

**Council of Europe  
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Information on the contentious practices of Serbian authorities which are undermining the respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights, rule of law and democracy, and in the context of ongoing student protests in the Republic of Serbia

**To whom it may concern,**

Respected representatives and members of the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), the Committee of Ministers, Commissioner for Human Rights, Directorate General of the Human Rights and Rule of Law, Director General of Democracy and Human Dignity, Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity, Group of States against Corruption, Steering Committee on Democracy and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Relying on the **Statute of the Council of Europe (CoE)** which affirms the aim of achieving greater unity among its members in order to safeguard and realize the ideals and principles that constitute their common heritage, and emphasizing that every member State of the CoE must accept the principles of the rule of law and the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons within its jurisdiction.

Recognizing your respected mandates in providing support to Member States in carrying out their obligations **to respect, protect, fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms**; to establish domestic systems grounded in the principles of **the rule of law and democracy**; and to ensure the full implementation of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR). Furthermore, the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Recommendations and Resolutions of PACE and CM, along with the reports and findings of different various bodies established under the auspices of the CoE.

Underlining that the **right to life; the freedom from torture and inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment; the right to liberty and security; the right to a fair trial; the right to freedom of assembly; and the right to freedom of expression constitute some of the most fundamental values in democratic societies—values which all State Parties of the Council of Europe (CoE) are obliged to respect, protect, and fulfil.**

We address you with the aim of informing you about the current situation in the Republic of Serbia, a member State of the Council of Europe since 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2003.

In the past five months Serbia has witnessed the ongoing student protest led by all four state universities - Novi Sad, Belgrade, Kragujevac and Niš - as well as the majority of their professors and lecturers. Their movement also garnered support from educational workers from elementary and high schools, the Bar Association of Serbia and local bar chambers, agricultural

workers, IT professionals, actors, cultural workers and citizens of the country. Demonstrations have taken place in over 200 cities and municipalities, with citizens consistently raising their voices to defend the very values that form the cornerstone of the Council of Europe - the most prominent organization for the protection of human rights.

Throughout this letter we wish to draw your attention to the alarming human rights violations taking place in Serbia and to inform you of the protests that have been ongoing for the past five months. These protests, led by students across Serbia and supported by a broad coalition of citizens, reflect widespread dissatisfaction with the erosion of democratic principles, increasing political repression, alongside the systematic violation of fundamental human rights and freedoms. They also signal a serious departure from the rule of law and core democratic values.

## **I. Context**

As a result of the protest, which represents a legitimate expression of civil discontent with the authoritarian practices of the ruling structure, the suppression of pluralism of opinion and serious violations of the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, the situation in Serbia continues to deteriorate.

The media environment is particularly concerning. Independent media outlets face growing pressure and censorship, while the national public broadcaster has remained largely passive, barely mentioning the protests throughout the five months of their duration. Independent journalists are under constant threat of being subject to economic blackmail, political interference and, in some cases, direct intimidation for reporting on protests and state-level corruption.

Editors and reporters from independent outlets are frequently targeted by smear campaigns, orchestrated by pro-government tabloids and public officials. Rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue with the protesters, the authorities have resorted to both legal and extra-legal means to suppress public demonstrations. By instrumentalizing pro-regime media they aim to instill fear and routinely insult the population that is peacefully voicing its dissatisfaction.

In Novi Sad, on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2024, at 11:52, a canopy, that was recently reconstructed for the second time, collapsed. This led to 14 people dying on the spot as well as 3 people being seriously injured. One of the three injured people died on November 17<sup>th</sup> 2024, while the second person passed away on March 21<sup>st</sup> 2025, bringing the number of victims to 16.

Due to the inadequate reactions of the institutions and false public statements given by the President of the Republic and authorities —broadcasted on national frequencies—claiming that the canopy had not been reconstructed, citizens took to the streets on November 5<sup>th</sup> 2024 to publicly express their dissatisfaction. On November 15<sup>th</sup> 2024, at precisely 11:52, citizens across numerous cities in Serbia began paying tribute to those who lost their lives on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2024 by holding peaceful commemorations under the name “Zastani, Srbijo” (“Pause, Serbia”), marked by a fourteen-minute silence. As announced, the intention was to honor the victims every Friday—the day of the week on which the canopy collapse occurred.

However, the following tribute lasted fifteen minutes, as another individual tragically passed away two days later on November 17<sup>th</sup>. From the very first days after the collapse of the canopy

it became evident that this was not a mere accident, but the result of long-standing and deeply entrenched corruption, systemic pressure on professionals to serve political interests, and the complete erosion—and in some cases, absence—of institutional accountability.

