

## Overview of Youth rights violations and threats to activist safety in Serbia - 2024

### 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.

This overview presents documented incidents not as isolated cases but as indicative of systemic narrowing of the space for activists to operate and freely express their opinions. The UN Human Rights Committee, in its March 2024 conclusions, urged Serbia to amend notification requirements in its public assembly laws<sup>1</sup>, while the European Commission noted the government's failure to ensure a safe environment for civil society gatherings<sup>2</sup>. This **overview** highlights specific instances to illustrate the need for urgent reforms in Serbia's approach to civil society and youth rights.

### 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. For instance, 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<sup>3</sup>, raising questions about the legal basis for these actions. Two activists also reported being accosted by unidentified men who

---

1

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CCPR%2F4&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CCPR%2F4&Lang=en)

<sup>2</sup> [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902\\_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/advokati-student-relja-stanojevic-ostaje-u-pritvoru/>,

physically coerced them into unmarked vehicles<sup>4</sup>, 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. We recently witnessed an example in which the movements of an activist were broadcast by national media with footage from airport surveillance, sparking concerns over state complicity in privacy violations. 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 detaining activists at the border and maintaining a list of "morally and politically unwelcome foreigners,"<sup>5</sup> a practice that Serbian authorities claim will be discontinued. There was also an incident where 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.<sup>6</sup>

### **Media Hostility and Smear Campaigns**

A sustained media campaign against civil society actors, often led by high-level officials and pro-government 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**, Informer 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<sup>7</sup>. 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.

Such hostility fosters a climate of fear, pushing young people further away from civic engagement. According to the Alternative Report on Youth in Serbia, 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.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.021.rs/story/Novi-Sad/Vesti/392911/Aktivistkinja-Mila-Pajic-najavila-podnosenje-krivicne-prijave-Kao-da-me-je-hapsila-parapolicija.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://yibr.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/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://insajder.net teme/bez-odgovora-nadleznih-kako-je-fotografija-iz-licne-karte-ucesnika-protesta-zavrsila-u-medijima-video>

<sup>7</sup> <https://informer.rs/politika/vesti/936097/finasiranje-protesti-stranci>

Given the fact that the young activists who participated in the aforementioned protests were also active within the National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), the organization has repeatedly been accused in tabloid media of inciting and supporting protests and acting against its own country<sup>8</sup>.

### **Psychological harassment**

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.

These documented incidents demonstrate a lack of respect for fundamental freedoms and raise pressing concerns about Serbia's commitment to the rule of law. As Serbia seeks closer ties with the European Union, these abuses underscore the need for systemic reforms to safeguard youth activists' rights, including:

- Enforcing legal protections against unauthorized surveillance and the misuse of personal data, holding accountable those who disclose sensitive information to the media.
- Pushing for transparency in state actions and policies, particularly regarding data collection, surveillance, and interference in civil society activities.
- Strengthening 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.
- Reaffirming 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.
- Adhering to the Council of Europe recommendations to protect the rights of young people to engage in youth advocacy and to freely express their political preferences by allowing the organisation of peaceful public gatherings and demonstrations by youth civil society; and safeguard the right of young people to express their views freely while protecting them from violence and preventing subsequent detention for political reasons.

Measure 4.3. Improving the position of CSOs through ensuring effective legal protection for CSO members and human rights defenders, of the Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2022–2030, provides specific recommendations for the implementation and protection of the safety of activists. Some of the recommendations are also part of the proposed Work Plan of the Civil Society Council, which is in the process of adoption:

- Hold consultative meetings with representatives of CSOs in order to review the situation regarding threats/attacks against members of CSOs working on human rights and implement preventive measures.

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://informer.rs/politika/vesti/945389/sokantne-veze-soroseve-stefani-rot-nemacke-nvo-i-lidera-laznih-ekologa>

- Organize roundtables with CSOs on the implementation of activities from the subchapter Fundamental Rights of Chapter 23
- Conducting training aimed at increasing the capacity of CSOs to initiate procedures for protection against discrimination

According to the Alternative Report, the largest percentage of young people, over 48%, stated that they had participated in a protest organized by an association, students, informal groups, or citizens in the past two years, while nearly 48% reported signing a petition or popular initiative. Young people participate significantly less in other forms of engagement, primarily due to their lack of trust in institutions. The exclusion of young people and the lack of systematic attention to their needs create a tendency for them to express their views and opinions through informal means of participation, such as protests and petitions.

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.

In order for youth organizations to be partners of institutions and participate in the creation of various strategic and legislative documents, it is essential that the human rights of young activists are not endangered and that institutions protect, rather than persecute, human rights defenders. The engagement of young people in street protests is a consequence of systemic exclusion and a lack of trust in the work and results of those institutions opinions, which is why young people must have a place in institutions.

This overview serves as a call to action for Serbia's government and its international partners, urging concrete measures to protect civil society, uphold democratic norms, and foster an environment where young activists can safely participate in shaping the future of their country. The preservation of fundamental rights is essential, not only for Serbia's youth but for the health and sustainability of Serbia's democracy.