

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SUBMISSION

SERBIA - AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SUBMISSION FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION ENLARGEMENT PACKAGE 2026

Brussels, 18 May 2026

Reference: TIGO IOR 10/2026.7599

Amnesty International is presenting this submission to the European Commission ahead of the preparation of its 2026 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 reporting period (May 2025 – April 2026) has been marked by a continued deterioration of human rights and the rule of law in Serbia, amid sustained protests and widespread civil unrest. The collapse of a concrete canopy at the train station in Novi Sad in November 2024, which resulted in the deaths of 16 people, acted as a catalyst for prolonged public discontent. In the months that followed, hundreds of thousands of people participated in protests across the country, frequently blocking roads and public institutions while demanding accountability for the incident and calling for early elections.

Rather than engaging with protesters' demands, the Serbian authorities chose to respond by doubling down on repressive measures, targeting the protest movement, journalists, civil society groups, students and increasingly also the broader academic community. Indeed, during the reporting period government repression has taken the form of police violence and the excessive use of force against protesters, arbitrary arrests and detentions, unlawful surveillance, serious and unfounded criminal charges and escalating disinformation and smear campaigns.

Although the demands initially driving the protests closely aligned with Serbia's EU accession commitments, the EU's perceived complacency toward Serbia's long-standing human rights backsliding in previous years, undermined the EU's credibility as a human rights actor and reinforced Serbian civil society's sense of isolation. However, over the past year, tentative shifts have emerged in the EU's approach towards Serbia. This has included a stronger emphasis on human rights and rule of law reforms in high level public engagements by the [President of the European Commission](#), the [High Representative](#) and the [Commissioner for enlargement](#), as well as a more explicit linkage between [EU financial assistance](#) and reforms in the field of fundamental rights and the rule of law. However, to meaningfully support human rights reform, this shift must now translate into decisive EU action and a more sustained policy approach which firmly anchors Serbia's accession process in respect for the rule of law and fundamental rights.

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 - remains 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. 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](#)
 - [Excessive use of force and police violence](#)
 - [Arbitrary arrests and detention of protesters](#)
 - [The opaque role of officers without identification](#)
 - [Attacks on civil society](#)
 - [Economic and administrative retaliation](#)
2. [Freedom of Expression](#)
3. [Unlawful use of invasive spyware and digital forensic technology](#)
 - [Lack of accountability for unlawful use of spyware and digital forensic technology](#)

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

Throughout 2025, the protests expanded significantly highlighting an unusual degree of civic engagement and mobilization, even outside of main urban centers, which had been primary locations of such gatherings in the past years. While the majority of assemblies remained peaceful, protesters – including students, activists, journalists – and increasingly university professors and other employees – were subjected to a broad range of repressive measures. These included excessive use of force, police violence, arbitrary arrests and detentions, unlawful surveillance, and thousands of misdemeanors and criminal charges. There has been an alarming increase in the use of disinformation and smear campaigns targeting individuals involved in or perceived to support the protests. Taken together, these measures point to a pattern of systemic restrictions on civic space which significantly undermines people's ability to exercise their rights to the freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE AND POLICE VIOLENCE

The authorities responded to the growing civil unrest with increasingly repressive measures, including the excessive and unnecessary use of force to disperse largely peaceful protests, as well as arbitrary, and in some cases, violent arrests and detentions.

Protests and road blockades during the summer months, particularly in July and August, escalated into violent confrontations. Media outlets and local organizations documented numerous instances of police deploying tear gas, batons, and armored vehicles to disperse large protests that took place on 28th of June, St. Vitus Day.¹ In the weeks that followed, multiple instances of police violence during arrest operations were recorded, including media footage showing officers dragging people, forcing them to the ground, and kicking and striking demonstrators who did not appear to be resisting.²

During the 28 June protest in Belgrade, several students, journalists and activists sustained serious injuries. Media widely reported a case of a young student who was assaulted by the police requiring two serious surgeries for his injuries. Despite his condition, he was – according to his family – handcuffed while in his hospital bed and transferred to a detention facility.³

¹ YUCOM, Monitoring report 6/25 "See you at Vidovdan," 15 July 2025, <https://yucom.org.rs/monitoring-izvestaj-6-25-vidimo-se-na-vidovdan/>.

