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Amnesty International is presenting this submission to the European Commission ahead of the preparation of its 2025 Enlargement Package. It details Amnesty International's human rights concerns and outlines key recommendations that the EU should prioritize in the framework of Serbia's EU accession process as well as any other ongoing engagement with the authorities.

The past year has seen several major waves of protests, with each triggering an increasingly harsher government response. Over the past six months, protests and student blockades have gripped Serbia and mobilized hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life across the country. The protest movement's demands are centered around calls to end corrupt practices and guarantee full accountability for the Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse, which killed 16 people in November 2024. Rather than engaging with these legitimate demands, the authorities chose to respond by doubling down on repressive measures, targeting the protest movement and civil society groups. Indeed, over the past year, the challenges facing protesters, civil society activists, human rights defenders and independent journalists in Serbia has reached a critical point with government repression taking the form of arbitrary arrests, serious and unfounded criminal charges against protesters, the unlawful use of invasive spyware, expulsions and vicious smear campaigns against civil society actors.

The demands that have driven protesters to take to the streets are closely aligned with the reforms Serbia is expected to deliver on, as part of its path to EU membership. However, the absence of a robust and vocal EU response to the government's longstanding backsliding on human rights and the perceived sidelining of these concerns in favour of other stakes, has further increased Serbian civil society's sense of isolation and undermined the EU's reputation among citizens in Serbia. These protests underline the importance of prioritizing human rights in the EU's enlargement process, and its key role in responding to the growing risks and tensions the EU faces in its neighborhood.

Efforts to promote fundamental rights and the rule of law should be at the forefront of Serbia's EU accession process. The EU and its member states should ensure that their engagement with the Serbian authorities as well as the technical and financial support foreseen within the framework of Serbia's EU accession process are used more effectively to foster concrete human rights and rule of law progress and to ensure the meaningful involvement of Serbia's civil society in the reform process.

More specifically, the EU should ensure that achieving tangible progress on human rights - in both law and practice - is at the center of any decisions to open new negotiation clusters with Serbia and to disbursing EU funding under IPA III and the Growth and Reform Facility. Further EU funding should also be directed to promoting civil society space and supporting these actors in their crucial work, particularly against the backdrop of the US funding withdrawal. As part of its efforts to promote civil society space, the EU should insist on the meaningful involvement of civil society in the elaboration of human rights benchmarks linked to EU funding and in the monitoring and tracking of Serbia's delivery on these commitments.

This briefing covers the following key issues which the EU should address in the framework of Serbia's EU accession process and other ongoing engagement with the authorities:

1. Freedom of assembly and association
 - Arbitrary arrests and unfounded charges targeting protesters
 - Arbitrary seizure of telephones and computers of activists and protesters
 - Unlawful use of sonic weapon during a protest
 - Attacks on civil society
 - Expulsion and publishing of personal data of activists and foreign citizens
2. Unlawful use of invasive spyware and digital forensic technology
 - Digital surveillance campaign targeting civil society
 - Accountability and due diligence
 - Attacks using NSO Group's Pegasus Spyware
 - Inadequate legal framework and practice regulating digital surveillance
3. Economic, social and cultural rights: Social Card Law

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

Following the summer of demonstrations against plans to open a lithium exploitation mine in Serbia's Jadar region in 2024, the fall of the concrete canopy in the train station of Novi Sad in November 2024, triggered another wave of protests across Serbia. From November 2024 to April 2025, students organized a series of protests in which hundreds of thousands of citizens gathered in cities across the country, often blocking the roads and institutions. They demanded greater transparency over the government's investment and construction projects and that those responsible for the tragic event be accountable. Although the majority of gatherings were peaceful, protesters faced arrests, detentions, and serious criminal charges. Civil society organizations recorded over 100 cases of violence against protesters during this period, while many gatherings were dispersed or disrupted by authorities or unknown attackers. This included instances of individuals driving their cars through crowds of protesters, leaving people with serious injuries. The heavy-handed response by the authorities and the initial failure of the police to provide security for the protesters undermined people's ability to exercise their right to the freedom of peaceful assembly.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND UNFOUNDED CHARGES TARGETING PROTESTERS

The authorities continued to arrest or question activists and protesters using the **serious charge of "inciting the violent overthrow of the constitutional order,"** a criminal offence carrying a penalty of up to eight years of imprisonment. Amnesty International documented at least 60 such cases between August and December 2024, but the practice continued in 2025 as well.¹ Those who carried out the arrests were often men in civilian clothes who **refused to identify themselves or show any official identification.** Up until their arrival at a police station, the activists and students who were detained in these operations often did not know whether they were taken in by Serbia's Security – Information Agency ("Bezbedonosno-informativna agencija"-BIA) or the police, or even armed hooligans.² The activists and lawyers who spoke with Amnesty International, as well as the court orders for home searches that Amnesty International reviewed, indicate that the police frequently cited activists' posts on social media, their speeches or even their mere participation in the protests as elements for serious criminal charges.³ People who were arrested or detained for informational interviews were frequently subjected to long questioning, intrusive apartment searches, as well as seizure and inspections of their telephones, computers and other mobile devices.⁴ Amnesty International interviewed 10 activists who were questioned in relation to the criminal charge of "inciting the violent overthrow of the constitutional order" and whose homes were searched by the police between August and December 2024. At the time of writing, not one has been formally charged.

¹ Amnesty International, "A Digital Prison: Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia," 16 December 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8813/2024/en/>

² Interviews with 20 people who were arrested and detained between August 2024 and March 2025.

³ Amnesty International, "A Digital Prison: Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia," 16 December 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8813/2024/en/>

⁴ Amnesty International, "A Digital Prison: Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia," 16 December 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8813/2024/en/>

Several other cases where individuals did face the formal charge of inciting the violent overthrow of the constitutional order, resulted in **plea-bargains** because the charged activists feared that they would not receive a fair trial if they refused to settle their cases.⁵

During the protests in Novi Sad in November 2024, the police arrested and detained at least 20 protesters and activists, most of whom were protesting peacefully.⁶ They were charged with various criminal and misdemeanor offenses, ranging from public peace and order disturbances to the more serious charge of attempting to violently overthrow the constitutional order.

In March 2025, the authorities arrested and detained five activists from the opposition Movement of Free Citizens (PSG) and a member of the student organizations "STAV" from Novi Sad on suspicion of "preparing an act against the constitutional order and security of Serbia".⁷ The arrest came one day after media outlets close to the government played an audio recording of a discussion about the ongoing protests that took place on STAV's premises in March 2025 and **published the names and photographs of the organizations' members in the press**. It is not clear how the recording was obtained, but the activists suspected that they were unlawfully surveilled by the authorities, with the aim of being discredited.⁸ At the time of writing, the six activists remained in custody, with their detention extended by 30 more days on 13 May. On 13 May, one of the detained activists, Marija Vasić, a sociology teacher in a Novi Sad high school, started a hunger strike, in protest against the "unlawful detention." Due to severe dehydration, she was moved to a hospital on 15 May.

