

SERBIA

CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS
TO CIVIC FREEDOMS





INTRODUCTION

Concerning developments have been noted in Serbia, with the authorities' attempts to ban the LGBTQI+ EuroPride march event and ongoing threats to environmental rights defenders. Despite attempts to ban the EuroPride march, at the last minute, the authorities allowed a short 'walk' to take place on 17th September 2022, thus limiting LGBTQI+ persons from fully exercising their right to peaceful assembly. Anti-LGBTQI+ protesters attempted to disrupt the march and attacked police and journalists. Concerningly several LGBTQI+ activists reported being physically attacked after the event.

Following President Aleksandar Vucic's victory in the April 2022 elections, where observers raised several concerns over irregularities, growing pressure on civil society and the right to peaceful assembly has continued. In its election mission observation [final report](#), the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) noted an "uneven playing field" during the election period, stating that major media outlets had close ties with the ruling coalition, which reduced pluralism and undermined the "watchdog function of the media". Journalists face several restrictions, from SLAPPs, to intimidation and harassment, with a failure to hold perpetrators to account, thus creating a culture of impunity.

LGBTQI+ RIGHTS THREATENED

In August 2022, President Aleksandar Vucic announced the cancellation of the EuroPride event citing safety concerns. EuroPride is a pan-European and international LGBTQI+ event, which is hosted by a different European city each year and includes a series of events such as conferences and a march. The event is being held in the Balkans region for the first time. In its official [statement](#), the government explained that "at this moment there are no conditions for the safe holding of EuroPride 2022, and especially bearing in mind the fact that certain extremist groups could use and abuse this event and Serbia's will to organise it in order to further increase tensions and bring Serbia into instability." Later, Prime Minister-designate Ana Brnabic, the first woman and openly gay person to hold the office, stated that the cancellation was more of a request than a ban. The decision was widely condemned, including by 145 [members](#) of the European Parliament LGBTI intergroup and the [European Commission](#).

The initial decision came after right-wing and religious groups staged protests with the use of slogans such as "save our children, save our family". One group, the conservative Dveri movement, [called](#) for a ban of gay pride for 100 years via a people's referendum. Added to this, it called for the legal prohibition of "homosexuality and transgender propaganda" among minors, including a ban on promoting non-traditional sexual relations among children on the Internet, social networks and in public spaces. The proposed ban is similar to the one adopted in countries like Russia and Hungary.

Despite the authorities' cancellation, organisers maintained that the event would go ahead. Leading up to the event, [protests took place](#), including one on the 11th September 2022, with the Serbian Orthodox church, which has a strong prominence in the country, voicing its opposition and calling on authorities to ban the event, which it believes threatens traditional family values. Amongst the protesters were pro-Russian supporters in support of Serbia's long-term ally.

Civil society organisations condemned the decision. In a statement, the Belgrade Pride and European Pride organisers association [said](#) that while the state, specifically the police, can attempt to ban the EuroPride march,

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Serbia as "**Obstructed**".

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN



it cannot cancel it as this would be unconstitutional. The Three Freedoms Platform, a coalition of CSOs, [called for](#) competent institutions to “clearly and unequivocally, guarantee the safe holding of “EuroPride 2022”. It added that discouraging citizens from public participation violates their fundamental freedoms, such as the right to peaceful assembly.

On 10th September 2022, the President [announced](#) that the Interior Ministry would decide on the event within 96 hours, in accordance with the law and Constitution of Serbia. Following this, on 13th September 2022, the Ministry [announced](#) that it is officially [banning](#) the Pride march segment of EuroPride scheduled for 17th September 2022. Organisers of the EuroPride march said they would submit an official complaint to the Ministry of Interior Affairs to overturn the decision. Reacting to the decision, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović [called on](#) the authorities to withdraw the ban, adding that the uncertainty around the event has led to creating a “space for hateful rhetoric and more threats against LGBTI people, including from religious leaders”. On 17th September 2022 the Administrative court [rejected an appeal](#) filed by EuroPride organisers against the decision to ban the EuroPride march. Shortly afterwards, organisers announced that the police had [permitted](#) the walk but with a shorter route. However, the Interior Minister [did not call](#) this a “walk” but “security for the passage of participants” to the Tašmajdan Stadium, where concerts were to be held.

