receiving foreign funding to register as “agents” under threat of severe penalties, constitutes a serious departure from international standards and a direct attempt to stigmatise and silence critical voices.

At the same time, the practice of formally fulfilling public consultation requirements was further hollowed out by the cir-

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3 Map of Incidents, YuCom.

cumvention of the Planning System Act. Public hearings were organised in a manner that did not enable meaningful participation by interested stakeholders, while key legislative processes, including amendment of criminal law, were conducted in an expedited manner, with limited and inadequate public debate. The most striking example was the public hearing on the 2025 budget convened by the parliamentary Committee on Finance, the State Budget and Control of Public Spending. The hearing was scheduled for Sunday afternoon, 24 November 2024, only one day before the parliamentary session on the budget. It was announced only three days in advance and the Committee session and the hearing effectively overlapped, because both were scheduled for 4 pm. Invitations were sent exclusively to public institutions and state officials. Only following an initiative by Transparency Serbia (a member of the PrEUgovor coalition and the National Convention on the EU) was an invitation extended to this CSO, whose representatives thus became the only civil society participants. Holding budget hearings on Sundays immediately prior to parliamentary sessions has become a regular practice, evidently preventing the broader community from contributing to the improvement of such a vital document.

Another illustration of procedural shortcomings was the public hearing entitled “Public Discussion with REM Council Nominees”, organised by the parliamentary Committee on Culture and Information on 23 January 2025. Following the hearing, several candidates requested that the process be annulled in seven out of nine categories, citing serious procedural irregularities. These requests were rejected in full. Only five days later, seven of the 18 shortlisted nominees withdrew their candidacies, alerting to systemic discrimination, preferential treatment of candidates affiliated with the ruling party and breaches of statutory requirements regarding the nominating organisations.<sup>4</sup>

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4 PrEUgovor Alarm, Report on the Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1, PrEUgovor, May 2025.

The amendments to criminal legislation considered during 2025 alarmed CSOs, as they included provisions with the potential to incriminate activism, further restrict freedoms of assembly and expression and harden the penal policy. Despite the civic associations' and professional organisations' calls for the withdrawal of the draft amendments, the legislative process continued, while reports on public debates remained incomplete and inconsistent with the prescribed standards of transparency and inclusiveness.

The public was not adequately included in the legislative processes in 2025. Work on amendments to the Criminal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Juvenile Justice Act proceeded at pace. For the first time, a public consultation was conducted without a formal conclusion providing for the holding of public events and round tables. The draft amendments to the criminal legislation contained provisions narrowing the freedoms of assembly and expression. Civil society criticised the conduct of the public consultations within a short 20-day period in September and October 2025, arguing that the Government lacked legitimacy to undertake such far-reaching reforms amid a societal crisis. They were, in particular, concerned about: (1) the criminalisation of activism through the introduction of new criminal offences that could be used to suppress public protests, such as stricter penalties for road blockades envisaging up to one year's imprisonment; (2) threats to freedom of expression through the introduction of an offence effectively criminalising the dissemination of content deemed to encourage criminal conduct, interpreted as a "thought crime" that could affect social media users and journalists; (3) the tightening of the penal policy; and (4) threats to journalists' work.

Civic and guild associations and experts called for the withdrawal of the amendments from the procedure, fearing they would strengthen repression and jeopardise fundamental human rights.

Following the end of the public consultation period, the Ministry of Justice announced that the government would ask the European Commission for an opinion on the draft. The consultation report was not compiled in accordance with the relevant rules, nor in line with prior practice involving responses to all comments and suggestions.<sup>5</sup>

This analysis of the institutional and normative framework fully reflects the findings set out in the UN special procedures' communication AL SRB 1/2025, which highlights the systematic targeting of civil society organisations through discreditation campaigns, surveillance and disproportionate financial scrutiny. When read together with other UN communications issued in 2025 — including AL SRB 2/2025 and AL SRB 3/2025 — it reveals a clear pattern in which legislative initiatives, security mechanisms and administrative pressures operate as interconnected instruments for narrowing civic space and restricting freedom of association in the Republic of Serbia.

## 2.1. Violations of the Activists' Digital Security

The concept of threats to the digital security of human rights defenders covers a broad range of cyber-attacks aimed at undermining the privacy, integrity and security of individuals and organisations engaged in human rights work. Although it includes various forms of sophisticated intrusions, cases that could be classified as digital security incidents were rare at the time the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights began systematically documenting incidents against activists in 2020. At the time, the Internet was used primarily as a tool for smear and discreditation campaigns, while direct cyber-attacks against the websites of non-governmental organisations and media outlets were sporadic.

