

Navigating the Digital Landscape: **Strengthening Digital Rights in Serbia**

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■ Executive Summary

This report sheds light on serious digital rights violations in Serbia, exposing troubling patterns in the targeting of journalists, activists and citizens, especially during times of political unrest. Political crises have amplified both the frequency and severity of these abuses. A deeply polarized social and political climate, combined with intimidation tactics and inadequate legal safeguards, has created an environment that enables aggression against those defending the public interest. Additionally, the widespread use of manipulative media strategies further undermines freedom of expression and entrenches these threats.

■ Context Analysis and Objectives

In 2025, Serbia is experiencing profound social and political upheavals. Periods of protest are often marked by a rise in attacks on citizens, journalists and activists, both online and offline, highlighting the alarming lack of protection for those advocating for freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Such crises create a hostile environment where repression intensifies and democratic principles are increasingly undermined.

Since late 2024, mass protests and student blockades have been ongoing across the country. Sparked by the tragic collapse of a canopy at the Novi Sad railway station, which claimed 16 lives, these protests have grown into a sustained, wide-reaching movement. Protesters are demanding a transparent investigation, the release of official documentation and broader accountability from state institutions. Beyond that, they are also pushing for systemic reforms, particularly in the areas of the rule of law, anti-corruption efforts and the protection of civil liberties.

In an already polarized and deeply divided society, civil society actors, especially activists and young people, are bearing the brunt of increasingly repressive government tactics. The authorities' attempts to silence criticism have taken the form of public smear campaigns, restrictions on movement and assembly and digital surveillance. These measures reduced already weakened human rights and eroded fundamental rights in both physical and digital spaces.

Numerous attacks have been recorded against students, citizens and activists participating in protests. These individuals who took to the streets to voice their dissatisfaction with the ruling political structures, became targets of direct verbal attacks by government representatives, who used pro-regime media to insult and discredit them publicly.

Citizens, activists and journalists have been systematically targeted by pro-government media outlets, which frequently publish their names, private information and photographs, without consent. In some cases, the identities and images of student protesters have been broadcast on national television, exposing them to public condemnation. National broadcasters have also used their platforms to stigmatize and delegitimize participants, framing them as enemies of the state. Simultaneously, these same individuals face police brutality on the streets, including physical violence and arbitrary arrests during demonstrations. Journalists covering the protests are not spared either, as media crews are regularly subjected to intimidation and aggression while reporting from the ground.

BIRN detected 183 violations of rights in the digital space from September 2024 to June 2025, in [BIRD monitoring database](#), a part of the [Reporting Digital Rights and Freedom project](#), which is an unprecedented number of digital rights violations.

Concerning information is that in 80% of the cases, the targets of digital attacks were journalists, activists and citizens. It should be noted that the number of attacks on these targeted groups increases during periods of political crises and protests that marked the first half of the year in Serbia. Verbal threats, intimidation and physical violence increasingly target citizens, journalists, activists and civil society organizations.

These groups, who serve as defenders of the public interest and act as watchdogs of democracy, face heightened risks precisely because of their social and political engagement. Their critical role in holding power to account frequently exposes them to various forms of pressure, undermining their safety and freedom.

There is a significant disproportionality in the attacks on politicians, political parties and state institutions, who were the targets of digital attacks.

[NUNS](#) recorded over 130 attacks on journalists from the beginning of 2025, up to the publication of this report, including 79 reported pressures, 34 verbal threats and 19 physical assaults on journalists.

According to a report of the organization Civic Initiatives (Građanske inicijative) on the state of civil society, violations of the right to freedom of assembly and acts of intimidation by authorities ahead of protests have become routine. The report highlights that citizens are often warned they could face criminal or misdemeanor charges for participating in public gatherings. In some cases, police officers have reportedly visited the homes of protest organizers and potential participants, issuing verbal warnings that they would be prosecuted and punished if they attend.

The rise in attacks, threats and pressure is further fueled by a polarized social climate, restricted media freedoms and an increasingly authoritarian system in which journalists, activists and engaged citizens are routinely portrayed as legitimate targets. The endangerment of journalists' safety can lead to censorship and self-censorship, which can threaten the quality of public information, media independence and freedom of speech.