On November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2024, professors and students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade gathered in the vicinity of the building to pay tribute to the victims. During the gathering, citizens—primarily students and professors—were physically attacked.

The inadequate response from the relevant institutions and public authorities to this violent incident prompted the students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts to organize the first **plenum**—an informal, inclusive body composed of all students. The plenum was established with the aim of ensuring full participation while preventing political interference by individuals seeking to co-opt the student protests. It also emerged as an alternative to official student parliaments, which are widely perceived as being under the complete control of the ruling political parties that have governed Serbia for the past thirteen years.

At that plenum, held on November 25<sup>th</sup> 2024, the students voted to initiate a blockade of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts. The blockade entails the suspension of all lectures and examinations until those responsible for the attacks on students and professors are identified, criminally prosecuted, and appropriately sanctioned.

In essence, the students are demanding that judicial authorities fulfill their obligations by conducting an effective investigation into their well-founded claims of ill-treatment, allegedly perpetrated by individuals, many of whom are believed to be state agents, acting under the instruction of ruling political parties. These demands are rooted in both the material and procedural obligations arising under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

In response to the broader social circumstances and incidents that occurred across the country during this period, students from other faculties in Serbia—acting in solidarity with their colleagues from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts—have initiated blockades of their own higher education institutions.

At present, state Universities of Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Niš and Novi Pazar, as well as University of Arts in Belgrade remain under student blockade, which will continue until their demands are met.

## ***STUDENT REQUESTS***

### ***Demands of students of the University of Novi Sad:***

1. Publication of all documentation regarding the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station, which is currently unavailable to the public.

\*Specification: We would like to point out that the goal of this request is not only to make the documentation available to the public but also to encourage the Prosecutor's Office to review it within its operating system and then take the steps required by law.

2. Undertaking criminal prosecution and conducting criminal proceedings against legal and natural persons responsible for the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad, in accordance with the law.
3. Resignation and determination of criminal liability of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia, Miloš Vučević, and the Mayor of Novi Sad, Milan Đurić.
4. Undertaking criminal prosecution and conducting criminal proceedings against all persons responsible for attacks on participants, students, and construction during peaceful demonstrations, in accordance with the law.
5. Undertaking criminal prosecution and conducting criminal proceedings against the police officers responsible for the attack and injury to Ilija Kostić, in accordance with the law.

***Requirements of students of the University of Belgrade:***

1. Publication of all documentation regarding the reconstruction of the Novi Sad railway station, which is currently unavailable to the public.
2. Request for confirmation by the competent authorities of the identity of all persons suspected of having physically attacked students and professors, as well as the initiation of criminal proceedings against them. Also, the dismissal of the aforementioned persons is requested if it is shown that they are public officials.

\*Specification: The aforementioned request applies to both the listed persons and any future person who physically attacks students and professors and all other persons participating in peaceful civic gatherings.

3. Dismissal of criminal charges against students arrested and detained during protests, as well as suspension of criminal proceedings already initiated.

\*Specification: Release from detention does not guarantee that these persons will not be prosecuted, nor that a conviction will not be issued against them. In accordance with the above, we demand that criminal charges against all students and professors participating in civil protests be dismissed, and if criminal proceedings are ongoing, that they be suspended.

4. Increase the budget for higher education by 20%.

\*Specification: Amendments to the Law on the Budget of the Republic of Serbia, amendments to the Law on Higher Education.

5. Investigation by the relevant authorities into the incident that caused panic on March 15, 2025, at 7:11 PM during a peaceful protest on Kralja Milana Street.

\*Specification: During the peaceful protest and 15 minutes of silence on Kralja Milana Street, a loud and unidentified sound was heard, causing panic, people fleeing, and several injuries.

6. An urgent investigation and the dismissal of the UKCS management are demanded, including the director of the Emergency Center and the head of intensive care, due to the unauthorized entry of media and individuals into the ICU without protective equipment, and the recording of patients, which violates their health, privacy, and dignity. Additionally, misdemeanor proceedings are requested against the institution and responsible staff for breaching data protection laws, an extraordinary inspection with public access to the report, and oversight by the Commissioner for Personal Data Protection. Transparency regarding ICU protocols is also demanded, along with an urgent session of the Ethics Committee to assess whether ethical codes were violated on March 17, and an investigation by the Ombudsman into potential violations of patients' rights to health and life on that date.

***Demands of students of the State University in Novi Pazar:***

1. They have uniform requirements with the first four requirements of Belgrade universities.

In addition to these four requirements, there are two more that are local.

