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On the occasion of OSCE/ODIHR Protecting Civic Space - the Role of Human Rights Defenders and Freedom of Peaceful Assembly: Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting II

Freedom of Assembly in Serbia – current issues and challenges

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Thousands of people have been protesting daily in Serbia for the past six months, following the collapse of the canopy at the Railway Station in Novi Sad. Images of hundreds of thousands peacefully gathering in Belgrade have circulated globally. At least initially, since the student protests began, both protesters and the state appeared to act within the law, with no visible use of repressive measures to disperse demonstrations. It may seem that the "red lines" marked by blood have not yet been crossed.

However, the reality is far more troubling. During the largest gathering on March 15, a weapon, unseen, unidentified, and officially unacknowledged, was used against peaceful protesters during a minute of silence. Its effects: intense fear, panic, deafness, dizziness, elevated blood pressure, and injuries from crowd movement—were reported by over 4,000 people. Shockingly, local judicial institutions classified these reports as "inciting panic," while the Government denied anything had occurred.

In a democratic society, institutions must visibly and effectively respond to the legitimate demands of protesters. In Serbia, not only are such responses absent, but a covert form of repression has emerged.

A smear campaign was launched from the highest levels of government. Tabloid media portrayed students and activists as foreign mercenaries, hate speech was unleashed, and pre-investigations targeted NGOs falsely accused of organizing the protests, with leaks further endangering them.

Another alarming development is the targeting of foreign nationals. EU citizens have been denied entry or expelled. Foreigners supporting the protests had their residence permits revoked and were separated from their families. Inspectorates were deployed to monitor teachers involved in the protests, many of whom now face dismissal. Physical attacks on protesters were not promptly prosecuted, and prosecutors were mobilized against demonstrators.

Meanwhile, the government openly supported counter-demonstrations, with frequent attempts to provoke violence.



University deans are under threat, with legal actions initiated to hold them responsible for student protests. Arbitrary arrests and the use of spyware have intensified, with the security intelligence agency playing a growing role. Informative interviews are increasingly conducted outside police stations without notifying families. Prosecutors themselves have been publicly threatened with dismissal if they fail to protect the Government's "order."

Perhaps most alarming, national television broadcast secret recordings of conversations related to the March 15 protest. Based on these illicit records, 12 people were prosecuted: six have been detained for over 45 days, and six are in exile, charged with planning to overthrow the constitutional order.

This systematic intimidation and institutional retaliation have serious and lasting consequences, not just for protesters, but for all citizens of Serbia, worse even than traditional repression.

Therefore, today we call on the OSCE and participating States:

- To recognize and publicly denounce the use of institutionally coordinated repression in Serbia targeting freedom of assembly, expression, and association, and insist that Serbia uphold its international obligations;
- To request independent investigations into the unlawful use of sonic weapons, excessive force, and the misuse of intelligence services against civilians;
- To support the protection of students, teachers, activists, journalists, and prosecutors from retaliation and unlawful surveillance.

Finally, we urge you to help redefine the "red lines" for dispersing public gatherings, not only when there is blood on the streets, but when fundamental rights are systematically, even if invisibly, dismantled.