² N1 (Video), "Violent arrests and dispersal of blockades during night across Serbia: young woman knocked on the ground and kicked in her chest," 2 July 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/video-nasilna-hapsenja-i-razbijanje-blokada-tokom-noci-sirom-srbije-devojka-oborena-i-sutirana-u-grudni-kos/>.

³ Vreme, "Case of student L.M.: Beaten and then cuffed to his bed in hospital," 8 July 2025, <https://vreme.com/drustvo/slucaj-studenta-l-m-prebijen-pa-u-bolnici-lisicama-vezan-za-krevet/>.

The serious criminal charges filed against him were ultimately dropped in September due to a lack of evidence.⁴ Nevertheless, there has been no investigation into his alleged ill-treatment.

During protests at a university in Novi Sad in early September, participants reported that the police used exceptionally large quantities of tear gas, with some people suffering chemical burns, blisters and other skin damage.⁵ During the same protests, police indiscriminately deployed stun grenades against the entire protests, after several protesters threw rocks and flairs in their direction.⁶

Amnesty International received reports that several hundred students, including high school students, and other protesters were arrested on various criminal and administrative charges in the first days of August. While most were released within hours or days, there were credible reports of excessive use of force during the protests, arrest operations, and detention, including beatings that left several students hospitalized.⁷

Student protesters and by-standers frequently reported being apprehended by officers in plain clothes and taken to undisclosed locations for informal questioning, where they were subjected to ill treatment. In September, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) documented testimonies from nine people, including two by-standers, who reported that the masked police officers in plain clothes apprehended them, forced them into vehicles and transported them to a disused garage within a government building. There, they were reportedly lined up, made to sit with their backs to the wall and subjected to hours of abuse, including slapping, kicking, and threats of further violence, including rape.⁸ One of the students, Nikolina Sindjelić, publicly accused the former commander of the unit for protection of persons and facilities, Marko Kričak, of slapping her, hitting her head against the wall and threatening to “rape her in front of everyone.”⁹ Sindjelić filed a criminal report against Kričak in August,¹⁰ and the Ombudsman's Office initiated an inspection shortly after. At the time of writing, neither process has been concluded.

In August, pro-government media outlets published footage from protests in Novi Sad showing a group of young men, including a minor, kneeling with their hands cuffed behind their backs and facing the wall, while police officers stood behind them.¹¹ While media reports indicated that the men had been arrested during anti-government protests, local organizations and legal experts questioned the necessity and proportionality of holding detainees in a stress position, apparently only for the purpose of recording and disseminating footage.¹²

The testimonies reveal that many similar abuses occur during the initial period of custody, prior to any formal police interview, and in the absence of legal counsel, significantly increasing the risk of torture or other ill-treatment.

⁴ Nova RS, “Charges against the student who was cuffed to bed dropped: His family was unofficially informed about the decision,” 30 September 2025, <https://nova.rs/vesti/hronika/odbacena-optuznica-protiv-studenta-koji-je-vezivan-za-krevet-porodica-tek-usput-obavestena-o-toj-odluci/>.

⁵ Danas, “What is CN gas students claim police used against citizens in Novi Sad,” 14 September, 2025, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/sta-je-cn-gas/>.

⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/reels/DOPBb4JiDUu/>.

⁷ Amnesty International, Serbia: Authorities must end unlawful use of force against protesters and investigate reports of police violence, 4 July 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/07/serbia-authorities-must-end-unlawful-use-of-force-against-protesters-and-investigate-reports-of-police-violence/>.

⁸ BIRN, “Files - Police brutality in the garage of the Republic of Serbia Government’s garage,” 15 September 2025, <https://birn.rs/policijska-brutalnost-u-garazi-vlade/>.

⁹ N1, “Student: Marko Kričak threatened to rape me, slapped me and hit my head against the wall,” 15 August 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/studentkinja-marko-kricak-mi-pretio-da-ce-me-silovati-samarao-i-udarao-mi-glavu-o-zid/>.

¹⁰ O21, “Student Nikolina Sindjelić filed criminal complaint against Kričak,” 26 August 2026, <https://www.O21.rs/info/srbija/419127/studentkinja-nikolina-sindjelic-podnela-prijavu-protiv-kricka>.