Six other members of STAV who had been attending a workshop in Croatia at the time of the arrests are unable to return to Serbia for fear of being arrested and detained on the same serious charges and remain in, de facto, political exile. The Higher Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad recommended that the six are tried in absentia and that all 12 activists receive the highest proscribed sentences for the crime that they have been charged with.⁹

A coalition of more than 100 civil society organizations demanded an immediate release of the activists from Novi Sad, calling their arrest a "political persecution."¹⁰ The European Parliament called on Serbian authorities to release the six activists from detention.

The harsh treatment of protesters represents a disproportionate response to an expression of dissent and sends a chilling message that criticism of those in power will not be tolerated. The right to peaceful protest and freedom of expression must be upheld without the fear of reprisals.

All law enforcement officials who use force during public assemblies should be easily identifiable. When in contact with the public, every police officer, or other official exercising police powers, should wear a visible tag – either with their name on it or with a number identifying them personally.¹¹

The lack of clear separation between the police and Serbia's Security – Information Agency (BIA), whose operatives have police powers and can participate in criminal investigations, create an opaque situation in the context of arrest operations. It also profoundly compromises accountability of law-enforcement officials and undermines the ability of victims to obtain redress in case of unlawful arrest or surveillance. In its last report, the European Commission warned Serbia that the regulations and remits of the two services should be clearly separated, yet to date, no action has been taken to this end.¹²

⁵ Information provided to Amnesty International by Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM), December 2024

⁶ Radio Slobodna Evropa, "Skup podrške uhapšenim aktivistima ispred tužilaštva u Novom Sadu," 12 November 2024, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/skup-podrska-aktivisti-uhapseni-novi-sad/33199448.html>

⁷ Radio Slobodna Evropa, "U Novm Sadu uhapšeni opozicionari i aktivista nakon snimka sastanka," 14 March 2025, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/novi-sad-hapsenje-opozicija/33348154.html>

⁸ Information provided to Amnesty International by the members of STAV, 25 March 2025.

⁹ N1, Detained activists from Novi Sad: Prosecutor calls for a trial in absentia and highest sentences, 12 May 2025, https://n1info.rs/vesti/optuzeni-aktivisti-iz-novog-sada-tuzilastvo-trazi-sudjenje-u-odsustvu-i-maksimalne-kazne/?utm_source=CRTA+Briefings&utm_campaign=a9330dc71d-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2022_11_10_01_07_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3655cf7701-a9330dc71d-452978344

¹⁰ Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, "Hitno zaustaviti progon aktivista omladinske grupe Stav i članova PSG-a," 17 March 2025, <https://nuns.rs/hitno-zaustaviti-politicki-progon-aktivista-kinja-omladinske-grupe-stav-i-clanova-psg-a/>

¹¹ Amnesty International, Guidelines on the use of force, August 2015, https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2017/07/guidelines_use_of_force_eng.pdf?x93186

¹² European Commission, 2024 Serbia Report, 30 October 2024, https://neighbourhoodenlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf

ARBITRARY SEIZURE OF TELEPHONES AND COMPUTERS OF ACTIVISTS AND PROTESTERS

Amnesty International documented at least 14 activists who were detained or questioned between July 2024 and March 2025 and whose **telephones or computers were temporarily seized and searched** by the police. In some cases, the police called the activists for informational interviews in relation to charges of “incitement to the violent overthrow of the constitutional order,” while in others, they seized the telephone devices during court-authorized apartment searches.¹³

Devices belonging to the activists were put through an inspection and then an extensive digital forensic search and analysis of the extracted data, allegedly to enable the prosecutors to decide whether to press charges against the individuals.¹⁴ At the time of writing, no criminal charges were formally filed against any of the activists and their devices remain with the police.

Serbia’s Criminal Procedure Code allows for the inspection (“uvidjaj”), search (“pretres”) and expert analysis (“veštačenje”) of mobile devices that have been temporarily seized, and court rulings found that such measures did not represent a “special evidentiary action,” and therefore did not require the necessary safeguards normally associated with secret communications surveillance.¹⁵ However, **intrusive digital surveillance measures** that enable full extraction of data on the device, including communication with people in their broader network, even before individuals in question are formally charged, **raise numerous questions about the lawfulness of such interference** with people’s right to privacy and rights to the freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and association.

UNLAWFUL USE OF SONIC WEAPON DURING A PROTEST

On 15 March 2025, the peaceful gathering of some 300,000 people in Belgrade was disrupted by what appears to have been a **sonic weapon or an acoustic device** that emits sound waves. The incident took place when the protesters were observing a 15-minute silence to honor those who lost their lives in the Novi Sad railway station’s roof collapse in November 2024. Video footage from the protest shows how a low-frequency sound emitted from undisclosed locations triggered an immediate panic and caused a stampede, as people tried to escape the affected area.¹⁶ People Amnesty International spoke with reported hearing a frightening and an inexplicable sound which left them feeling deeply unsettled. A coalition of civil society organizations from Belgrade collected testimonies of several thousand people who experienced health issues or sought medical help following the incident, most complaining of persisting headaches, nausea, tinnitus and high blood pressure, while some reported severe cases of arrhythmia and anxiety.¹⁷

Despite considerable video and audio evidence of an incident that caused genuine panic and reports of medical trauma, Serbian authorities denied using a sonic device against protesters and initially claimed that they did not have access to such devices.¹⁸ While the government later admitted that it had indeed purchased a type of a long-range acoustic device, ministers in charge maintained that such devices “never left the warehouses and were never used.”¹⁹ However, media reports, photographic evidence and later statements by senior officials indicated that sonic devices were not only in the possession of the Ministry of Interior, but were also on the streets of Belgrade and ready to be used on the day of the protest.²⁰

While denying the use of a sonic weapon, senior government officials simultaneously engaged in a **protracted smear campaign against civil society and protesters** accusing them of engaging in anti-government activities and spreading lies, creating a generally hostile environment for public discussion about the incident. President Aleksandar Vučić accused protesters and civil society organizations of spreading disinformation and instructed the Minister of Justice to “prosecute

¹³ Amnesty International, “A Digital Prison: Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia,” 16 December 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8813/2024/en/>