There is a notable absence of adequate responses to these types of attacks and threats. Investing in protection measures often poses a significant financial burden, especially for individuals and organizations already operating with limited resources. Furthermore, there is a lack of a culture of dialogue around these incidents, as well as an absence of internal protocols or institutional mechanisms for responding effectively.

■ Conversation of the SEE Digital Rights Network and other CSOs

In June 2025, a discussion was held among members of the [SEE Digital Rights Network](#), with participants including representatives from BIRN Serbia, A 11, Committee for Human Rights Niš, Civil Rights Defenders, CRTA, Da se zna, Atina, Partners Serbia and Youth Initiative for Human Rights. The conversation also included representatives of other relevant organisations: Novi Sad Journalism School, Center E8, Danas, Committee for Human Rights Niš, Fake News Tragač and Zoomer.

The participants agreed that in the current political context of Serbia, digital rights are under serious pressure and are continuously deteriorating. SLAPP lawsuits (strategic lawsuits against public participation) are increasingly frequent, used to intimidate and exhaust journalists, activists and civil society. At the same time, numerous leaks of personal data and their misuse are being recorded, alongside intense tabloid exposure of private information, which goes unpunished by any institutional sanctions.

Violations of digital rights do not remain confined to the online space but often spill over into physical threats and attacks, especially targeting vulnerable social groups: students, women, LGBTQ+ community members, journalists and activists. These are hybrid forms of attacks combining digital violence, hate speech and physical repression.

Protection and reporting mechanisms, such as the police, prosecution and large tech platforms (Meta, TikTok), have been proven ineffective. Reports often go unanswered, while some public institutions, instead of calming tensions, further fuel the atmosphere of hostility through their statements and actions.

Particular concern is raised by the spread of hate speech and direct threats on social networks, with TikTok standing out as a platform where this phenomenon is especially pronounced. The lack of capacity of major platforms to adequately moderate content in the Serbian language further worsens the situation. At the same time, increasing attention is drawn to the dangers posed by advances in deepfake technology, as it opens doors to new, sophisticated forms of manipulation and discrediting of individuals.

Discussion participants highlighted a number of concrete problems that further complicate the protection of digital rights in Serbia. First and foremost, they pointed to the complete absence of sanctions for tabloids that reveal and misuse citizens' private data with no consequences. Although such actions violate the law, there is no response from regulatory bodies or judicial authorities.

There is pronounced frustration over the inertia of the police and prosecution, which do not respond to reports of digital violence. Participants emphasized that this approach discourages victims from reporting attacks at all.

Another important problem is poor communication with large technological platforms, which ignore most user reports from Serbia.

Additionally, there is an excessive focus by the state on constant changes to laws and policies that are not practically implemented, described as an "endless cycle of changes without effect." Meanwhile, social networks remain flooded with hate speech and threats, without serious oversight or content moderation.

■ Protection Mechanisms

However, there are certain protection mechanisms available to journalists, activists and citizens.

The Law on Information Security established the National Center for the Prevention of Security Risks in Information and Communication Systems (National CERT), which provides assistance in identifying and preventing threats and communicating with relevant institutions. The law also provides for the establishment of national CERTs and in addition to 23 specialized CERTs.

Moreover, there are specific protection mechanisms that have been established, such as the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists, which has been providing an SOS hotline service since 2021 for journalists whose safety is at risk.

Groups that assist journalists also provide protection mechanisms for them. The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS) has been maintaining a database of attacks on journalists across Serbia since 2008. Additionally, there are other organizations in Serbia, such as the Association of Journalists of Serbia (UNS), the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV) and the Association of Local Independent Media (Local Press), which offer support to journalists.

Regarding activists and citizens, the protection mechanisms available to them in cases of attacks and threats include civil society organizations that provide assistance, such as the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUKOM). Civic Initiatives (Građanske inicijative) aim to strengthen civil society, support active citizenship, promote democratic values and initiate responsible institutional work.

In cases of violence against these targeted groups, they can contact the Public Prosecutor's Office and file a criminal complaint.

■ Recommendations and Ways Forward

According to an analysis of the digital landscape in Serbia, the BIRN monitoring team in cooperation with SEE Digital Rights Network, proposes the following measures that would enable optimal protection of digital and human rights.

— Immediate urgency

This category consists of measures that need to be implemented to immediately address burning issues such as the basic digital rights of journalists, activists and citizens as the most vulnerable groups.