¹¹ O21, “Regime media publish footage of Novi Sad arrests: on their knees, cuffed and facing the wall,” 15 August 2025, <https://www.O21.rs/novi-sad/vesti/418102/rezimski-mediji-objavili-snimke-uhapsenih-u-novom-sadu-na-kolenima-lisice-i-glave-uz-zid>.

¹² N1, “What kind of a measure is this? Public is shocked with the footage of arrested men kneeling facing the wall,” 15 August 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/video-koja-je-ovo-mera-javnost-sokirana-snimkom-uhapsenih-mladica-koji-klece-ispred-zida/>. Also, see Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Annual Report 2025, p. 41.

Despite numerous formal complaints, there have been no reported instances of police officers being held accountable for unlawful or excessive use of force against protesters.¹³ The lack of accountability stands in stark contrast to a series of presidential pardons granted to individuals charged with serious offences against protesters. In July 2025, the President Aleksandar Vučić pardoned four supporters of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) who had been charged with assault and causing serious bodily harm to students in Novi Sad in January 2025.¹⁴ The attack left one female student with a broken jaw. In August 2025, the President also pardoned a young woman who had driven her car into protesters in Belgrade in January 2025, striking a protest steward and causing her serious physical injuries.¹⁵

This pattern of selective and arbitrary use of executive clemency normalizes repression, further undermines already low levels of public trust in the rule of law, and raises serious concerns about the independence and impartiality of state institutions. It also contributes to a climate of impunity and diminishes the prospect for meaningful, good-faith engagement between the authorities, protesters, and civil society.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND DETENTION OF PROTESTERS

The authorities have continued to arrest and question the protesters and activists on a large scale. Thousands of people have been questioned or charged in connection with the protests in 2025.¹⁶ The scale of arrests intensified during the summer months, with more than 1600 people apprehended or charged in July and August alone. The vast majority - approximately 1400 people - were charged with minor offences under the Law on Public Order and Law on Road Traffic Safety, while nearly 300 faced criminal charges, including serious offences such as assaulting an official, violent conduct and attempting to overthrow the constitutional order.¹⁷

While most of those detained were often released after several hours or days in custody, some were held in custody for longer than 30 days.¹⁸

The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights reported the increasing use of pre-trial detention in cases related to protests.¹⁹ In some instances, pre-trial detention was prolonged without sufficient justification; in others, it may have been used to exert pressure on defendants to accept plea agreements. Such practices raise serious concerns as to whether pre-trial detention has been applied in a necessary and proportionate manner, or whether it has been used to deter further public participation in protests and exert pressure on defendants.²⁰

THE OPAQUE ROLE OF OFFICERS WITHOUT IDENTIFICATION

The arrests and detentions of protesters also continued to be carried out by both uniformed police officers and individuals in plain clothes who did not wear visible official identification and refused to identify themselves. In many cases, detainees reported that, until their arrival at police stations, they were unaware of whether they had been arrested by the police, the Security Information Agency (BIA), or even by armed hooligans.²¹ This lack of transparency raises serious concerns about the legality and oversight of law enforcement operations and increases the risk of human rights abuses.

BIA also continued the practice of inviting protesters and those suspected of involvement in protests to so-called “informational interviews” and “informal and friendly conversations” to obtain information about the planned gatherings. People who were interviewed by BIA were not told on what grounds they were invited, and many perceived the “informal

¹³ Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Annual Report 2025.

¹⁴ RTS, “President pardoned the four men charged with assaulting students in Novi Sad,” 3 July 2025, <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/5742836/predsednik-pomilovao-cetvoricu-okrivljenih-za-napad-na-studente-u-novom-sadu.html>.

¹⁵ Index HR, “Vučić pardoned the girl who drove her car into a student and drove with her on the hood of her car,” 4 August 2025, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/vucic-pomilovao-djevojku-koja-je-autom-udarila-studenticu-i-vozila-je-na-haubi/2696607.aspx>.

¹⁶ <https://pustiteihsv.org/baza-podataka/>.

¹⁷ Ministry of Interior Police Directorate data obtained by CRTA and quoted by the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Annual Report, p. 47.

¹⁸ Yucom or BG Centre – find the submission.