¹⁴ Amnesty International, “A Digital Prison: Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia,” 16 December 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8813/2024/en/>

¹⁵ See detailed analysis in Amnesty International, “A Digital Prison: Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia,” 16 December 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8813/2024/en/>

¹⁶ N1, “Earshot confirms use of sonic weapon in protest,” 17 March 2025, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/earshot-confirms-use-of-sonic-weapon-at-protest/>

¹⁷ Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, “More than 3,000 testimonies of citizens of Serbia,” 17 March 2025, <https://www.bgcenter.org.rs/saopštenje-organizacija-civilnog-drustva-vise-od-3-000-svedocenja-gradjana-i-gradjanki-srbije/>

¹⁸ RTS, “Dačić: Policija Srbije nikad nije koristila zvučni top,” 17 March 2025, <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/5674789/zvucni-top-mup-studentske-blokade-i-protesti.html>

¹⁹ N1, “Policija Srbije ima zvučni top; stoji u kutijama u magacinu, izjava da ga nemamo - bila nespretna,” 19 March 2025, <https://n1info.rs/lat/da-cic-policija-ima-zvucni-top-stoji-u-kutijama-u-magacinu-izjava-da-ga-nemamo-bila-nespretna/>

²⁰ N1, “Dačić displays LRAD devices,” 19 March 2025, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/dacic-displays-lrad-devices/?comments>

all those who went public with such a notorious lie.”²¹ Minister of Justice Maja Popović called the allegations of the use of sound weapon “deliberate and synchronized lies” and committed to hold to account “all those who spread disinformation and deliberately cause panic among citizens.”²² The Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade shortly after announced that it had ordered the First Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office “to order the **identification of persons who spread such false information in public,**” on grounds for suspicion that they committed a criminal offense of causing panic and disorder.²³ At the same time, media reported that hospitals receiving people with medical complaints after the incident were instructed to mark all such case files with a “P” for protest and send all relevant documentation to Serbian Security and Intelligence Agency (Bezbedonosno-informativna agencija -BIA).²⁴

While threatening civil society with prosecution for reporting about the events of 15 March 2025, **authorities have failed to conduct an independent, impartial and thorough investigation** into this incident and to ensure that those responsible for the unlawful use of a sonic device to disperse the peaceful protest are brought to justice. The First Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office, which was instructed by President Vučić to determine what took place during the protest within a 48-hour timeline, concluded unequivocally that no members of the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence and Security and Intelligence Agency who were securing the protests on 15 March “heard, saw or used the so-called sound cannon,” and further rejected reports that the patients who reported to emergency services following the incident showed signs of acoustic trauma or other damage caused by high frequency noise.²⁵ The Prosecutor’s Office noted that it reached this conclusion based on the reports submitted to the Office by the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense and the Security Information Agency.²⁶ Persistent public statements by the government officials and the president of the Prosecutor’s Office prior to the investigation insisting that “no sound device was used,” the reliance on official information provided by law-enforcement agencies, rather than witness statements and audio and video material, and President Vučić’s inappropriate interventions, including to set a deadline for the investigation, **cast serious doubt on the independence and seriousness of this investigation.** Moreover, the Prosecutor’s Office did not investigate why the authorities had procured a sonic weapon, specifically the Genasys-made Long-range Acoustic Device (LRAD), in the first place and deployed it for possible use on the day of the protest, given that the use of such weapon is not lawful under Serbian legislation.

Shortly after the Prosecutor’s Office, the National Assembly’s Security Services Control Committee also concluded that there was no evidence to support the use of sound device by security services and urged media “to refrain from dissemination unverified information.”²⁷ The Defense and Internal Affairs Committee came to a similar conclusion. It dismissed the allegations of a sound device as unreliable, called for the Prosecutor’s Office to investigate the events and prosecute all persons “who misinformed the public and caused disorder and panic.”²⁸

On 29 April, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) granted interim measures in response to a request filed by a group of citizens from Belgrade affected by the use of a sonic weapon. The Court requested the Serbian authorities to (i) prevent the use of sonic weapons in such circumstances; (ii) prevent criminal prosecution of those who take part in public debate on the use of a sonic weapon on 15 March 2025; and (iii) conduct an effective investigation into the allegations that a sonic weapon had been used.²⁹

Amnesty International has long expressed concerns over the use of sonic weapons in law enforcement and called for their suspension until further research, testing and evaluation is done to fully understand their effects, the risks involved and

²¹ Večernje novosti via Youtube, President of Serbia speaks at the government session, 16 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/live/hEDYbwG5uJQ?t=655s>

²² Europnews, “Ministarka pravde: Osudjujem širenje dezinformacija o upotrebi zvučnog topa, pozivam na istragu,” 16 March 2025, <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/161446/popovic-osudila-sirenje-dezinformacija-o-zvucnom-topu/vest>

²³ Higher Public Prosecutor in Belgrade, “Press Release, 16 March 2025, <https://beograd.vjt.rs/saopstenja/saopstenje-803/>

²⁴ N1, “U zemunsku bolnicu primljeno 56 osoba, ljekari stavljali oznaku ‘P’ - pacijenti bili na protestu, 18 March 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/u-zemunsku-bolnicu-primljeno-56-pacijenata-lekari-stavljali-oznaku-p-pacijenti-bili-na-protestu/>

²⁵ Radar, “Stručnjaci: Tužilašto ispunjava naloge predsednika Čacilenda,” 19 March 2025, <https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/tuzilastvo-vucica-zvucni-top/>

²⁶ Radar, “Stručnjaci: Tužilašto ispunjava naloge predsednika Čacilenda,” 19 March 2025, <https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/tuzilastvo-vucica-zvucni-top/>

²⁷ Committee for control and oversight over security services, “Conclusions”, 18 March 2025, <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.parlament.gov.rs%2Fupload%2Fdocuments%2Fdokumenta%2F18.03.2025.%2520ZAKLUCCI%2520LAT.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

²⁸ Committee for Defense and Internal Affairs, “Conclusions”, 18 March 2025, <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.parlament.gov.rs%2Fupload%2Fdocuments%2Fdokumenta%2F18.03.2025.%2520Zakljucci%252011.%2520sednica%2520ODB%2520odbrana%2520LAT.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

²⁹ European Court of Human Rights, Interim measures issued in case of sonic weapon use, 29 April 2025, <file:///Users/jelenasesar/Downloads/Interim%20measure%20issued%20in%20sonic-weapon%20case.pdf>

their overall compliance with international human rights law and standards.³⁰ Such weapons have not undergone the necessary testing or medical review for use in law enforcement. The lack of analysis, knowledge and understanding of the risks involved in the use of such weapons implies a problematic, trial-and-error approach, posing unacceptable risks to the physical integrity of anyone in the area, in particular people with pre-existing health problems.