Abuse of access to people's personal data collected by mobile and internet service providers was one of the most serious

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<sup>5</sup> [www.mpravde.rs](http://www.mpravde.rs).

digital security problems in the period behind us. Although this practice was frequent and systemic, the public at large reacted to it only sporadically, largely owing to the work of a small number of digital rights organisations, which consistently warned about it in their reports.

The issue of activists' digital security gained particular prominence in late 2023, after two individuals working in CSOs were notified by Apple that their phones had been targeted in an attack linked to state actors. The use of the Israeli "Pegasus" spyware was later confirmed through forensic analysis carried out by the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto and Amnesty International. An AI report, published in December 2024, revealed that domestically produced spyware known as "NoviSpy" had been installed on the phones of a number of activists while they were questioned by BIA officers. Unlike "Pegasus", "NoviSpy" can be installed only by a person with physical access to the phone and the programme is incapable of erasing traces of its own use. "NoviSpy" transmitted the extracted data to an IP address associated with a BIA officer, whose name was partially reflected in the name of the computer receiving the data. In addition, the software's source code contained a phone number linked to that individual. Based on the formatting of the identification code of victims' devices, Amnesty International concluded that the spyware may have been installed on more than 600 mobile devices; this assessment was further supported by the information this organisation received from Google.

Amnesty International concluded in at least two cases that phones on which "NoviSpy" was installed had been unlocked using "Cellebrite" software – a forensic tool lawfully used by police forces worldwide. The tool enables phones to be unlocked, data to be copied and spyware to be installed. The "Cellebrite" licence was withdrawn following the publication of Amnesty's report. However, the practice also changed: instead of returning phones to activists after copying data, devices are now destroyed in order to conceal traces of the extraction of information. Stu-

dents repeatedly reported that police officers had smashed their phones, which further suggests attempts to conceal evidence of unlawful copying of content. The use of spyware has far-reaching consequences for the work of human rights defenders. The mere knowledge that such tools are being used generates intimidation and self-censorship, which persists as long as those responsible remain unaccountable and there is no clear institutional protection for those affected.

The Amnesty International report is based on information obtained through digital forensic examinations of the activists' and journalists' phones, which established the method, timing and scope of data compromise. These findings were then used to initiate all available legal protection mechanisms. Criminal reports have been filed against unidentified perpetrators, police and BIA officers, in relation to six documented cases since 2024. All cases remained in the pre-investigation stage.

Proceedings were also initiated before the Protector of Citizens and an initiative was submitted to the Personal Data Protection Commissioner requesting an inspection of digital surveillance cases. Unfortunately, protection before independent institutions turned out to be as ineffective as criminal-law protection. The Protector of Citizens informed one complainant that he would not conduct proceedings because criminal proceedings were pending in the case. After obtaining responses from the police and security services – in which they denied taking measures or actions that would constitute unauthorised or unlawful personal data processing and claimed that any actions they had taken had been lawful – the Personal Data Protection Commissioner “established” that there were no facts indicating a violation of the Personal Data Protection Act, nor any grounds that would justify conducting an ad hoc inspection ex officio.

The use of unlawfully obtained data is restricted by law and such evidence cannot be used in court proceedings. Nevertheless, after *Informer* TV published an audio recording of a meeting of STAV and PSG activists in March 2025, the group

was apprehended on suspicion of preparing a crime against the constitutional order.

There were other incidents during the protests, including the one on 11 July, when a plain-clothes police officer harassed a female student of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, pulling her by the hair outside the Faculty of Law in Belgrade in an attempt to force her to unlock her phone. According to lawyer Ivan Ninić, who represents the protesters, the police have been sharing recordings obtained from seized phones to tabloid-style outlets such as *Informer* and *Pink*.

## 2.2. Attacks on Women Activists and Human Rights Defenders

Approximately a third of all registered attacks were directed at women human rights defenders, activists and women maintaining a visible public presence at the protests. Those female students, professors, school principals, college deans, prosecutors, judges, lawyers and activists were targeted precisely because they held visible roles in public life, organised resistance or challenged the authorities.

This is confirmed by the research conducted by the organisation FemPlatz, entitled “Between the Megaphone and Silence: Women in the Struggle for Change – An Exploratory Study of Personal Experiences, Challenges and Women’s Resistance in the Protests in Serbia 2024/2025”, published in November 2025. The study analyses women’s participation in the mass protests in Serbia and the various forms of violence to which they were exposed. Violence against women in the context of protests was not sporadic; rather, it was structural and deeply rooted in patriarchal patterns and authoritarian state practices.

The study documents a wide spectrum of gender-based violence: from verbal harassment, sexist insults and online attacks to physical abuse, threats of sexual abuse and degrading police treatment. The gendered dimension of repression was particu-

larly evident in the manner in which the police and actors affiliated with the authorities treated women, reflecting an intersection of misogyny, sexism and political repression.