2. The fifth demand of the DUNP students is the consideration of Hernandez Bakan's case by the Supreme Court and adoption of a binding opinion on treating a driver's youth as an aggravating circumstance.
3. The sixth demand is: Administration Compulsory (pro tempore).

***Demands of students of the University of Kragujevac:***

1. Students at the University of Kragujevac have uniform requirements with the first three requirements of Belgrade universities.
2. The fourth demand reads, "We demand that the revenues that would be directed to foreign universities through the adoption of the proposed amendment to the Law on Higher Education be redirected to the financing of officially accredited faculties."

With that said, the physical attacks on students and citizens have not ceased—on the contrary, they have intensified. Over the past five months, we have witnessed numerous instances of violence targeting students and citizens, who gathered peacefully to honor those who lost their lives in the canopy collapse.

The response of the competent institutions was, once again, absent. The authorities failed to investigate or prosecute the attacks on students and citizens, falling short of the obligations stemming from the procedural limb of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The President of the Republic of Serbia has continually downplayed and relativized acts of violence through regime-affiliated media outlets—including Informer, Kurir, Alo, **Večernje Novosti**, **B92**, **Prva TV**, **Happy TV**, **Pink**, and other de facto state-controlled platforms—as well as through the public broadcasters, **Radio Television of Serbia (RTS)** and **Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV)**. Together with other high-ranking political figures, he has publicly targeted students, professors, and individuals or groups expressing support for the protests. Both RTS and RTV have since faced significant criticism for their biased and selective reporting.

In strong solidarity with the students, and expressing widespread dissatisfaction with the overall situation in the country—particularly the inaction of institutions and the lack of accountability for the collapse of the canopy—educational workers across Serbia, including those in primary, secondary schools and kindergartens, have also gone on strike and suspended their work. Farmers, agricultural workers, and professional associations—including cultural workers, actors, lawyers, and others—have likewise halted their activities. Despite ongoing pressure, threats, and blackmail, citizens across Serbia continue to gather peacefully, voicing their discontent with the erosion of institutional integrity, political interference, lack of independence in public bodies, and the total absence of accountability for corrupt practices and the tragic collapse of the canopy. The demands related to the collapse of the canopy are nothing more than a call to action for the relevant judicial authorities to fulfill their procedural obligations under Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), by conducting a thorough and effective investigation into all individuals responsible for the violation of the right to life of 16 innocent victims.

Since the fall of the canopy on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2024, dozens of protests have been organized throughout Serbia, with the most massive protests being:

1. Protest on the streets of Novi Sad was held on November 5, 2024.
2. Protest at Slavija in Belgrade on December 22, 2024.
3. 24-hour blockade of Autokomanda in Belgrade on January 27, 2025.
4. 24-hour blockade of 3 bridges in Novi Sad on February 1, 2025
5. 15-hour protest in Kragujevac named "Sretnimo se na Sretenje" (Let's meet on Sretenje) on February 15, 2025.
6. The protest in Novi Pazar named "Pohitaj u Pazar" (Hurry to Pazar) was held on February 27, 2025.
7. The protest in Niš named "Studentski edikt" (Student Edict) was held on March 1, 2025.

8. The protest in Belgrade named "15th for 15" was held on March 15, 2025. is considered the most massive protest in the history of Serbia.
9. The protest in Novi Pazar named "Sloboda vlada čaršijom" (Freedom reigns in the streets) was held on April 12, 2025.

Officials persistently ignore citizens' demands for transparency in the work of institutions, while the public space is contaminated with political propaganda and manipulations aimed at discrediting anyone who criticizes the regime.

## II. Instances of human rights violations

During this period, as widely reported by the international public, numerous accounts have documented the excessive use of force by law enforcement against peaceful protesters, instances of arbitrary detention, staged criminal and misdemeanor proceedings, and informal invitations by the Security Information Agency for so-called 'friendly talks'—all of which constitute intimidation tactics directed at activists, students, journalists, opposition figures and ordinary citizens.