The use of electro-magnetic and **sonic weapons as means of crowd control is not regulated by the Law on Internal Affairs** that is in force in Serbia. Amnesty International and others criticized past attempts by the Serbian authorities to introduce acoustic and electromagnetic weapons as means of coercion into the Law on Internal Affairs.³¹ In May 2025, the European Parliament called on the Serbian authorities to ensure an "impartial investigation of the claims that unlawful technology of crowd control was used against the protesters, causing injuries to a number of them."³²

ATTACKS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

In the weeks and months following the Novi Sad canopy collapse and the widespread protests across the country, the authorities responded to the growing instability in the country with increasingly repressive measures. This included openly **hostile rhetoric and smear campaigns** aimed at discrediting protesters and civil society.

Senior officials, including President Vučić, Speaker of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić and other high-ranking Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) officials, repeatedly labelled student protests as a "terror" and "colour revolution" funded by foreign powers intent on "violently overthrowing the state."³³ President Vučić publicly singled out civil society organizations, including the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), TRAG Foundation, and Civic Initiatives, and accused them of criminal activities; money laundering; "financing subversive activities against free states" and "creating conditions for a colour revolution," without providing any evidence for such claims.³⁴ **CRTA alone documented over 1150 media pieces targeting them** directly only in the first two months of 2025.³⁵

In February 2025, acting on unsubstantiated statements by members of the new US administration about the alleged fraud and corruption in USAID, armed crime **police raided four civil society organizations**, including CRTA, Civic Initiatives, TRAG Foundation, and the Centre for Practical Policy as part of a probe into **allegations of abuse of USAID funds**.³⁶ The raid was announced on several media outlets close to the government twenty minutes before the police entered the premises of the organizations. The State Prosecutor's Office stated that the investigation was initiated with reference to statements from U.S. President Donald Trump and the head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), Elon Musk regarding USAID funding.³⁷ The organizations targeted were not presented with a warrant for this action, which lasted over 28 hours.³⁸ At the time of writing, the Prosecutor's Office has not filed formal charges in this case.

The information collected during the raid, including tens of thousands of pages of documentation relating to USAID funding, have been **publicized through government-controlled media** and used by senior government officials, including Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić, to further discredit civil society and accuse it of using foreign funds to engage in anti-government activities.³⁹ The documents included **private or protected information**, containing the names of election observers, experts, association and partners who interacted with the organizations. According to CRTA, this action posed

³⁰ Amnesty International, Human Rights Impact of Less Lethal Weapons and Other Law Enforcement Equipment, April 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ACT3013052015ENGLISH.pdf>

³¹ Amnesty International, Comments on the Draft Law on Internal Affairs of Republic of Serbia, 27 January 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/6388/2023/en/>

³² European Parliament resolution of 7 May 2025 on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Serbia (2025/2022(INI)), 7 May 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0093_EN.pdf

³³ Politika, "President Vučić: Srbija attacked from abroad by color revolution," 18 March 2025, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/667709/predsednik-vucic-srbija-napadnuta-spolja-obojenom-revolucijom>

³⁴ Politika, "President Vučić: Srbija attacked from abroad by color revolution," 18 March 2025, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/667709/predsednik-vucic-srbija-napadnuta-spolja-obojenom-revolucijom>

³⁵ Information provided to Amnesty International by CRTA, 24 April 2025. On file with the organization.

³⁶ Novosti, "Four NGOs targeted by the prosecutor's office and police in Serbia", 25 February 2025, <https://www.novosti.rs/hronika/hapsenja-i-istraga/1464105/cetiri-nvo-meti-tuzilastva-policije-srbiji-stefanovic-obratili-smo-ministarstvu-pravde-sad-dostavljanje-potrebni-obavestenja>

³⁷ Novosti, "Four NGOs targeted by the prosecutor's office and police in Serbia", 25 February 2025, <https://www.novosti.rs/hronika/hapsenja-i-istraga/1464105/cetiri-nvo-meti-tuzilastva-policije-srbiji-stefanovic-obratili-smo-ministarstvu-pravde-sad-dostavljanje-potrebni-obavestenja>

³⁸ Information provided to Amnesty International by CRTA, 24 April 2025. On file with the organization.

³⁹ CRTA, "Criminal charges against President Vučić and others for leaking data from the investigation against CRTA", 13 March 2025, <https://www.crt.rs/krivicna-prijava-protiv-predsednika-vucica-i-drugih/>

a grave risk to the identity and safety of some of the organization's sources who enabled the disclosure of cases involving corruption and human rights violations.⁴⁰

The **heavy-handed approach**, including the presence of armed police instructed to seize documents that could simply have been requested; the 28-hour operation during which the leadership of these organizations had to remain on site; and the selective approach targeting only four of many organizations in Serbia receiving USAID funding, raises numerous concerns that this was a deliberate act by the government aimed to intimidate them and obstruct their work rather than investigate a crime. Together with media campaigns focusing on the alleged Western-funded plot to overthrow the government, the raids seemed intended to create an environment to **legitimize the adoption of a Russia-style "Foreign Agents Law"**, which was most recently re-submitted into the parliamentary procedure in November 2025 by the Movement of Socialists, the political party of the former Minister of Interior and BIA Director, Aleksandar Vulin.⁴¹

Arbitrary investigations targeting organizations critical of the government profoundly threaten the freedom of expression and association and further undermine confidence in the rule of law in Serbia.

EXPULSION AND PUBLISHING OF PERSONAL DATA OF ACTIVISTS AND FOREIGN CITIZENS

The authorities in Serbia engaged in frequent **deportations and expulsions of foreign citizens** accused of alleged anti-government activities, including EU citizens. In January 2025, at least 14 people, including citizens of Croatia, Austria, Slovenia and North Macedonia, who attended a **civil society conference supported by Austrian ERSTE Stiftung and Vienna University**, were questioned by the police and asked to leave Serbia within 24 hours.⁴² The participants were given expulsion orders issued by the Ministry of Interior, which declared them a security threat and banned them from entering Serbia for a year. The people expelled did not have any apparent involvement in Serbian domestic politics.