¹⁹ Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Annual Report 2025, p. 48.

²⁰ Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Annual Report 2025, p. 49.

²¹ Amnesty International Interviews with 30 people who were detained between November 2024 and August 2025.

conversations” as another form of intimidation.²² Amnesty International's earlier research showed that in 2024 and early 2025 the authorities used these informational interviews to forcibly unlock phones belonging to activists, access their data and, in some cases, install spyware on activists' devices.²³

The absence of a clear separation between the police and BIA, whose operatives exercise police powers, are present at the protests, and carry out arrests, continues to create an opaque operational environment. This significantly undermines accountability and limits victims' ability to seek redress in case of unlawful arrest or other human rights violations. The European Commission has repeatedly called on Serbian authorities to ensure a clear separation of mandates and legal framework governing BIA and police, particularly in the context of criminal investigations and for security purposes.²⁴ However, at the time of writing, no concrete measures have been taken to address these concerns.

The excessive use of force during protests, combined with the scale of arrests and detentions, constitutes a disproportionate response to the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly. It has a chilling effect and sends a clear message that dissent and criticism of those in power will not be tolerated.

Moreover, the deployment of plain-clothes officers without visible insignia, as well as involvement of unidentified operatives from BIA in arrest operations, should be stopped. All law enforcement officials involved in public assemblies must be clearly and individually identifiable. In line with international human rights standards, when in contact with the public, officers should wear a visible identification, such as a name badge or a unique identification number.²⁵

ATTACKS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

The authorities intensified hostile rhetoric and employed targeted smear campaigns aimed at discrediting and delegitimizing anyone critical of the government.

Civil society, journalists, student protesters and the entire academic community have been subjected to a well-organized and sustained smear campaign and public vilification. Authorities and government-controlled media have deliberately spread disinformation, including labelling the protesters as “terrorists”, and “enemies of the state” acting on the behest of foreign governments trying to destabilize Serbia.²⁶ Senior public officials, including the President, publicly thanked Russian foreign intelligence service (SVR) for providing information regarding the anti-government protests. Previously the SVR had accused the European Union and Member States of orchestrating the protests in order to depose the current government and install a “compliant leadership loyal to Brussels.”²⁷ The authorities went as far as to suggest that the tragic accident in Novi Sad may have been an “act of sabotage or terrorism.”²⁸

Pro-government media continued to publish or air attack pieces to discredit non-governmental organizations, including CRTA (Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability), BIRN (Balkans Investigative and Reporting Network), KRIK (Crime and Corruption Investigating Network) and SHARE Foundation by suggesting that “deep state actors” from abroad

²² Insajder, “Ahead of the St Vitus Day protest: Security Services inviting students in blockade for interviews,” 24 June 2025, <https://www.insajder.net teme/uoci-protesta-na-vidovdan-bezbednosne-sluzbe-pozivaju-studente-u-blokadi-na-razgovor-video>; Danas, “BIA invited more than 10 students for conversations because of Military Parade,” 19 September 2025, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/zabrinuti-da-li-ce-zvizdati-vucicu-bia-pozvala-vise-od-10-studenata-na-razgovor-zbog-vojne-parade/>. Also, information based on Amnesty International interviews with 50 people between June 2024 and October 2025.

²³ Amnesty International, A Digital Prison: Surveillance and the suppression of civil society in Serbia, 16 December 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/8814/2024/en/>.

²⁴ European Commission, 2025 Serbia Report, 4 November 2025, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6e68ce26-b95b-48e1-921a-c60c12da8f00_en?filename=serbia-report-2025.pdf.

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ Insajder, “From ‘foreign mercenaries’ to ‘color revolution’, How the authorities and tabloids attack student protests,” February 2025, <https://www.insajder.net teme/od-stranij-placenika-do-oboijene-revolucije-kako-vlast-i-tabloidi-napadaju-studentske-proteste-video>.

²⁷ N1, “Vučić: ‘We are grateful to the Russian Service; the organizers of the Color Revolution will not give up easily,’” 16 September 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-hvala-ruskoj-sluzbi/>.

