

Motion

Condemning youth rights violations and threats to activist safety in Serbia

signed by: National Youth Council of
Serbia (KOMS)

co-signed by: Croatian Youth Network
(MMH), National Youth Council of Slovenia
(MSS), National Youth Council of North
Macedonia (NYCNM), National Youth
Forum of Bulgaria (NYF), Belarusian
National Youth Council (RADA)

Introduction

In 2024, Serbia's youth activists faced worrying challenges to their safety, privacy, and basic freedoms, highlighting deep-rooted issues in the country's rule of law and democratic practices. While Serbia's legal framework on freedom of assembly and association is nominally in line with European standards, enforcement has remained inconsistent and selective, with authorities frequently restricting the very rights protected in national law. According to the European Commission's latest report, the lack of alignment with the Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR guidelines has allowed for a restrictive interpretation of assembly rights, leading to arbitrary arrests and suppression of protests. These actions are at odds with Serbia's commitments as an EU candidate country, calling into question the government's political will to uphold democratic values.

The UN Human Rights Committee, in its March 2024 conclusions, urged Serbia to amend notification requirements in its public assembly laws,¹ while the European Commission noted the government's failure to ensure a safe environment for civil society gatherings.²

Arrests of activists

In 2024, incidents of arrests increased markedly, particularly targeting youth who protested against government actions and demanded accountability for public safety failures. Despite constitutional guarantees, Serbian authorities have repeatedly detained peaceful protesters under vaguely defined charges, including "incitement to violent overthrow of constitutional order." The government's handling of assembly rights has drawn scrutiny, with both international and local observers noting a pattern of arbitrary detention, interrogation, and, in some cases, violent suppression. In November, activists in Novi

Sad protested the tragic death of 15 individuals due to an accident when the canopy roof fell at the newly reconstructed building of the Main train station in Novi Sad. After the protests state forces detained demonstrators, and the response of the state authorities to the protests was disproportionate to the assumed intention of intimidating citizens and especially young people from participating in protests in general. Such actions were dismissed by mainstream media, which, instead, amplified narratives aimed at discrediting activists.

Young protesters faced detention by masked individuals who failed to identify themselves as police officers,³ raising questions about the legal basis for these actions. Activists also reported being accosted by unidentified men who physically coerced them into unmarked vehicles,⁴ while police withheld information from their families regarding their whereabouts. These cases are not isolated; they highlight a troubling trend where young people exercising their right to protest are met with disproportionate force, further evidenced by masked and non-uniformed individuals conducting arrests in violation of Serbian law and international human rights standards.

Invasion of privacy and surveillance

Activists in Serbia also face unprecedented levels of privacy infringement. Tabloid campaigns frequently publish personal details of activists, often based on footage or records that only state institutions could access. European Union standards mandate the protection of privacy and personal data, yet such incidents suggest a flagrant disregard for these rights by Serbian authorities.

The European Commission's report further demonstrates this, highlighting the continued practice of

1 The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2024). Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Serbia. https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2FC%2FSR.B%2FCO%2F4&Lang=en

2 European Commission. (2024). COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT: Serbia 2024 Report. Retrieved November 20, 2024, from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf

3 FoNet. (2024, November 13). Advokati: Student Relja Stanojević ostaje u pritvoru. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/advokati-student-relja-stanojevic-ostaje-u-pritvoru/>

4 021.rs. (2024, November 10). Aktivistkinja Mila Pajić Najavila Podnošenje Krivične prijave: "Kao da me Je Hapsila parapolicija." 021. <https://www.021.rs/story/Novi-Sad/Vesti/392911/Aktivistkinja-Mila-Pajic-najavila-podnosenje-krivicne-prijave-Kao-da-me-je-hapsila-parapolicija.html>

detaining activists at the border and maintaining a list of “morally and politically unwelcome foreigners,”⁵ a practice that Serbian authorities claim will be discontinued. During protests, biometric photos of young activists, stored exclusively in the Ministry of Internal Affairs database, were discovered not only in a correspondence being accessed by an unidentified woman during a protest but also published on a tabloid portal.⁶

Media Hostility and Smear Campaigns

A sustained media campaign against civil society actors, often led by high-level officials and tabloids, has heightened risks for young activists. Public defamation and accusations of “foreign interference” target individuals and organizations advocating for environmental justice, democratic reforms, and human rights. The European Commission’s report highlights a high incidence of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), especially against organizations challenging government-backed projects like lithium extraction.