In April 2025, a **Croatian citizen**, married and living with her family in Serbia for 12 years, had her residency permit revoked, and was subsequently deported from the country and banned from entry for a year.⁴³ She told media that she was not informed of the reasons for her expulsion, but suspected that her posts on social media in support of the student protests may have been the cause for the authorities to declare her as "an unacceptable security risk."⁴⁴ **Croatian authorities recorded at least 32 cases** of its citizens, including the head of the Croatian Chamber of Commerce, being deported or denied entry into Serbia over the past several months without a legitimate cause.⁴⁵ The series of expulsions come amid repeated statements by the Serbian authorities about the alleged influence of Croatian intelligence over NGOs in Serbia and their purported involvement in anti-government activities.⁴⁶ Most recently, in late April, a **Montenegrin student** attending the Faculty of Law in Belgrade, who took part in the peaceful student protests, was denied entry into Serbia and declared a threat to the national security.⁴⁷

In addition to the expulsions, media with known links to the government **repeatedly published personal data of Croatian and other foreign citizens** who were suspected of involvement in alleged "anti-Serbian activities". In January 2025, a media outlet close to the government, published a copy of the identity card of a Croatian journalist and the address of the hotel where he was staying. The same program also featured personal documents of several other young Croatian citizens and others who were accused of "waging a hybrid war against Serbia."⁴⁸ Other pro-government media outlets similarly published passports belonging to two student protesters with dual Serbian-Croatian citizenships, insinuating subversive

⁴⁰ Information provided to Amnesty International by CRTA, 24 April 2025. On file with the organization.

⁴¹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Vulinova stranka u Skupštini Srbije predložila zakon o stranim agentima" ["Vulin's party proposed a law on foreign agents in the Serbian Parliament"], 4 September 2024, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-vulin-straniagenti/33220976.html> (in Serbian).

⁴² European Western Balkans, "Foreign civic activists interrogated and banned from Serbia for representing a "security risk" 22 January, 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/01/22/foreign-civic-activists-interrogated-and-banned-from-serbia-for-representing-a-security-risk/>

⁴³ A2, "Serbia expels 3 Croatian citizens from the country, Prime Minister Plenkovic reacts harshly: We want clarifications!", 10 April 2025, <https://a2news.com/english/rajoni-bota/balkani/srbija-debon-3-shtetas-kroate-nga-vendi-reagon-ashper-kryem-i1145092>

⁴⁴ Balkan Insight, "Croatia Calls on Serbia to Explain Expulsions of Three Citizens", 10 April 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/04/10/croatia-calls-on-serbia-to-explain-expulsions-of-three-citizens/>

⁴⁵ Balkan Insight, "Croatia Calls on Serbia to Explain Expulsions of Three Citizens", 10 April 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/04/10/croatia-calls-on-serbia-to-explain-expulsions-of-three-citizens/>

⁴⁶ Otvoreno HR, "Srbia again accuses Croatia: This is an attempted coup," 26 December 2025, <https://www.otvoreno.hr/top/srbija-ponovno-optuzuje-hrvatsku-ovo-je-pokusaj-drzavnog-udara/516934>

⁴⁷ Insajder, "Strugar student case: She testified to an attack at the Faculty of Law, was targeted in the media, and was banned from entering Serbia," 24 April, 2025, <https://www.insajder.net teme/slucaj-studentkinje-strugar-svedocila-napadu-na-pravnom-fakultetu-targetirana-u-medijima-pa-joj-zabranjen-ulazak-u-srbiju>

⁴⁸ Index HR, "Chetnik and criminal on Vučić's TV publishes identity cards of Croats. Croatia is silent", 17 January 2025, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/cetnik-i-zlocinac-na-vucicevoj-tv-objavljuje-osobne-iskaznice-hrvata-hrvatska-suti/2633810.aspx>

activities by Croatia in the protest movement.⁴⁹ Data Protection Commissioner told media that he requested information from the relevant authorities to determine how the media outlets obtained the documents, but was sceptical that his investigation would yield any results.⁵⁰

A report prepared by the European Parliament's Rapporteur on Serbia strongly criticized the "Serbian authorities' unsubstantiated allegations that EU Member States were involved in organising the student protests with a view to triggering a 'colour revolution' and the unlawful arrests and expulsions of EU citizens and the public disclosure, by convicted war criminals, of the personal data of EU citizens."⁵¹

In April, the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner expressed concern about the "unfavourable working environment for NGOs and human rights defenders," and called Serbian authorities to protect protesters and improve the operating environment for civil society.⁵²

Recommendations for EU engagement towards the Serbian authorities:

Civil society organizations play a key role in advancing human rights-related reforms in Serbia, including through their ability to enhance transparency, hold the authorities to account and offer evidence-based reporting.

Efforts to support civil society actors should be at the forefront of Serbia's EU accession process and the EU's broader engagement with the authorities. Given the "difficult environment" that civil society in the country operates – as acknowledged by the European Commission's 2024 report – and in light of the impact of the new US Administration's Executive Order to freeze USAID financing, the EU should **step up funding and ensure more diversified support** to civil society. This includes support to those facing arbitrary arrests, smear campaigns or other attacks, as well as dedicated programmes to promote an enabling environment for civil society.

The EU and its member states should also **bolster the use of diplomatic channels to support independent journalists, human rights defenders and civil society.** This could include public statements, and the use of political and technical dialogues to inquire about individual cases, including smear campaigns, ongoing investigations into threats, or cases of intimidation and violence.

Moreover, the European Commission should ensure that its engagement with the authorities as well as the financial and technical assistance foreseen within the framework of Serbia's EU accession process, including IPA III and the Growth Facility, contributes to **ensuring the effective implementation of reforms that promote and protect the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.**

Among other things, the European Commission should urge the Serbian authorities to:

- **Promote an enabling environment for the exercise of the right to freedom of assembly, including by facilitating peaceful assemblies and protecting participants against possible** abuse, including abuse by members of the public. Although the 2024 European Commission report raises concerns about the right to peaceful assembly in Serbia, it included only very few specific recommendations for the Serbian authorities. Considering the events over the past year, it will be important to ensure this issue is more prominently addressed in this year's report.
- **Ensure that law-enforcement officials involved in policing the protests wear visible insignia and clearly identify themselves when interacting with protesters.** This issue was not addressed in the 2024 European Commission report.
- **End criminal proceedings against all people charged solely for their involvement in peaceful protests or for exercising their right to freedom of expression or peaceful assembly.** While the 2024 European Commission report, rightly points to arrests and charges of 'incitement to the violent overthrow of the constitutional order' being made against peaceful protesters, it would be important to stress how widespread this practice has become and the baselessness of these charges, with police frequently citing activists' posts on social media, their speeches or even their mere participation in the protests as elements for serious criminal charges. Moreover, while the 2024 report refers to such cases being

⁴⁹ N1, "Novosti threaten the safety of students," 3 January 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/novosti-ugrozavaju-bezbednost-studenata/>

⁵⁰ Insajder, "Commissioner Marinović for Marker: We are determining who provided the passports of two students to the media," 14 January 2025, <https://www.insajder.net teme/poverenik-marinovic-za-marker-utvrdujemo-ko-je-medijima-dostavio-pasose-dva-studenta-video>

⁵¹ European Parliament, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Draft Report on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Serbia (2025/2022(INI)), 10 February 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-PR-767969_EN.pdf

⁵² Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner, Serbia: authorities should ensure safety of demonstrators and improve working environment for civil society and human rights defenders, 28 April 2025, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/serbia-authorities-should-ensure-safety-of-demonstrators-and-improve-working-environment-for-civil-society-and-human-rights-defenders>

settled via plea bargains, it would be important to stress that this is because activists often feared they would not receive a fair trial if they refused to settle their cases.