Anti-LGBTQI+ groups [gathered](#) near the Constitutional Court building in an attempt to prevent the EuroPride march from starting. Carrying bibles and crosses, some anti-Pride protesters [trampled](#) on an LGBTQI+ rainbow flag that was spread on the street in front of the Court. Additionally, they [damaged](#) cars, attacked police officers and attempted to break the police [cordon](#) protecting EuroPride marchers. Several journalists were targeted by anti-Pride protesters. For example, a former priest who is known to attend right-wing and religious protests, was [arrested](#) after [hitting](#) an N1 journalist with a water bottle and clashing with police. N1 reporter Petar Gajić was [threatened by](#) an anti-Pride protester and his phone was temporarily taken away. A FoNet journalist was [insulted by](#) two anti-Pride protesters. Two women were [physically attacked](#) by anti-Pride protesters while trying to take photos of the gathering. In one case, a journalist [was intimidated](#) by the police. According to Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, 64 people [were detained](#). At least 13 police officers were injured after clashes with anti-Pride protesters.

Following the march and concerts, LGBTQI+ activists from Germany and Albania were [attacked](#) while returning to their hotel. It is reported that eight Albanian activists were attacked by 10 people, with two activists injured and requiring medical attention. The activists reported that the police [failed](#) to intervene.

The authorities attempts to ban the EuroPride march come as LGBTQI+ rights are under attack. For example, on 17th August 2022, the premises of the Pride Info Centre in Belgrade were [defaced](#) yet again. Earlier, on 7th June 2022, the premises [were attacked again](#) when the neo-nazi group Belgrader Jugend put stickers on its office windows. There have been 15 attacks on the Centre since its opening three years ago, with none of the previous attackers caught, except in one case when attackers were detained but did not face any penalties. In relation to the June attack, the Ministry of the Interior announced that a consultation process had been concluded with the prosecutor’s office and found that there were “no elements of crime” in this case. The Citizen’s Protector (Ombudsman) also initiated a formal process of evaluating the work of the police in this case.

ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS & DEFENDERS TARGETED

Those staging protests for environmental rights have faced restrictions. In a recent case, on 20th August 2022, environmental activists, who were camping on mount Starica near Majdanpek, East Serbia, to prevent mining at this site, [were attacked by private security](#). One of the activists, who happened to be in the camp during this incident, told N1 that members of private security physically destroyed the activist base, allowing the activists to take their personal belongings, and then ordered them to leave the location. Although they did not introduce themselves, they confirmed that they were hired by the Chinese company Zijin, which manages the mine in Majdanpek. Environmental activists set up a camp on a ridge of the Starica mountain in June 2022 to prevent further expansion of the mine. On 3rd September 2022, another activist from Starica [stated](#) that activists and journalists were again attacked. This time they were physically assaulted by the Zijin workers. After the arrival of the local police, the workers retreated. Despite [a police statement](#) saying that nobody reported any physical conflict at that location, another activist later [confirmed](#) that he was hit several times by a Zijin worker and later followed by a manager who continued to approach him and who yelled at him. After the activist tried to push the manager away from him, other workers started hitting him aggressively. On 11th September 2022, private



security reappeared again, [now stating that](#) they had been hired by the Ministry of Mining and Energy. This Ministry later [rejected this statement](#).

Similarly, a group of environmental activists, who have been camping in the green oasis Šodroš in Novi Sad for more than two months, [expressed](#) concerns over what they believe is intimidation by private security forces. They [told the media](#) that they were worried because they saw members of the private forces and unknown cars near their location. The activists who are camping in this part of Novi Sad are trying to prevent the cutting of the forest at that location for the construction of a new bridge with a bypass around this city, stating that they want to prevent the destruction of the "last green oasis" in the city. Their concerns over the presence of private security stem from an [earlier incident](#) which took place during protests in July 2022 over the General Urban Plan (GUP), when members of private security used excessive force against protest participants. Footage on social media documented a case of a man being pulled from the protest and violently [pinned to](#) the ground by private security before being detained. The GUP provides a blueprint of how the city will develop in the future.

