

Motion

Appeal to the European Union: Stand Against Repression and Violation of Fundamental Rights in Serbia

signed by: National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS)

co-signed by: Belarusian National Youth Council (RADA), Croatian Youth Network (MMH), Cyprus Youth Council (CYC), Forum des Jeunes (FJ), National Youth Congress of Albania (KRK), National Youth Council of Catalonia (CNJC), National Youth Council of Malta (KNZ), National Youth Council of Moldova (CNTM), National Youth Council of North Macedonia (NYCNM), National Youth Council of Slovenia (MSS), National Youth Council of Ukraine (NYCUkraine), National Youth Forum of Bulgaria (NYF), Portuguese National Youth Council (CNJ), Spanish Youth Council (CJE), Young European Federalists (JEF Europe)

Introduction

Repression in Serbia is entering a dangerous, systemic phase. Since November 2024, the country has been shaken by a wave of student-led protests following the Novi Sad tragedy, where the collapse of a train station roof claimed 16 lives. Almost six months in, the authorities have responded with repression instead of accountability. More than 1600 protests in over 370 locations across Serbia took place in March alone¹, testifying to a widespread civic uprising. On March 15, 2025, over 325,000 people participated in the largest protest in Serbia's history, which was marked by an incident involving an alleged sonic weapon against peaceful protesters that left thousands with lasting injuries.²

Students and young people remain unwavering in their demands for accountability, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights. Civil society has been instrumental in rallying both domestic and international support for these calls. As youth from Serbia and across Europe, and building on the motion 'Condemning youth rights violations and threats to activist safety in Serbia' adopted at the November 2024 European Youth Forum General Assembly³, we appeal to the European Union to stand with us against the escalating repression, violence, and violations of youth rights in Serbia.

Arrests and Surveillance of Activists

On March 14, six members of the nonformal STAV group and Movement of Free Citizens (PSG) political party were detained after an unauthorized recording of their meeting was leaked to the media. The discussion captured in the recording was labelled by the media—and echoed by public officials—as an act of terrorism and an attempt to overthrow the state, language which formed the basis of the court's decision to detain them. The court

also ordered the detention of six additional activists currently residing in Croatia, issuing warrants for their arrest. On April 11, the detention was extended by another 30 days.⁴

Previously, Amnesty International has confirmed the use of Pegasus and NoviSpy spyware by the Security Information Agency (BIA) and Ministry of Interior to illegally surveil activists and journalists.⁵

Threats Against Public Safety

More than 80 physical assaults on protesters have been documented since November – harassment of protestors, vehicles ramming through crowds, knife attacks, physical attacks with baseball bats and more.⁶ During the March 15 protest in Belgrade, police showed up in large numbers alongside pro-government supporters, including veteran members of the defunct Special Operations Unit (JSO) that was involved in war crimes during the Yugoslav Wars. While major violence was prevented, a sudden loud noise disrupted a 15-minute silence held to honour victims of the Novi Sad tragedy, causing panic and reported health issues among attendees. Over 4,000 protesters reported symptoms such as disorientation, nausea, and hearing loss.

Initially, Serbian authorities denied possessing or using sonic weapons. However, they later acknowledged owning Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs), asserting they were not deployed during the protest. Contradictory evidence, including photographs of LRADs present at the scene, surfaced, prompting further scrutiny. The Serbian government inquired the American FBI and Russian FSB for investigation of the matter, with the latter releasing a report on April 16 concluding that Serbian police did not use the weapon.⁷

On March 25, following Serbian CSOs' request, the European Court of Human Rights announced

1 <https://crta.rs/najmanje-1697-protesta-u-martu/>

2 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2g8v32g30o>

3 https://www.youthforum.org/files/241122_M-activist-safety-in-Serbia-1.pdf

4 <https://vreme.com/en/vesti/produzen-pritvor-za-jos-30-dana-prisluskivanim-novosadskim-aktivistima/>

5 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/serbia-authorities-using-spyware-and-cellebrite-forensic-extraction-tools-to-hack-journalists-and-activists/>

6 <https://www.cins.rs/mapa-napadi-na-ucesnike-protesta-i-blokada/>

7 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbia-says-russian-investigators-found-that-sonic-devices-were-not-used-2025-04-16/>

it is collecting statements and evidence regarding the incident. The Court issued an interim measure on April 29, ordering the Serbian Government to refrain from using sonic crowd-control weapons, although without issuing a verdict on whether such a weapon was used in Belgrade.⁸

Mounting Pressure on Civil Society

On February 25, 2025, Serbian police raided the offices of five prominent civil society organizations—KOMS, the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), Civic Initiatives, the Trag Foundation, and the Center for Practical Policy—as part of an investigation into alleged misuse of USAID funds. The police visits were ordered by the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, which cited statements from senior US officials expressing concerns about potential fund mismanagement and money laundering.⁹ As of April 25, KOMS has not received any further information regarding the investigation.