- **Ensure that the use of security services in criminal proceedings is forbidden or limited to exceptional cases and ensure a clear separation between the police and Serbia's Security – Information Agency (BIA).** In its last report, the European Commission warned Serbia that the regulations and remits of the two services should be clearly separated, yet to date, no actions have been taken to this end.
- **Conduct an independent, impartial and thorough investigation into the use of an unidentified acoustic device to target peaceful protesters on 15 March 2025,** including the past procurement by the Ministry of Interior of acoustic devices such as Long-range acoustic device (LRAD), which are not lawful under Serbian legislation. Raise concern about the independence of investigations into the incident carried out so far, including by the First Basic Public Prosecutor's Office. **Ensure that state officials refrain from personal attacks on civil society activists, organizations and human rights defenders,** including through media close to or controlled by the government or the ruling party.
- **End criminal proceedings against all people charged solely for their involvement in peaceful protests or for exercising their right to freedom of expression or peaceful assembly.**
- **Ensure that law-enforcement officials involved in policing the protests wear visible insignia and clearly identify themselves when interacting with protesters.**
- **Stop the practice of seizing devices belonging to civil society activists and protesters who are not formally charged and subjecting them to highly invasive searches using advanced digital forensic tools.** It would be important to raise concerns about the lawfulness of the intrusive digital surveillance applied against protesters and activists, in many cases even before the individuals in question were formally charged. This infringes on people's right to privacy and rights to the freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and association
- **Promote an enabling environment for the exercise of the right to freedom of assembly, including by facilitating peaceful assemblies and protecting participants against possible abuse, including abuse by members of the public.**
- **Conduct an independent, impartial and thorough investigation into the use of an unidentified acoustic device to target peaceful protesters on 15 March 2025,** including the past procurement by the Ministry of Interior of acoustic devices such as Long-range acoustic device (LRAD), which are not lawful under Serbian legislation.
- **Immediately stop targeting civil society groups, including orchestrated campaigns through media and unfounded financial and criminal investigations.**
- **Stop the practice of arbitrary expulsion and denial of entry to foreign citizens and investigate all cases of media publishing personal data and identity documents of foreign citizens.**
- **Remove the Russia-style "Foreign Agents Law" recently re-submitted into the parliamentary procedure in November 2025 by the Movement of Socialists.**

UNLAWFUL USE OF INVASIVE SPYWARE AND DIGITAL FORENSIC TECHNOLOGY

DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE CAMPAIGN TARGETING CIVIL SOCIETY

In December 2024, Amnesty International's report, "A Digital Prison" uncovered a **widespread surveillance campaign targeting civil society** in Serbia amid ongoing anti-government protests.⁵³ The investigation exposed how Serbian police and intelligence authorities are using advanced phone spyware alongside mobile phone forensic products, such as Cellebrite, to unlawfully target journalists, environmental activists and student protesters.

The research found that the authorities **systematically used the Cellebrite digital forensic technology to forcibly unlock the phones of protesters, activists and journalists** who were detained – either for taking part in peaceful protests, for publishing critical posts on social media or for merely administering large groups on Twitter or Facebook. None of the individuals were formally charged and, with one exception, the affected people were not shown a warrant or a court order.

⁵³ Amnesty International, Serbia: "A Digital Prison": Surveillance and the suppression of civil society in Serbia, 13 December 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8813/2024/en/>

Digital forensic tools can extract all data on devices and are widely used in law-enforcement across the world in the context of criminal investigations. Serbian authorities, however, used this technology to forcibly unlock the phones of unsuspecting people who were detained, in order to gain access to all data on their phones, and in some cases – to enable the installation of a malicious software that would allow the authorities to surveil the activists and journalists after they were released from custody.

On almost a dozen of the analyzed devices, Amnesty International found traces of a previously unknown spyware, named NoviSpy, which allowed for the capturing of sensitive data from people's phones and had the ability to turn on their devices' microphone and camera remotely. Most extraordinarily, in a number of cases, the authorities **used Cellebrite's legitimate digital forensic technology (designed for use in the context of criminal investigations) to forcibly unlock the phones and to enable the installation of this malicious software**, without a court order, and in most cases, without any specific charges against the individuals in question.

Amnesty International can attribute with high confidence these spyware campaigns to the Serbian authorities, and more specifically to BIA. An analysis of multiple NoviSpy spyware app samples recovered from infected devices found that all communicated with servers hosted in Serbia and were configured to connect directly to an IP address range associated directly with Serbia's intelligence agency, BIA.

Having access to two highly invasive technologies in combination, provided the authorities with an enormous capability to gather data. What makes these cases particularly disturbing was the **exceptionally deceptive tactic used** - the infections occurred while the phones were temporarily taken away from their owners, who were either detained or attending informational interviews, or even reporting an incident, and were apparently placed in lockers in police stations.

Further research published in February detailed new evidence of continued targeting of student protesters by Cellebrite technology.⁵⁴

ACCOUNTABILITY AND DUE DILIGENCE

Although the Serbian authorities publicly rejected the findings, in February 2025, the Serbian prosecutor for high technological crime officially **registered a criminal case**, responding to charges filed by the association of NGOs against police and intelligence agencies. The original criminal complaint, which involved four complainants whose cases were documented in Amnesty International's report, was expanded in May 2025 to include three additionally documented cases. Amnesty International understands that the police are currently gathering evidence, and that the investigation is ongoing.⁵⁵ Despite the urgency and the fact that new cases of unlawful spyware targeting continued to emerge after the initial revelations, **no significant progress has been made since December 2024**. With the authorities in Serbia continuing to deny that they engaged in unlawful actions, the degree of undue influence and political pressure on the country's judiciary, it is difficult to expect an impartial and thorough investigation of this matter.

The **Serbian ombudsman and Data Protection Commissioner launched their own investigations** in February 2025, with Amnesty International's evidence forming the basis of the inquiry. There has been **no concrete progress** reported at the time of writing.