²⁸ Insajder, “Ahead of the fall of canopy anniversary, authorities speak of terrorism; truth or justice are not in sight,” 20 October 2025, <https://www.insajder.net teme/uoci-godisnjice-pada-nadstresnice-vlast-pominje-terorizam-istina-i-pravda-ni-na-vidiku>.

are financing civil society in order to cause instability in Serbia.²⁹ Senior public officials, including SNS Members of Parliament, have issued public statements targeting other civil society groups, calling them “anarchic gangs,” which “operate on the verge of terrorism” and called for their arrests and the ban of their activities.³⁰

Individual activists were not spared from smear campaigns. Shortly after she publicly accused Marko Kričak – the former commander of the unit for protection of persons and facilities – of ill-treatment, including threats of rape, during her arrest, student Nikolina Sindjelić became the victim of the unauthorized publication of her intimate photographs without her consent. The photographs were shared online by the former secretary of the Minister of Interior as well as Informer TV.³¹

ECONOMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE RETALIATION

Academic institutions, organizations, individuals and even small businesses that openly supported the protests have faced serious administrative pressure. University rectors, professors, high school teachers and other professionals have been unfairly dismissed or subjected to disciplinary and criminal proceedings, in some cases solely because they, or their family members expressed support for student protests, participated in demonstrations, or shared their views on social media.³² The authorities have also imposed financial pressure on the academic sector, including substantial salary reductions for university employees and, in some instances, failed to pay the salaries altogether – often without due process or effective avenues for appeal.³³ According to trade unions and professional networks, more than 100 school employees have already lost their jobs or have not had their contracts renewed, while over 110 disciplinary proceedings have been initiated in high schools and primary schools across several cities, including Subotica, Belgrade, Srbobran, Požarevac, Gornji Milanovac.³⁴ The Ministry of Education confirmed that 25 school principals have been dismissed, and as many as 75 have resigned. In Niš, local authorities replaced entire school boards in 26 schools. At the university level, rectors and vice-rectors have been repeatedly questioned, and in some cases, faced criminal charges.³⁵ These punitive actions were widely perceived as an act of intimidation that severely threatened academic freedom and created a chilling effect for freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

In December 2025, Civicus downgraded Serbia's civic freedom rating from “Obstructed” to “Repressed”, noting that the authorities “have moved from restricting criticism to actively dismantling the right to speak, organise and protest.”³⁶

In October 2025, the European Parliament warned that the polarization in Serbia is a “direct result of hate speech, promotion of violence, smear campaigns against opponents and anti-EU and pro-Russian propaganda widely spread via government-controlled media and also government officials.”³⁷

²⁹ B92, NGO Files, 7 March 2025, <https://www.b92.net/video/info/10479/dosije-nvo>, B92, CRTA, “Schoedinger's cat: New series of NGO Files on TV B92,” <https://www.b92.net/zivot/aktuelno/135879/sredingerova-macka-nastavak-serijala-dosije-nvo-na-tv-b92/vest>, 6 June 2025.

³⁰ N1, “Djukanovic calls for the ban of PSG, STAV, SviČe and Local Front: They operate on the verge of terrorism,” 15 May 2025, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/djukanovic-trazi-zabranu-psg-stav-svice-i-lokalnog-fronta-deluju-na-ivici-terorizma/>.

³¹ Deutsche Welle, “Nikolina Sindjelić: Private photographs as a weapon,” 22 August 2025, <https://www.dw.com/bs/slu%C4%8Daj-nikoline-sin%C4%91eli%C4%87-privatne-fotografije-kao-oru%C5%BEje/a-73730240>.

³² Gradjanske inicijative, “Repression in education: Waves of dismissals, removals and disciplinary proceedings,” September 2025, https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Pritisak-na-prosvetne-radnike_ce-1.pdf.

³³ Radio Free Europe, “Professors – from reduced salaries to arrests,” 18 June 2025, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/novi-sad-hapsenja-profesori-pritisak-srbija/33448116.html>. See also Tanjug, “Minister Stanković: Professors at universities will receive higher salaries once they return to work,” 3 June 2025, <https://www.tanjug.rs/srbija/politika/166541/ministar-stankovic-profesori-na-univerzitetima-ce-dobiti-uvecane-plate-kad-pocnu-da-rade/vest>.