- The Prosecutor's Office should conduct investigations into criminal acts committed in the online space. Strengthening the capacities of prosecutors and courts for the prompt and efficient resolution of cases.
- Media outlets to report actively and transparently on attacks on activists and journalists, keeping track of how often they occur and documenting the consequences such attacks have on the lives of individuals who are victims of digital violence. Sanctioning tabloid media and other sources that publish personal data without consent.
- Media outlets affiliated with the government that are proven to violate citizens' right to privacy, spread hatred and intolerance, target political opponents, or deliberately produce disinformation and fake news should not receive public funding through state competitions.
- Establishment of permanent communication channels with platform representatives such as Meta (Facebook, Instagram) and TikTok, including the appointment of local contact persons. Adaptation of reporting tools to the language and laws of Serbia, as existing reporting mechanisms are neither effective nor understandable.
- CSO should maintain a regular and active database of attacks on activists and citizens, categorized by type of attack. Greater networking among civil society organizations to avoid overlapping efforts and to jointly influence institutions.
- CSO to educate citizens (especially youth and parents) about digital rights, online safety and protection mechanisms.
- Public officials and politicians should refrain from behaviors and speech that incite threats to the safety of journalists, activists and citizens, to prevent the encouragement of violence in the online space.
- Public officials should publicly condemn attacks and threats against journalists, activists and citizens and create a more favorable environment for the expression of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.
- The government should educate journalists, activists and citizens about the existing mechanisms for safety protection and the rights they have under the law, encouraging them to utilize these mechanisms and assert their rights.
- Introduction of local officers in police stations trained to handle cases of digital violence and hate speech. Training and sensitization of police and judicial authorities to recognize digital forms of violence.

— Mid-term urgency

Mid-term measures are extremely important to be implemented in the long run and require more time and dedicated prolonged effort to work.

- Strengthening cooperation between journalistic associations, civil society organizations and the state technological sector in order to adequately address online attacks.
- Serbian government to amend laws and regulations in alignment with EU laws to allow for the protection and legal safeguards of citizens' rights in the digital space and effective legal mechanisms in cases of digital rights violations.
- The government should align domestic laws with new EU legislation, the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) to contribute to the creation of a safer digital space.
- The government should initiate amendments to the Law on Information Security in accordance with the current situation in the country.
- Editorial boards should establish clear protocols regarding the safety of journalists in the online environment.
- Civil society organizations should actively participate in educating activists and citizens about their rights, encouraging them to practice those rights adequately.
- Serbian government and relevant authorities to ensure prosecutors are given resources and training to ensure independent and efficient investigation and prosecution of digital rights violations.

— Long-term urgency

Long-term urgency goals often require careful planning, commitment and sustained effort.

- The government should increase funding for civil society organizations and organizations that play a leading role in the development, design and implementation of democratic principles.
- The government should encourage journalists, citizens and activists to engage in active citizenship and practice their civil rights.
- The government should provide a space for freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. The government should ensure the safety and security of all participants in the public space.

— Urgency and Importance

The urgency to address digital rights violations in Serbia is underscored by the alarming data presented in this report. The increase in targeted attacks against journalists, activists and citizens during periods of political unrest not only threatens individual freedoms but also impacts the foundational pillars of democracy.

By implementing the recommended measures, we can expect significant positive societal changes. For instance, ramping up public awareness campaigns about existing legal protections for journalists and activists can empower these individuals. If civil society organizations actively promote knowledge of protective mechanisms, there would be greater utilization of these resources, leading to an increased sense of safety among individuals standing up for public interest. Furthermore, public condemnation of attacks by officials could foster a more respectful and open political discourse, encouraging wider civic participation.

Addressing these violations is not solely a matter of immediate response; it brings long-term societal benefits. A safer environment for journalists and activists nurtures freedom of expression, cultivates

a culture of accountability and transforms public discourse into a more robust and constructive platform.

The recommendations in this report are particularly crucial for government officials and policymakers who possess the authority to enact legislative reforms. They are also essential for civil society organizations, which play a pivotal role in monitoring digital rights violations and advocating for victims' rights. General citizens must also be made aware of their role in holding officials accountable and ensuring that their own rights are respected.

In conclusion, the importance and urgency of taking decisive action to protect digital rights can lead to a healthier civil society, increased trust in public institutions and a stronger rule of law.

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