This was accompanied by an extensive smear campaign accusing CSOs of organising a “coloured revolution” at the behest of the West. This has prompted CIVICUS Monitor to place Serbia on its 2025 Watchlist as an ‘obstructed country’, highlighting severe curbs on freedoms.¹⁰ This has put severe strains on the civil society and the youth sector whose position has been made even more precarious as the USAID cuts affected many national and local CSOs, forcing them to cut staff and programmes.

Particularly Strained Conditions in the Youth Sector

The youth sector has emerged as a key pillar of civic resistance, with many organizations actively

supporting student protests through legal aid, logistical support, and advocacy Initiatives such as KOMS' reports on youth rights violations and the jointly launched Manifesto of the Youth Sector in March have mobilized broad support across civil society for student demands and better conditions for the youth sector with over a hundred signatories.¹¹

At the same time, the youth sector operates under mounting pressure, facing institutional constraints, an increasingly challenging security environment and tightening of resources – public funding is kept away from vocal organisations and USAID cuts have impacted youth organisations disproportionately, with KOMS losing a third of its budget and many local organisations losing crucial funding.¹²

Ongoing protests and blockades have significantly stretched the youth sector's capacity, forcing a shift away from core programming—such as education, employment, and community development—toward crisis response and protection of demonstrators. Despite these pressures, organisations such as KOMS have retained their autonomy. However, without adequate resources to navigate this environment, many organizations face operational collapse, leaving young people increasingly vulnerable. This climate has contributed to a sharp rise in fear and disillusionment: 78% of youth associate activism with harassment, while nearly half report plans to emigrate—signaling a deepening brain drain driven by institutional hostility.¹³

Intimidation and Rights Violations of Foreign Citizens

Foreign nationals have also faced repression. In December, Croatian students—including the president of the Croatian Youth Network—were spied on and harassed by Serbian police and security services during a visit to Belgrade.¹⁴ In January, youth from six countries — Croatia, Slovenia, Romania,

8 <https://www.echr.coe.int/w/interim-measure-granted-concerning-serbia>

9 <https://crd.org/2025/02/27/serbian-police-crack-down-on-civil-society-organisations/>

10 <https://monitor.civicus.org/watchlist-march-2025/>

11 https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Manifesto_of_the_Youth_Sector_Serbia_EN.pdf

12 <https://www.youthforum.org/news/last-chance-for-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans>

13 https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Alternative_Report_2024.pdf

14 <https://www.srednja.hr/faks/ispovijest-studenta-kojeg-su-u-srbiji-proglasili-sprijunom-policija-nam-je-rekla-da-bi-to-moglo-biti-kobno/>

Austria, Albania and North Macedonia — attending a workshop were expelled under vague security claims, amid a smear campaign portraying them as foreign spies.¹⁵

On April 10, representatives of the Southern Youth Councils attending a meeting in Belgrade organised by KOMS and the Tempus Foundation were physically attacked on the streets by a group of young men shouting pro-government slogans. They targeted a Slovenian representative, mistaking them for a Croatian national due to their accent, revealing the nationally motivated nature of the attack.

These incidents represent a pattern of creating external enemies for domestic political purposes that has been employed by various political actors for the past 30+ years.¹⁶ Some convicted war criminals from the Yugoslav Wars are still involved in politics and support the ruling coalition, providing support by spreading hateful narratives on television channels with national broadcasting.¹⁷ This reveals a dangerous undercurrent of ethno-nationalist hostility that persists in Serbian public life that has persisted throughout the years.

Retaliation Against Educational Workers

Professors and educational workers have stood in solidarity with pupils and students in their blockades of primary schools, high schools and higher education institutions since the beginning. However, their labour rights have been violated – many primary and high school professors have been on strike since January, with their salaries for February and March being illegally reduced, with many receiving as little as 17€. ¹⁸ This was accompanied by the Prime

Minister and Education Minister warning that all who refused to work would be fired.