A week after the GUP protest, another protest entitled "Revolt against the Mafia" was staged, demanding that the perpetrators of the violence be held accountable and calling for a referendum on the GUP. Before the protest was held, stickers [showing](#) Novi Sad activist Brajan Brković with Nazi Ustasha (Ultra-Leftist) insignia showed up in the police parking lot. The activist has [previously faced](#) numerous attacks and smear campaigns which brand him as an "ultra-leftist", "terrorist" who is working to destroy the Serbian state. During the protest, some violent acts took place. The mayor of Novi Sad called the protesters "thugs" and accused them of using ecology as an excuse to "create disorder". At the same time, President Vucic said that the protests were organised by "an aggressive, civic-oriented group".

Environmental activists face judicial harassment through Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation ([SLAPPs](#)), intended to silence and intimidate them. Activist Dragana Arsić, the Let's Defend the Forests of Fruska Gora movement, and the civic association Fruškać have faced a total of five SLAPPs (four civil and one criminal) from the co-owners of the Galens company for their environmental activism. They have been campaigning against the irregularities in the purchase of land in the Fruska Gora National Park by the Galens company. The company is demanding more than 2 million dinars (more than 17,000 USD) compensation through these SLAPPs, including a prison sentence for Arsić.

In a separate case in June 2022, environmental activists from the village of Dragovo near Rekovac, Kragujevac, [announced](#) that they had received a lawsuit warning from a company that conducted geological research in the village. The warning was sent to several residents stating that due to roadblocks and the inability of the company to carry out its drilling as part of its research, damages arose due to its breach of deadlines and obligations to carry out its research. The company is seeking compensation of 140,000 euros and announced additional claims due to the drop in the value of its shares on the stock market. Miroljub Popović, one of the activists, stated that the warning served to intimidate the locals and to stop the protest. Residents in the municipality of Rekovac [have been](#) fighting for several months against the announcement of lithium and boron mining in the municipality, preventing exploration works and wells.

Earlier in March 2022, activist Dobrica Veselinović from the Let's Not Drown Belgrade Movement [was sued](#) by the head of the police department in Šabac for because he filmed the police officer during an environmental protest in the city on 27th November 2021. The lawsuit [alleged](#) that the police officer suffered "non-material damage", that is "damage to his honour and reputation" due to statements made by Veselinović at the protest after the order was issued to withdraw the police from the protest site. The Movement stated that the lawsuit is an act of intimidation.

In addition, the authorities have targeted those participating in environmental rights protests by bringing misdemeanour charges against protesters. A report by Civic Initiatives [found that](#) over 60 acquittals were handed down in cases of misdemeanours allegedly committed by participants in environmental protests and roadblocks in several cities in Serbia at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. Police officers filmed protests without authorisation or recognised activists protesting and recorded their presence. This information was then forwarded to the traffic police, who issued fines for misdemeanours for "staying on the roadway".

There have also been [other attempts to](#) intimidate activists. For example, Youth Student Action (OSA) activist Brajan Brković, who has also been participating in environmental rights protests, was monitored by a drone which flew within two metres of the terrace of his apartment during the address of President Vučić and



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán taking place in Novi Sad at the train station near his apartment. He [reported](#) that a day earlier he was warned by members of the Ministry of the Interior that "OSA activists should not make incidents at the opening of the railway station because it will end very badly for them". He also stated that on the morning of the mentioned gathering, several plainclothes police officers patrolled the entrance to his building.

ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, MEDIA OUTLETS

Journalists face several restrictions, from SLAPPs, to intimidation and harassment. For example, former State Secretary in the Ministry of Internal Affairs Dijana Hrkaločić, charged with influence peddling, [filed 16 lawsuits](#) against *Danas*, *NIN*, *Vreme*, *Nova.rs* and other media portals demanding compensation for articles written about her. Hrkaločić also sued the Crime and Corruption Research Network (KRIK), an investigation portal investigating Hrkaločić and her connections with criminal activities. KRIK's editor-in-chief Stevan Dojčinović [stated that](#) the portal received 11 lawsuits in 2021 and 2022 from different persons, adding that the purpose of such suits is to "intimidate and financially exhaust journalists" and editorial offices, to deter them from further reporting.

There are several examples of harassment perpetrated by state and non-state actors, with a failure to hold them to account, thus creating an environment of impunity. In June 2022, journalist and member of the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists Veran Matić [was targeted](#) when posters with his image appeared in the city of Vranje. All four persons accused of putting up the posters were acquitted, [while Matić stated](#) that the court decision was "scandalous". Authors of the *Dobar, loš, zao* podcast Nenad Kulačin and Marko Vidojković [received threats](#) on social networks. They have been frequently exposed to threats, while Vidojković stated in April 2022 that [he had to leave Serbia](#) due to death threats.

Media outlets have also faced public vilification by government officials. News outlets *Danas*, *N1* and *InfoVranjske* [were attacked](#) on social media by Velimir Bulatović, father of a ruling party MP from Vranjska Banja, South Serbia, who called these portals "auto-chauvinist" and accused them of "leading a campaign against him". Separately, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office accused N1 and Nova.rs portals of "exerting undue influence" for reporting on work related failures of the deputy prosecutor Željka Nikolaidis. [N1 stated](#) that the deputy prosecutor was a person of public interest especially since the cases she worked on were sensitive and involved criminal clans, adding that their reporting was done in accordance with professional standards. N1, *Danas* and Nova.rs portal [were again verbally attacked by Lav Pajkić](#), former MP and member of the ruling party, who compared these media with WWII Ustasha movement members. Journalist Nedim Sejdinović [was targeted by Vladimir Đukanović](#), an MP and member of the ruling party, and also a member of several judicial bodies. *Glas Šumadije* portal [was verbally attacked](#) by the Kragujevac City Committee of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party for an article about an organised departure of the party's activists to an event on the occasion of Operation "Storm" which was held in Novi Sad in August 2022. The portal was accused of being "financed with dollars" and leading a campaign against President Vučić. Dana's portal [faced pressure](#) from government officials and officials of the ruling party after it published an article about the impossibility of state institutions to find the residence of President Vučić. Prime Minister Ana Brnabić called *Danas* a "tycoon's pamphlet", calling on the competent institutions to react due to "violation of the Law on Data Protection", while Minister Vulin called *Danas* a "tabloid", which threatened the safety of the President and his family by publishing his address. The portal stated that the information about the president's residence, which was published on social media and by the *Danas* portal, was already public and that its publication was not subject to the provisions of the Law on Personal Data Protection.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Serbia

- Adopt best practices on the freedom of peaceful assembly, as put forward by the 2012 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association.
- Unconditionally and immediately drop charges against all protesters for exercising their right to the freedom of peaceful assembly and review their cases to prevent further harassment.
- Publicly condemn at the highest levels all instances of the use of excessive force by security forces in response to protests, launch formal investigations into such cases and bring the perpetrators to justice.
- Respect the right of LGBTQI+ people, including their right to assemble peacefully, and create an enabling environment for them to express their rights to freedom of expression without intimidation.
- Carry out urgent and impartial investigations into attacks on the Pride Information Centre and bring the perpetrators to justice.
- Carry out urgent and impartial investigations into attacks on journalists and bring the perpetrators to justice.
- Stop the intimidation, smear campaigns and harassment of journalists and hold those who perpetuate these acts to account to deter others from doing so in the future.
- Refrain from intimidating environmental rights activists and urge businesses to drop SLAPP lawsuits against environmental activists and CSOs.

To Private Companies

- Refrain from subjecting environmental rights defenders to acts of intimidation and harassment and respect the rights of freedom of peaceful assembly and expression at all times.