Internationally, **the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, which donated Cellebrite digital forensics to Serbia, and the **United National Office for Project Services (UNOPS)**, which was responsible for the procurement of the equipment, have initiated internal reviews and begun far-reaching reform of their aid and procurement policies globally as a result of Amnesty International's findings.

Most significantly, the revelations **prompted swift action by Cellebrite**, which launched an internal investigation and, by February 2025, announced the suspension of customers in Serbia found misusing their forensic tools.⁵⁶ Google, whose Android security system had been compromised by Serbian authorities, confirmed Amnesty International's findings, and

⁵⁴ Amnesty International, Serbia: Cellebrite zero-day exploit used to target phone of Serbian student activist, 28 February 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/9118/2025/en/>

⁵⁵ Information received from the lawyer representing the complainants, 12 April 2025. On file with Amnesty International

⁵⁶ Cellebrite Statement About Amnesty International Report, 28 February 2025, <https://cellebrite.com/en/cellebrite-statement-about-amnesty-international-report/>

responded by removing the software from infected devices, issuing security alerts to affected Serbian users, and patching vulnerabilities that could have compromised millions of devices worldwide.⁵⁷

In March 2025, the **Council of Europe's PACE Legal Affairs and Human Rights Committee** organized a thematic hearing to address the use of digital surveillance in Serbia and Spain. In April 2025, Amnesty International presented its findings on digital surveillance at the PACE Monitoring Committee's special hearing on Serbia.

In May, **the European Parliament** expressed deep concern about “widespread illegal surveillance practices using spyware against activists, journalists and members of civil society,” urged the government of Serbia “to immediately cease the use of advanced surveillance technology against activists, journalists and human rights defenders,” and the “competent state authorities to conduct a thorough investigation into all existing cases of unlawful surveillance and use of spyware and to initiate appropriate proceedings against those responsible.”

ATTACKS USING NSO GROUP'S PEGASUS SPYWARE

In March 2025, a joint Amnesty International – Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) investigations revealed how two independent journalists with BIRN were **targeted with NSO Group's Pegasus spyware**, bringing the **total of documented cases to five**.⁵⁸ The journalists received suspicious links on Viber messaging app, but did not click on these avoiding full infection of their phones. Viber security team confirmed that the sender of the malicious messages was reported by multiple recipients and was subsequently blocked, indicating that the scope of such targeting goes well beyond the two journalists.⁵⁹ Previous investigations found evidence of Pegasus targeting two high-profile think-tank representatives and a protest organizer in July 2023.⁶⁰ Independent research indicated that Serbia has purchased and operated Pegasus spyware since at least December 2021.⁶¹ Amnesty International concluded with high confidence that Serbian authorities were behind these attacks.

INADEQUATE LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND PRACTICE REGULATING DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

The **use of surveillance software is not sufficiently regulated** in Serbia. Serbia's legislation provides for the use of exceptional measures, including secret communications surveillance, and sets specific circumstances in which such measures could be used lawfully. However, the use of advanced technologies, including spyware and other advanced digital forensic tools that collect vast amounts of personal data, is not fully recognized or sufficiently regulated by law, leaving too much space for potential abuse of such techniques, including for political purposes. The **generic provisions regulating the application of special measures** across several different laws are not sufficiently clear, nor do they provide meaningful safeguards against misuse when it comes to digital surveillance technologies, which are far more intrusive and less targeted than the conventional means of covert communications surveillance, such as wiretapping. Even the mechanism of judicial ex-ante oversight, such as a judicial decision that specifies strict timespan and the target of surveillance activities, cannot provide effective protection against advanced digital surveillance tools or spyware that are able to gain complete and uncontrolled access to the data, messages, images, files and metadata on one's device.

Moreover, in practice the means of control and oversight over the use of special measures are often rendered meaningless or ineffective in Serbia, due to often-noted concerns about the government's undue political influence on courts and prosecutors and the degree of state capture in the country. The means of control and oversight over the use of special measures, which might appear sufficient on paper, are meaningless or **ineffective in practice**.

The authorities have deployed these tools against civil society, activists and journalists who are already subjected to unjustified criminalization over their activities or work. At the time of writing, Amnesty International has documented at least **17 cases of human rights defenders and journalists in Serbia whose devices were targeted by highly invasive spyware**,

⁵⁷ Bleeping Computer, Google fixes Android zero-day exploited by Serbian authorities, 4 March 2025, <https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/google-fixes-android-zero-days-exploited-in-targeted-attacks/>

⁵⁸ Amnesty International, Serbia: BIRN journalists targeted with Pegasus spyware, 27 March, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/03/serbia-birn-journalists-targeted-with-pegasus-spyware/>

⁵⁹ Email exchange with Viber security team, 28 March 2025, on file with Amnesty International.

⁶⁰ Amnesty International, Serbia: Civil society threatened by spyware, 28 November 2023, <https://securitylab.amnesty.org/latest/2023/11/serbia-civil-society-threatened-by-spyware/>

⁶¹ The Citizen Lab, Pegasus vs. Predator, Dissident's Doubly-Infected iPhone Reveals Cytox Mercenary Spyware, 16 December 2021, <https://www.citizenlab.ca/2021/12/pegasus-vs-predator-dissidents-doubly-infected-iphone-reveals-cytrox-mercenary-spyware/> and Google, Protecting Android users from 0-Day attacks, 19 May 2022, <https://www.blog.google/threat-analysis-group/protecting-android-users-from-0-day-attacks/>

domestic spyware or digital forensic tools. Unlawful and unchecked use of surveillance technologies not only has a devastating impact on people's right to privacy, but also profoundly threatens the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly of those targeted.

For more information on the recent instances of digital surveillance targeting civil society in Serbia, see Amnesty International: [A Digital Prison](#), from December 2024, Amnesty International: [Serbia: Celebrite zero-day exploit used to target phone of Serbian student activist](#), from February 2025, and Amnesty International: [BIRN journalists targeted by Pegasus spyware](#), from March 2025.