We hereby enclose a summary of some of the more significant human rights violations:

- Physical attacks on students of Faculty of Dramatic Arts
- Assault on members of the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra
- Staged criminal proceedings and pre-trial detention of a student in Novi Sad
- Use of a sound cannon, currently under examination by European Court of Human Rights under Rule 39 procedure
- Deliberate use of motor vehicles to endanger and harm civilians
- Public disclosure of personal information of students who also hold Croatian citizenship
- Defamation campaigns by pro-government tabloids, including **Informer**
- Informal summons for "friendly talks" issued by Security Intelligence Agency, used as an intimidation tool
- Statements by the executive branch calling for the arrest of individuals allegedly "spreading panic"
- Physical assault on journalist Saša Dragojlo during a protest orchestrated by pro-government activists
- Declaration of an anti-corruption campaign by a body lacking the legal mandate or jurisdiction to undertake such actions
- Severe physical assault in Novi Sad resulting in a fractured jaw of a student from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts
- Baton strikes inflicted on students and citizens during the protest in front of the National Assembly
- Attack on students of Faculty of Economy , Faculty of Law , Faculty of Sport and Physical Education
- Police intervention at the Medical Faculty of the city Niš
- Government's decree on the acquittal of teacher's salaries
- Violence and arrest of political opponents and members of the opposing party

- Attorney and ruling party official Vladimir Đukanović asserted that children are to be regarded as the property of the state until they reach the age of maturity, thereby endorsing the notion of extensive state authority over minors and raising serious concerns regarding parental rights, individual liberties, and the potential abuse of state power
- Attorney Đukanović additionally encouraged police to arrest students participating in faculty blockades, thereby endorsing the use of coercive measures against peaceful forms of academic dissent
- The Public Prosecutor's Office has ordered the arrest of engineer Zoran Đajić on suspicion of endangering the security of President Vučić based on a social media post
- The expulsion and one-year entry ban imposed on Italian pianist Davide Martello, who performed in solidarity with students during the five-hour bridge blockade in Niš, based on the alleged suspicion that he would not use his tourist visit for its declared purpose, represents an unjustified restriction on freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly
- Physical attack on students of Sport and Physical Education on the streets of Novi Sad
- An armed assault on the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš by individuals supportive of the current regime
- Arrest of STAV and PSG activists who are political prisoners.

### III. Conclusion

As a member of the Council of Europe, the Republic of Serbia is obliged to uphold the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, along with other core treaties, conventions, and principles adopted under the auspices of the Council of Europe. These include, but are not limited to, the recommendations of the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), as well as the standards and principles established by the CPT, GRECO, and CDDEM.

However, recent developments clearly indicate a troubling departure from these obligations. The current situation in Serbia reflects systemic violations of human rights, erosion of the rule of law, and disregard for democratic principles—all of which are contrary to the values and commitments Serbia has undertaken as a member state of the Council of Europe.

In light of the aforementioned, we respectfully urge the following:

1. **That the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)** and other competent bodies, including the Committee of Ministers, urgently review the situation in Serbia through plenary discussions. These discussions should culminate in relevant conclusions and recommendations, and ideally lead to the establishment of an independent fact-finding mission to assess the state of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in Serbia;



2. **That the Commissioner for Human Rights** initiate official inquiries and conduct a visit to Serbia with the aim of undertaking a comprehensive fact-finding mission concerning the allegations set forth in this letter;
3. **That the Director General of Democracy and Human Dignity and the Director General of Human Rights and Rule of Law** undertake an official visit to Serbia;
4. **That GRECO** initiate a new evaluation procedure for Serbia through an on-site country visit to assess the extent and impact of corruption and lack of institutional accountability;
5. **That CDDEM** initiate its own fact-finding activities to evaluate the degradation of democratic institutions and practices;
6. **That the CPT** initiate an official inquiry within its mandate—specifically to investigate the reported use of coercive crowd-control devices, including acoustic weapons (commonly referred to as "sound cannons")—and ensure that acts of ill-treatment and excessive use of force do not once again go unpunished, as has been documented in the past.

We sincerely hope you will recognize the gravity of the situation and respond with the urgency and thoroughness it demands. The citizens of our country no longer feel safe in light of the aforementioned events that have occurred over the past five months. We remain at your disposal for any further information or clarification you may require.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and continued commitment to the values of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

**Yours faithfully,**

**Students of Serbia**

April 16<sup>th</sup> 2025

Council of Europe

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**Please deliver to:**

- Mr Alain Berset, Secretary General of the Council of Europe
- Mr Zoltán Taubner, Secretary to the Committee of Ministers (CM)
- Mr Theodoros Rousopolous, President of the Assembly (PACE)
- Ms Despina Chatzivassiliou, Secretary General of the Assembly (PACE)
- Dr Michael O'Flaherty, Commissioner for Human Rights

- Ms Marja Ruotanen, Director General of Democracy and Human Dignity (DG II)
- Mr Gianluca Esposito, Director General of the Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI)
- Ms Livia Stoica Becht, Executive Secretary of GRECO
- Mr Thomas Zandstra, Chair of the Steering Committee on Democracy (CDDEM)
- Mr Hugh Chetwynd, Executive Secretary of the CP