In August 2024, one television aired a segment implicating civil society organizations in alleged “subversive activities,” releasing personal data, financial records and received funds, that presumably came from government records.⁷ Such leaks not only breach Serbian privacy laws but it also indicates the lack of a safe and free environment for civil society to cooperate with institutions and advocate for better position of young activists.

Consequences on youth participation

Such hostility fosters a climate of fear, pushing young people further away from civic engagement. According to KOMS’ annual Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in Serbia,⁸ only 14% of Serbian youth follow local politics, with an overwhelming majority disillusioned with public institutions. This disengagement is driven by systemic harassment and a lack of faith in the political system’s capacity to protect basic freedoms.

According to the Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Young People, more than 78% of young people believe it is impossible to engage in activism without pressure. Activists face not only physical threats but also sustained psychological harassment. Public figures frequently target activists with unfounded allegations of foreign collusion or betrayal. This narrative, fostered by national media, is a long-standing tactic to marginalize civil society actors and inhibit youth participation in public discourse.

When institutions respond with disproportionate punishment and the creation of an atmosphere of fear instead of fostering dialogue and involving young people in formal participation mechanisms, the gap between youth and institutions deepens, leading to profound misunderstandings between institutions and young citizens. For the National Youth Council of Serbia and other youth organizations, it is particularly challenging to continue promoting and advocating for the improved status of young people through collaboration and dialogue with institutions.

- 5 YIHR. (2024, August 31). The detention of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights’ director during Passport Control represents a continuation of the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs’ illegal practices. YIHR.rs. <https://yih.rs/en/the-detention-of-the-youth-initiative-for-human-rights-director-during-passport-control-represents-a-continuation-of-the-serbian-ministry-of-internal-affairs-illegal-practices/>
- 6 Insajder TV (2023, December 20). Bez odgovora nadležnih kako je fotografija iz lične karte učesnika protesta Završila U Medijima (video). Insajder TV - Više od vesti. <https://insajder.net teme/bez-odgovora-nadleznih-kako-je-fotografija-iz-licne-karte-ucenika-protesta-završila-u-medijima-video>
- 7 Informer. (2024, August 20). (video) Raskrinkavanje Crno na belo! Više od 78 Miliona Evra za specijalni rat protiv Srbije! Vučićević Otkrio Ko Finansirao proteste. INFORMER. <https://informer.rs/politika/vesti/936097/finasiranje-protesti-stranci>
- 8 Stojanović, B., Ivković, A., & Kaličanin, B. (2024). ALTERNATIVE REPORT ON THE POSITION AND NEEDS OF YOUTH IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA – 2024. National Youth Council of Serbia - KOMS.

The members of the European Youth Forum call for the Serbian Government to:

- *Enforce legal protections* against unauthorized surveillance and the misuse of personal data, holding accountable those who disclose sensitive information to the media.
- *Ensure transparency* in state actions and policies, particularly regarding data collection, surveillance, and interference in civil society activities.
- *Strengthen Serbia's legislative and institutional frameworks* to align with the European Union's youth policy, focusing on transparency, accountability, and protection of youth rights in civic spaces and ensuring their voices are heard in decision making processes.
- *Reaffirm the commitment of Serbia to the Reykjavik Declaration* of the Council of Europe, by supporting and maintaining a safe and enabling environment in which civil society, as well as human rights defenders, can operate free from hindrance, insecurity and violence.



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