³⁴ Gradjanske inicijative, “Repression in education: Waves of dismissals, removals and disciplinary proceedings,” September 2025, https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Pritisak-na-prosvetne-radnike_ce-1.pdf.

³⁵ Gradjanske inicijative, “Repression in education: Waves of dismissals, removals and disciplinary proceedings,” September 2025, https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Pritisak-na-prosvetne-radnike_ce-1.pdf.

³⁶ Civicus Monitor, “Serbia downgraded in global ratings report on civic freedoms,” 9 December 2025, https://monitor.civicus.org/press_release/2025/serbia/.

³⁷ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-10-2025-0459_EN.html.

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.

The European Commission's 2025 report rightly acknowledged the "increasingly difficult environment" for civil society in Serbia, while [the visible engagement of senior EU officials with civil society](#) and public recognition of their important role in advancing human rights-related reforms significantly bolstered their morale. The EU and its member states should continue to **use of diplomatic channels to support independent journalists, human rights defenders and civil society, though** 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.

The EU should also **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.

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.
- **Ensure that law-enforcement officials involved in policing the protests wear visible insignia and clearly identify themselves when interacting with protesters.**
- **Immediately stop targeting civil society groups, including orchestrated campaigns** through media and unfounded financial and criminal investigations.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Media and journalists operate in an extremely constrained environment. The number of incidents, including physical violence, death threats and smear campaigns, targeting journalists reached record levels in the reporting period. Journalists, especially those covering protests and elections, have faced intimidation, physical and online assaults, and were frequently prevented from reporting on controversial issues.

The Independent Association of Journalists in Serbia (NUNS) reported a sharp increase in the attacks in 2025, with **370 cases, including 113 physical attacks and 165 threats, to journalists.**³⁸ The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights documented over 900 incidents in which journalists were victims in 2025. The situation only deteriorated in the first months of 2026. NUNS documented 30 incidents, including 20 assaults and five death threats, against journalists only in March 2026.³⁹ Most of these took place during and the lead up to the local elections on 29 March 2026. In one of the more serious cases, two journalists, Ivan Bjelić and Lazar Dinić of the Revolt magazine were attacked by a group of unidentified men, who

³⁸ NUNS data provided to Amnesty International, January 2026.

³⁹ Independent Association of Journalists in Serbia (NUNS), "Brutal attacks on journalists reporting on local elections in Serbia requires urgent intervention by responsible authorities," 30 March 2026, <https://nuns.rs/srbija-brutalni-napadi-na-novinare-i-novinarke-koji-su-izvestavali-o-lokalnim-izborima-zahtevaju-hitano-odgovor-nadleznih-organa/>.

repeatedly hit and kicked them, leaving them with serious injuries and requiring medical treatment.⁴⁰ Also on 29 March, a group of masked men approached Darko Gligorijević, a journalist with Zoomer, took his phone, punched him on his head and sprayed him with pepper spray, although he clearly identified himself as a journalist covering the elections.⁴¹ During the same period, dozens of other journalists were physically or verbally attacked by unidentified assailants and, frequently, prevented from reporting. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media, Jan Braathu, said the elections saw an "escalation of threats and acts of violence" against journalists and media outlets and urged the authorities to take steps to investigate and ensure accountability for all reported cases.⁴²

Senior public officials, including SNS Members of Parliament, government ministers and the President, engaged in hostile rhetoric targeting journalists, including by accusing them of sedition and inciting violence. Slavko Ćuravija Foundation documented over 800 verbal attacks on journalists by public officials in the last six months of 2025.⁴³ President Vučić frequently accused independent media outlets, including N1 and Nova S, of pursuing an "agenda of destroying the state" and urged prosecutor's offices to "react".⁴⁴ The President of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić, labelled Nova and N1 "extremists advocating for the violent overthrow of the government," and "inciting violence on the streets."⁴⁵

Veran Matić, a veteran journalist and the president of the Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) Board of Directors was the target of a protracted smear campaign and online death threats due to his decade-long efforts to obtain justice for the killing of the journalist Slavko Ćuravija in 1999. In July 2025, in an interview with pro-government Pink TV, President Vučić referred to Matić as a person who "hates Serbia" and said that "people who had been arrested, detained and convicted [for the murder] because of Veran Matić" should have their records wiped clean."⁴⁶ In January and February 2026, pro-government media published or aired several coordinated hit pieces accusing Matić of treason and highlighting his alleged connections with George Soros, USAID and foreign embassies. Journalist associations called the campaign and the President's statement a "direct and dangerous act of intimidation."⁴⁷