Numerous testimonies point to disproportionate and unjustified use of force by the police against female protesters. Women reported being subjected to tear gas, physical violence, threats and degrading treatment during arrest and detention, even when they offered no resistance. Particularly concerning were accounts of invasive body searches, sexualised insults and comments and practices aimed at humiliation and intimidation rather than the maintenance of public order. Women were frequently portrayed through narratives depicting them as “foreign agents”, “traitors”, “immoral” or “sexually deviant”, while their private lives were instrumentalised to discredit them.

In addition to police violence, women were exposed to attacks by civilians and groups affiliated with the regime. CSOs and media registered incidents involving vehicles deliberately ramming into protesters, assaults on female students and threats and intimidation during and after protests. The FemPlatz study data indicate that nearly 40% of female students experienced some form of violence during the protests – most commonly verbal threats and insults, but also combinations of physical and verbal abuse, online harassment and direct assaults. More than a quarter of the respondents witnessed violence against other women, further confirming the systemic nature of the problem.

The experience of fear and insecurity became part of the everyday reality of women at the protests. Even those who had not been directly attacked reported heightened anxiety and a persistent sense of vulnerability. Many of them began wearing protective gear, masks or altering their behaviour at public gatherings in order to reduce the risk of violence, which directly affected their exercise of their freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression. The interviewed women did not perceive the violence as isolated incidents, but as part of a broader social and

political context in which patriarchal patterns of domination permeate both society and state institutions.

Femplatz's research demonstrates that violence against women in the context of the protests served as a mechanism of control and discipline, restricting women's presence in public and political space. Where state institutions and ruling structures are strongly interconnected, gender-based violence becomes a tool for suppressing social resistance. Such a practice has serious consequences for women's human rights, democratic processes and the rule of law and requires urgent institutional response, accountability and systemic protective measures.

Several examples illustrate the treatment of female protesters. The case of student Nikolina Sindelić encapsulates the authorities' response to women's participation in protests.

As noted, the authorities' response to the legitimate demands of student protests included resort to the "colour revolution" narrative, in which women often personified the enemy and became symbolic figures of rebellion. Mila Pajić, an activist of the STAV group and a protest organiser, was subjected to months of tabloid attacks, while the President publicly labelled her as a proponent of "anti-Serb ideology" who "hates the Serbian people". She was one of the participants in the meeting of STAV and PSG activists, the secretly recorded conversation of which was broadcast by *Informer TV* in March 2025. Following the airing of the footage, part of the group was detained on suspicion of preparing plotting against the constitutional order. Several participants, including Mila Pajić, Anja Pitulić and Doroteja Antić, avoided arrest because they were abroad at the time.

CSOs were also targeted as part of the "colour revolution" narrative. CRTA Director Vukosava Crnjanski was frequently accused of being part of an operation to overthrow the President, while Maja Stojanović, the Director of Civic Initiatives, was labelled a resident agent of Western intelligence services.

Members of the academic community were likewise subjected to repression and intimidation. Professor Smiljana Mil-

inkov, who participated in the protests, was the victim of police brutality and death threats. The Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš received death threats and was the target of a knife attack. In June, the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine was arrested over alleged irregularities related to salary payments. Many female professors and school teachers and principals were subjected to retaliation, dismissal or demotion because of their public support for the demonstrations and participation in protests.

Women were frequently targeted in tabloid smear campaigns. In August, Dejana Stošić was labelled in headlines as an “anti-Serb of homosexual orientation” who allegedly profited from her participation in protests. That month, tabloids justified the detention of Ana Hebar in Belgrade by portraying her as someone who “adores Albania and Croatia while wreaking havoc across Serbia”. Milena Orubović Đukić, an activist from Kosjerić, was depicted as a “terrorist who teaches children”. In April, female students Jelena Popadić, Žana Pavlović, Katarina Milankov, Anita Ivanović, Željana Marković, Mirjana Berković, Sara Azarić and Galina Đivujski were publicly labelled as part of a “group of thugs” who had allegedly “lynched” the Dean of the Novi Sad Faculty of Sports and Physical Education.

Female students and activists were also frequently subjected to police brutality, detention and intimidation. Sonja Ponjavić and Kristina Vasiljević were seriously injured in two separate vehicle attacks in January 2025. While the trial of the driver who struck Ponjavić is ongoing, the President pardoned the driver who hit Kristina Vasiljević.

Student Teodora Jovičić was detained in August for allegedly writing graffiti on the building of Radio Television of Vojvodina, while Milan, David and Irina – students travelling on a bus owned by Jaćimović (a well-known bus company owner providing transport for protesting students) in November – were held inside the vehicle after the police seized it.

Aleksandra Božić, who was detained during a protest in Novi Sad in September, reported that she had been subjected to

police torture. Milena Orubović Đukić was detained the same month together with six other activists, one day after being struck on the head with a baton during a protest in Kosjerić. In July, Vesna Klačar was detained during a protest in New Belgrade for allegedly obstructing traffic, although she claimed she was just sitting in the grass when the police intervened.