Recommendations for EU engagement towards the Serbian authorities:

While the 2024 European Commission report refers to cases of human rights defenders being targeted by spyware attacks, it refrained from formulating specific recommendations to the Serbian authorities. In light of the above-mentioned findings, the availability of specific criminal complaints that can be followed up on, and recent calls by the European Parliament⁶² for the European Commission to follow up on incidents of unlawful digital surveillance in Serbia, it will be crucial to see this issue more prominently addressed in this year's report. More specifically, the European Commission should urge the authorities in Serbia to:

- **Conduct independent and thorough investigations** into all documented and reported instances of unlawful targeted surveillance and misuse of spyware and other invasive digital forensics tools and ensure effective remedy for the victims.
- **Amend the Criminal Procedure Code, Law on Police and Law on BIA**, as well as other laws regulating covert surveillance, to ensure that they are in full conformity with the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, with regard to quality of the law, authorization procedure, supervision and oversight mechanisms, notification mechanisms and remedies.
- **Implement a human rights regulatory framework that governs surveillance**, includes robust safeguards, including strong independent oversight, and is in line with international human rights law and standards. Until such a framework is in place, both the EU and Serbia should enforce a moratorium on the purchase, sale, transfer and use of all spyware.
- **Amend relevant legislation to adequately clarify the roles and responsibilities of police and BIA in the context of criminal investigations** to ensure that they are in conformity with EU law and best practice.

More broadly, the European Commission should:

- **Step up the use of diplomatic and financial channels to support independent journalists, human rights defenders and civil society in Serbia targeted by unlawful targeted surveillance**, the misuse of spyware and other invasive digital forensics tools. This could include more regularly and publicly expressing concern over the targeting of individuals; issuing statements underlining the EU's support for civil society; offering human rights defenders and civil society legal support, grants for digital security and protection measures as well as training and capacity-building programmes in digital security.
- **Raise the issue of unlawful digital surveillance in high-level meetings with senior officials in Serbia** and urge them to take concrete measures to ensure the safety of civil society actors and to preserve the right to privacy, as well as the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.
- **Use political and technical dialogue with the Serbian authorities to call for and follow up on the progress of any investigations**, by both judicial and extra-judicial authorities, including the Ombudsman's Office and Data Protection Commissioner. into documented and reported instances of unlawful targeted surveillance or the misuse of spyware and other invasive digital forensics tools.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS: SOCIAL CARD LAW

⁶² European Parliament resolution of 7 May 2025 on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Serbia (2025/2022(INI)), 7 May 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0093_EN.pdf

In three years since the Law on Social Card entered into force on 1 March 2022, **nearly 60,000 people living in extreme poverty have lost access to the social assistance and accompanying benefits.**⁶³ The government's own figures show 152,982 recipients in the system in March 2025, which is 15,000 fewer than at the same time last year. This points to a **continuous decline in the number of recipients**, which is in stark contrast to the high rates of absolute poverty in Serbia, which lingers at around 7% of the overall population, and the absence of a statistically significant drop in the risk of the poverty rate.⁶⁴

This means that almost half a million people live under the poverty threshold of 12,500 Serbian dinars (106 euros) per month and are unable to meet their basic needs. Due to already restrictive eligibility requirements for social assistance, including an extremely low-income threshold of less than 12,000 Serbian dinars (102 euros), over 250,000 people who are living in poverty are already excluded from social assistance. **The number of people deprived of social assistance is bound to increase as the Social Cards law continues to exclude some of the most economically vulnerable people.**

In July 2024, the **Council of Europe's European Commission on Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)** expressed serious concerns about the impact of the Social Card Law and urged Serbia to "fundamentally review the decision-making process involving algorithmic systems in the provision of social assistance with a view of ensuring that Roma and other groups of concern to ECRI have equal opportunities in benefiting from social assistance and are not subject to discrimination."⁶⁵

In August 2024, the **World Bank's Inspection Panel** registered a case regarding the Bank's involvement in the establishment of the Social Card Registry and the automation of social assistance in Serbia, reacting to the complaint filed jointly by A11 Initiative for Economic and Social Rights and Amnesty International.⁶⁶ The complaint argued that the World Bank, which supported the introduction of the Social Cards law, **failed to conduct a human rights impact assessment** of the project to avoid adverse human rights impact on some of the most marginalized people in Serbia, including Roma and people with disabilities.

In October 2024, the Inspection Panel visited Serbia and, in November 2024, made a recommendation for further action to the World Bank's Board. The Board is expected to make a decision on possible further action in the coming weeks.

The research by Amnesty International and A11 Initiative for Economic and Social Rights found that the introduction of the Law on Social Cards and the **creation of the Social Card Registry has only exacerbated existing flaws and structural discrimination** and further restricted an already strained access of people living in poverty to social assistance.⁶⁷ For more details on the effects of the Law on Social Card, see [Amnesty International, Trapped by Automation: Poverty and Discrimination in Serbia's Welfare State](#), from December 2023.

Recommendations for EU engagement towards the Serbian authorities:

The European Commission's 2024 report highlighted concerns over the impact of the Social Card law on vulnerable individuals. It highlighted the insufficient assessment by social welfare staff of raw data processed by the social card register and recommended that the system be subject to a human-rights based impact assessment and outreach campaigns.

In light of these findings, the European Commission should reiterate these concerns and urge the Serbian authorities to:

- **Conduct an independent human rights impact assessment of the Social Card law** and its application to determine any gaps, including potentially discriminatory effects on specific groups and put in place adequate safeguards and remedial measures in instances of any human rights risks.

⁶³ A11 - Initiative for Economic and Social Rights, "Three years of implementation of the Law on the Social Card - Almost every third financially disadvantaged person was left without social assistance," 19 March 2025, <https://www.a11initiative.org/tri-godine-primene-zakona-o-socijalnoj-karti-skoro-svaka-treca-materijalno-ugrozena-osoba-ostala-bez-socijalne-pomoci/>

⁶⁴ European Anti-poverty Network, Poverty Watch Serbia 2024, September 2024, <https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/eapn-Poverty-Watch-Serbia-2024-6016.pdf>

⁶⁵ European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), Report on Serbia, July 2024, <https://rm.coe.int/fourth-ecri-report-on-serbia/1680b06413>

⁶⁶ World Bank Inspection Panel, Serbia: Public Sector Efficiency and Green Recovery DPL (P164575), <https://www.inspectionpanel.org/panel-cases/public-sector-efficiency-and-green-recovery-dpl-p164575>

⁶⁷ [Amnesty International, Trapped by Automation: Poverty and Discrimination in Serbia's Welfare State](#), December 2023.

- **Assess the role of social workers to determine whether they fully understand how the system works and can maintain meaningful control over the system** throughout the lifecycle of the application process; Provide additional training and capacity building where necessary.
- **Make public the information on how the Social Card Information System works to ensure full transparency** and access to information.
- **Ensure that the applicants receive information in clear and accessible terms about how the decisions in their cases are made, how they can challenge such decisions, and ensure that applicants receive support in lodging appeals.**
- **Ensure that recipients are provided access to an effective remedy**, including prompt and adequate reparation for any harm suffered in the process.