Despite well-documented widespread violations, the authorities have failed to adequately investigate the incidents and bring perpetrators to justice. The Council of Europe Platform for Safety of Journalists indicates that 85% of the alerts issued in 2025 have not been addressed by the authorities, while Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) reports that there were only three convictions of those responsible for criminal attacks on journalists in 2025.⁴⁸ MFRR noted that police

⁴⁰ Danas, "Phylosophy Faculty Novi Sad: Lazar Dinić received serious injuries to his head, and faced persecution, physical and psychological abuse," 30 March 2026, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/filozofski-fakultet-ns-lazar-dinic-ima-teske-povrede-glave-proganjan-je-fizicki-i-psihicki-zlostavljan/>.

⁴¹ Independent Association of Journalists in Serbia (NUNS), "Journalist members of the Permanent Group for Journalist Safety demands from the Ministry of Interior to identify and arrest all those who attacked journalists and citizens," 29 March 2026, <https://nuns.rs/novinarski-deo-srg-zahteva-od-mup-a-da-hitno-identifikuje-i-privede-sve-napadace-na-novinare-i-gradjane/>.

⁴² https://x.com/OSCE_RFoM/status/1952402791143518414.

⁴³ Safe Journalists, "SČF: 834 verbal attacks on journalists and media by officials in six months," 20 February 2026, <https://bezbedninovinari.rs/article/1477/za-pola-godine-834-verbalna-napada-funkcionera-na-novinare-i-medije>.

⁴⁴ Alo!, "They will continue pursuing their dirty work – Vučić about N1 and Nova reporting," 13 November 2025, <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/478166/nastavice-svoj-prijavi-posao-vucic-o-izvestavanju-n1-i-nove-nema-tu-nikakvih-promena-ali-ima-promena-kod-naroda.html#:~:text=%2D%20ko%20N1%20i%20Nove%20S.Takva%20je%20njihova%20mrtnica>.

⁴⁵ Kurir, "He sold them for 1.6 bilion euros, and now wants to keep his influence.Brnabić: Media under Šolak's influen are extremists advocating violent overthrow of the government," 6 November 2025, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/9794233/brnabic-mediji-pod-solakovim-uticajem-ekstremisti-su-koji-zagovaraju-nasilnu-smenu-vlasti>.

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHX0Ij4-dA>.

⁴⁷ Nova RS, "Aleksandar Vučić attacks Veran Matić," 22 July 2025, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/napad-aleksandra-vucica-na-verana-matic/#:~:text=%22Veran%20Mati%C4%87%20je%20decenijama%20posve%C4%87en,smatramo%20da%20je%20Vu%C4%8D%C4%87eva%20izjava%2C>.

⁴⁸ See Article 19, "Serbia: Authorities must stop spiral of violence against journalists," 31 March, 2026, <https://www.article19.org/resources/serbia-authorities-must-stop-spiral-of-violence-against-journalists/#:~:text=The%20use%20of%20violence%20to,with%20few%20protections%20in%20place>. See also CoE Platform for Safety of Journalists, <https://fom.coe.int/en/pays/detail/11709576>.

officers are responsible for many, if not most, violations against journalists,⁴⁹ however there are no indications that any of the police officers have been investigated for reported misconduct or their failure to protect journalists while reporting.

Research published in March 2026 showed that more than one third of journalists in Serbia experienced psychological difficulties or has been diagnosed with a mental disorder, with vast majority of those reporting high levels of anxiety.⁵⁰ The polled journalists pointed to financial insecurity, tight deadlines and external pressures and threats as the main factors for high levels of stress.

The continued failure to appoint members of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) Council in a manner that would ensure its independence and credibility seriously undermines effective governance of and oversight over electronic media and further erodes media pluralism.

The alarming increase in the physical attacks against journalists and the recurring pattern of public officials and pro-government media publicly naming, smearing and discrediting journalists encourages and legitimizes further violence and profoundly threatens freedom of expression in the country.