Activists of the initiative *SviČe*, Jelena Božić and Darija Stjepić, were summoned for questioning for writing graffiti on BIA's building during a campaign demanding the release of detained STAV members. A police officer pulled a female student by the hair and punched her in the head during a protest in Novi Sad in November. In August, during a protest in Belgrade, a female student was repeatedly struck on the head with a baton after falling to the ground. In July, a plain-clothes policewoman harassed a student of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, pulling her by the hair outside the Faculty of Law in Belgrade in an attempt to force her to unlock her phone.

The case of Nikolina Sindelić, a student of the Belgrade Faculty of Political Sciences, was one of the most egregious examples of gender-based and political violence during the 2025 protests in Serbia. Her experience clearly demonstrates how state repression, misogyny and digital violence are used as tools to silence women publicly engaged in political dissent.

Nikolina was detained together with other students and citizens during a peaceful protest in Belgrade on 14 August 2025, and taken to a government garage. According to her testimony, members of a special protection unit under the command of Marko Kričak subjected her to physical and psychological abuse – she was slapped, insulted and threatened with sexual violence, accompanied by overtly sexualised insults and degrading comments. The group was held for several hours without legal grounds; the prosecution stated the same evening that there was no basis for criminal prosecution, thereby confirming that the deprivation of liberty had been unlawful. After Nikolina publicly spoke about her experience, the MIA denied the allegations without having conducted an investigation, claiming that the po-

lice had acted in compliance with the law. Shortly thereafter, she became the target of a massive digital violence campaign. Intimate photographs taken when she was a minor were unlawfully published and disseminated on social media, an action reportedly initiated by former MIA State Secretary Dijana Hrkalović. The campaign escalated further when a pro-government tabloid broadcast her intimate content on a TV channel with nationwide coverage, which amounts to a grave form of institutionalised digital violence and a blatant violation of her right to privacy.

These events elicited strong public reactions. Feminist organisations staged a protest under the slogan “We are all Nikolina” on 19 August, demanding police accountability and an end to violence against women. Instead of an institutional response, a political campaign of discreditation followed. Senior state officials publicly questioned her credibility, portraying her as a political activist making unfounded allegations, thereby relativising and normalising the violence. Nikolina was subjected to multiple forms of abuse within a period of just ten days: physical and sexualised police violence, unlawful deprivation of liberty, digital abuse involving the unlawful publication of intimate content, mass online harassment and political pressure. No proceedings were initiated against Marko Kričak, although she filed criminal reports against him. When Kričak filed a defamation lawsuit against her, the court demonstrated unusual expedition in scheduling the hearing. This case illustrates how gender-based violence in Serbia is used as an instrument of political repression, with serious consequences for women’s safety, their participation in public life and the rule of law.

### **3. Conclusion**

The analysis of 2025 developments demonstrates that the mass civic protests in Serbia were accompanied by systematic and coordinated restrictions of fundamental human rights and freedoms, in particular the freedoms of peaceful assembly,

expression and association. The findings and reactions of UN mechanisms, including seven formal communications issued by special procedures, clearly demonstrate that the identified violations do not constitute isolated incidents, but, rather, form part of a broader pattern of institutional conduct aimed at narrowing civic space and discouraging democratic participation.

The UN special procedures, as one of the key international mechanisms for the protection of human rights, were referred to extensively in this analysis to draw attention to serious concerns regarding the enjoyment and protection of human rights in the Republic of Serbia. UN Special Rapporteurs addressed a total of seven communications to the Government of Serbia in 2025 (compared to four in 2024 and three in 2023).<sup>6</sup>

The UN special procedures repeatedly expressed serious concern over excessive use of force, the criminalisation of peaceful protests, pressure on the judiciary, surveillance of activists and civil society organisations, as well as threats to academic freedom and the safety of journalists. They placed particular emphasis on the executive's role in fostering a hostile environment through inflammatory public rhetoric, selective application of the law and the instrumentalisation of security and judicial institutions. The absence of effective domestic protection and accountability mechanisms has further deepened the gap between Serbia's international obligations and actual practice.

At the same time, increased engagement by international actors in 2025 – including visits by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights – confirms that the situation in Serbia is regarded as an issue of broader international concern.

Unless the identified trends are reversed, there is a serious risk of further deterioration of democratic standards, institutional independence and public trust in the rule of law. The

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6 More in BCHR's *2024 Human Rights Report*, p. 34 and *2023 Human Rights Report*, p. 42.

findings of UN mechanisms therefore constitute not only a diagnosis of the current situation, but also a clear call to the Serbian authorities to take prompt and concrete measures to safeguard human rights and align domestic practice with international standards.

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