With updated rules, the Government limited university professors' research time to just an hour per day, a significant reduction from before.¹⁹ Professors and staff also face targeted repression and public smear campaigns for their support of the student blockades. University deans and rectors have been disproportionately targeted, with the escalating rhetoric resulting in physical attacks by pro-government supporters.²⁰

Media Freedoms at a Critical Point

Media coverage of youth protests in Serbia has been marked by distortion and bias, with over half of online reports focusing on “pseudoevents”—press releases, staged narratives, and unverified claims—that undermine the protests' legitimacy. Public broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) marginalized youth voices, limiting coverage to brief, late-night segments. Media polarization deepened the divide: some outlets framed youth activism positively, while others emphasized threats and negativity.²¹

For two weeks, students blockaded the public broadcast TV station RTS to protest their perceived pro-government bias and inadequate coverage, joined by some of the workers.²² They demanded the launching of an open call for independent and qualified members of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) to ensure impartiality. This demand was fulfilled on April 28, in alignment with EU's requirements.²³ However, many fear that the selection procedure will not be done impartially.

15 <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/01/23/serbia-bars-13-foreign-ngo-workers-as-unacceptable-security-risk/>

16 <https://yih.rs/bhs/izvestaj-dosije-hrvatska-koordinacija-mrznje/>

17 https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/28/war-criminals-campaign-for-ruling-parties-in-serbian-elections/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

18 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/403370/Ne-zalite-nas-pridruzite-nam-se-Prosveta-u-strajku-a-univerziteti-profesori-ne-zasto.html>

19 https://www.chemistryworld.com/news/serbia-limits-academics-research-time-to-just-one-hour-a-day/4021399.article?utm_campaign=cw_shared&utm_medium=social&utm_source=reddit

20 <https://en.dialektika.org/editorial/attack-on-natalija-jovanovic-dean-of-faculty-of-philosophy-in-nis/>

21 https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Mladi_u_medijskom_ogledalu_2024.pdf

22 <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/serbian-students-continue-blockade-of-state-broadcaster-rt/ar-AA1D32sM?ocid=BingNewsVerp>

23 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/articles/c70zyew92xdo/lat>

Journalists in Serbia face increasing threats, harassment, and surveillance, leading to widespread self-censorship. Attacks and press freedom violations have risen sharply in the past year, while authorities used previously mentioned spyware to monitor media workers. Institutional responses remain weak, with many cases dismissed. Economic pressures and digital harassment further hinder free reporting. This has led Reporters Without Borders to issue a verdict saying that Serbian journalism is being systematically repressed.²⁴

Calls to Action

"It seems to me it is important to say that what the demonstrators and students demand from Serbia is the same thing that the European Commission is asking from Serbia."²⁵

Marta Kos, European Commissioner for Enlargement, April 30, 2025

Domestic judicial institutions have failed to tackle the increasing instances of violence, threats, and human rights violations – they have not held those responsible for these offenses accountable. Despite the formation of a new government on April 16, the repression is still ongoing. While the struggle for democracy and rule of law will be won domestically, actions and words of support by the EU can provide hope that the Serbian youth are not alone. We thus appeal to:

1. The President of the European Commission, the President of the European Parliament and the President of the European Council to voice clear and unequivocal political support to Serbia's youth and students in their demands for rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights;
2. The President of the European Commission, the President of the European Parliament and the President of the European Council to condemn intensifying repression, including but not limited to the March 15 attack on protesters, detention of youth activists and intimidation of civil society organisations, and to call upon

the Serbian authorities to promptly cease these actions and take concrete measures preventing their recurrence;

3. The European Commission to employ all available diplomatic and economic instruments to urge Serbian authorities to promptly fulfil their obligations within the Fundamentals Cluster of the EU accession framework, including judicial independence, freedom of media, anti-corruption measures and the conduct of free and fair elections;
4. The European Commission to deliver and clearly communicate urgent financial aid to sustain youth organizations, enabling them to resume essential programs - including through exploring all available flexibility in the Citizens Rights and Values (CERV) and Erasmus+ programmes for the remaining programming period;
5. All EU institutions to ensure increases in funds in the next EU budget cycle to offset losses caused by USAID cuts, including via the Instrument for Pre Accession Assistance (IPA) - with an added focus on involving youth organisations in the IPA - and ensuring full access of independent and democratic youth organisations to all parts of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps, as well as the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV).

Serbia has chosen the path to become an EU member. A Serbia that adheres to principles of democracy and rule of law is essential not only for its citizens but also for the stability of the Western Balkans and Europe as a whole. We, the youth of Serbia, call on Europe not to look away—this is your fight too, for the future of a democratic Europe.

24 <https://rsf.org/en/noose-tightens-around-serbia-s-journalists-european-union-can-no-longer-look-away>

25 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/04/30/marta-kos-visits-serbia-what-we-are-asking-is-very-close-to-the-demands-of-the-protesters/>



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