Recommendations for EU engagement towards the Serbian authorities

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

- **Ensure that public officials immediately stop personal attacks on, stigmatization and delegitimization of journalists and human rights defenders**, including through media close to or controlled by the government or the ruling party.
- **Ensure that threats and cases of physical and verbal violence against media workers are swiftly followed up on and as appropriate, publicly condemned, investigated, or prosecuted** in independent, impartial, and fair trials.
- **Ensure that all persons can freely exercise their rights to free expression, access to information and public participation without fear of reprisal.**
- **Take steps to improve media pluralism by ensuring equal opportunity and access for all media outlets**, including independent ones, to public resources and improve their ability to report on issues of public interest by facilitating their access to information provided by public institutions.

UNLAWFUL USE OF INVASIVE SPYWARE AND DIGITAL FORENSIC TECHNOLOGY

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY FOR UNLAWFUL USE OF SPYWARE AND DIGITAL FORENSIC TECHNOLOGY

Despite well-documented and fully evidenced reports of digital surveillance, including the use advanced spyware and digital forensic technology to target activists and journalists, there has been no accountability in any of the cases.

In December 2024, Amnesty International's report, "A Digital Prison" uncovered a **widespread surveillance campaign targeting civil society** in Serbia amid anti-government protests.⁵¹ The two follow up technical briefings exposed further cases of independent journalists targeted by highly invasive Pegasus spyware and a student protester whose phone was forcibly unlocked by the Cellebrite digital forensic tool while he was detained in a police station.

⁴⁹ NUNS, "Reporters without borders for N1: Attacks on media are akin to permission to kill," 27 March 2026, <https://nuns.rs/reporteri-bez-granica-za-n1-napadi-na-mediije-su-kao-dozvola-za-ubistvo/>.

⁵⁰ Safe Journalists, "Research: Every third journalist in Serbia has mental disorder or difficulties," 17 March 2026, <https://www.bezbedninovinari.rs/article/1506/istrazivanje-svaki-treci-novinar-u-srbiji-ima-mentalni-poremecaj-ili-smetnje>.

⁵¹ 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/>.

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 two additionally documented cases. In December 2025, one more individual was included, bringing the total number of people covered by the complaint to seven. Amnesty International is working closely with the association of NGOs and lawyers representing the victims and continues to provide forensic analysis and evidence of unlawful access to the devices by the authorities. In the intervening period, the police have interviewed only two victims in relation to the case and there have been no further updates despite urgent requests sent to the police and prosecutor's office by the victims' lawyer.

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. In December 2025, the Data Protection Commissioner informed a partner organization in Serbia that their inquiry found that "no unauthorised or unlawful processing of personal data has taken place". It further noted that some law enforcement units did not even possess "forensic tools for digital data processing," and decided not to undertake any further inspection of the police or BIA in this context.⁵² At the time of writing, there was no update on the progress of inspection undertaken by the Ombudsman's Office.

As in numerous other cases, the efforts to secure accountability for misconduct or unlawful activities by the authorities through judiciary or independent oversight institutions seem to be completely ineffective in practice. In the context of widely recognized state capture, neither the internal controls nor external bodies of oversight, including independent institutions such as Ombudsman's Office and Data Protection Commissioner, are willing to confront the established practices. As the European Commission rightly recognized in its 2025 report, "there has been little, or delayed, public reaction by the Ombudsperson to human rights violations in the context of the student and citizen protests."⁵³

Given the level of secrecy related to special measures, including digital surveillance, and the significant potential for misuse of new technologies, strong independent oversight is crucial, both to ensure that actors employing special measures are held accountable for their actions, and to encourage the development of more effective internal safeguards within police and security services. Yet, in the case of Serbia, genuinely independent oversight is virtually non-existent as are the avenues for accountability.

For more information on the instances of digital surveillance targeting civil society in Serbia, see Amnesty International: [A Digital Prison](#), from December 2024, Amnesty International: [Serbia: Cellebrite 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 2025 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 Parliament⁵⁴ 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,

⁵² Correspondence on file with Amnesty International.

⁵³ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6e68ce26-b95b-48e1-921a-c60c12da8f00_en?filename=serbia-report-2025.pdf.

⁵⁴ 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.

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.