

Digital Rights Violations Annual Report

DRVAR
Serbia
2025

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This publication is co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of BIRN and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

Context

Between September 2024 and August 2025 BIRN recorded 195 cases¹ of digital rights violations in Serbia. Over 60% of the cases are connected to the student-led protests in Serbia, indicating a surge in rights violations during a period of political crisis and tension, with an increase of 10% compared to the number of cases recorded in the previous monitoring period. BIRN also registered a high number of violations against digital civic participation and engagement, representing 24% of cases, (47 cases), and freedom of expression and media, representing 19% of cases (38 cases).

The most frequent targets of attacks were citizens, with 63% of cases (122 cases), which included students, but also journalists and media, in 17% of cases (35 cases), and activists, in 12% of cases (24 cases). Although clashes with police began with the large protests in March, protesters have been targets in the digital space since the first demonstrations in November 2024. By contrast, politicians and political parties were far less often targeted by online attacks, representing fewer than 5% of cases (10 cases) in the past year.

While the perpetrators of digital rights violations remain unknown in 36% of cases (72 cases), or the attacks came from politicians, public officials and representatives of public institutions, in 26% of cases (50 cases), it is specific to this monitoring period that among the most frequent violators are tabloids and pro-government media, representing 25% of cases (49 cases).

The main factor behind the digital rights infringements is the politically polarized society, where for months Serbian citizens have been expressing dissatisfaction² with the authorities in many cities across the country. Following the collapse of a canopy at a railway station that killed 16 people in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, students occupied faculties across the country, announced a suspension of classes, and called on the government to take responsibility. The student-led movement demanded the publication of all documents related to the station's reconstruction and the identification of those responsible for the tragedy. Decades of corruption and evasion of accountability motivated Serbian citizens to join and support the still ongoing protests.³

Although digital rights violations have tended to increase during earlier periods of unrest such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of emergency, the Vladislav Ribnikar school killings⁴, snap elections and electoral irregularities⁵ (covered by previous monitoring periods), none has caused as sharp a surge as the protests after the Novi Sad tragedy.

¹ BIRD (Digital Freedoms Monitoring). Accessed October 2025. <https://monitoring.bird.tools/>

² Balkan Insight. "Over 100,000 protesters flood Serbian capital demanding change." March 15, 2025. Accessed October 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/03/15/over-100000-protesters-flood-serbian-capital-demanding-change/>

³ Balkan Insight. "Serbian pupils mark ten months since disaster that triggered protests." September 1, 2025. Accessed October 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/09/01-serbian-pupils-mark-ten-months-since-disaster-that-triggered-protests/>

⁴ Balkan Insight. Digital Rights Violations: Annual Report 2022-2023. 2023. Accessed October 2025. <https://birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/01-BIRN-Digital-Rights-Violations-Annual-Report-2022-2023.pdf>

⁵ Balkan Insight. DRVAR 2024. December 2024. Accessed October 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/DRVAR-2024.pdf>

Serbia is classified as a “transitional or hybrid regime”, according to the Freedom House⁶ report for 2024, with a democracy score that declined compared to a year before, and an “increasingly hostile environment for critical journalism”. According to its report, the Serbian Progressive Party “has steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations”. But, the country is considered a free country as regards internet freedom, according to Freedom House.⁷

The public was also unsettled by the government’s announcements of amendments to the Criminal Code,⁸ with criticism focusing on the criminalization of social media activities and online speech. According to the draft, the proposed amendments apply to publications shared through the media, including social media, for which the prescribed penalty ranges from three months to three years in prison. The proposed changes can be interpreted as encompassing any call for civic unrest, disobedience, protest or blockades. ■

⁶ Freedom House. “Serbia: Country Report.” Accessed October 2025. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia>

⁷ Freedom House. “Serbia: Freedom on the Net 2024.” Accessed October 2025. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-net/2024>

⁸ BBC News na srpskom. “Šta se menja u Krivičnom zakoniku i ima li veze sa protestima u Srbiji.” Accessed October 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/articles/c75qvqz12lzo/lat>

Privacy Weaponised Against Civic Actors: Doxing and Surveillance

The right to privacy was the most at risk during this monitoring period, with 80 cases recorded during 2024-2025, frequently involving doxing and surveillance. The public sphere, “occupied” by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party and supporters, weaponised privacy violations against dissent, publishing private information to delegitimize, intimidate and potentially threaten opponents’ safety.

When the student-led protests started in 2024, the most frequently recorded violations were regarding digital civic participation and engagement (47 cases) and threatening behaviour and harmful content (31 cases). They included, among other rights, citizens’ rights to freely and safely participate in public life online and to be protected from attacks, manipulation and intimidation in the digital space.

It has become common for state-aligned media outlets to disclose the names of students, including minors, publish photographs of protesters (including those taken from personal documents, as well as photos shared on social media from private, locked profiles), and reveal family information, contacts, and even locations of political activists obtained from surveillance cameras in public spaces. As a result, activists began receiving threats and insults at their home addresses, and many people claim they were fired because they showed support for the protests on social media.

A BIRN investigation revealed how information from Viber groups⁹ that parents used to coordinate and organize acts of solidarity with protests were leaked to tabloid outlets. People were subsequently summoned to police stations as a result of these leaks.

Tabloids and political actors repeatedly exposed private information about individuals who took part in or spoke out about protests on social media. Photos from ID cards or passports were published on pro-government media websites, accompanied by descriptions identifying the individuals, including details about their family members and even information about where they last went on holiday.

In one case, tabloid *Informer* published surveillance footage from Belgrade Airport showing activist Nikola Ristić.¹⁰ The tabloid revealed his travel destination without disclosing how it obtained the information. In the same article, *Informer* insulted the activist and questioned whether he had travelled abroad to receive instructions on how to carry out a “colour revolution” in Serbia, a narrative used by pro-government media to delegitimize the protests, insinuating that they are driven by foreign actors.

⁹ BIRN. “Kako poruke sa Vibera završavaju u tabloidima.” May 7, 2025. Accessed October 2025. <https://birn.rs/poruke-sa-vibera-u-tabloidima/>

¹⁰ BIRN. “Zašto cure informacije o kritičarima vlasti.” December 13, 2024. Accessed October 2025. <https://birn.rs/zasto-cure-informacije-o-kriticarima-vlasti/>

Several serious violations were recorded involving the same tabloid, such as displaying intimate private photos live on television of student and political activist Nikolina Sindjelic¹¹ taken while she was underage. This attack came after she spoke about alleged brutal police violence she faced during protests in Serbia from Marko Kricko, commander of the Unit for the Protection of Certain Persons and Facilities (JZO).

These violations extended to traditional media too. In a television programme hosted by Informer's editor-in-chief, Dragan J. Vučicević, participants comment on the political situation in Serbia, revealing private information about citizens and activists, and speaking about them in a derogatory manner. On a television programme broadcast by Informer, Vojislav Seselj,¹² president of the Serbian Radical Party, who had been convicted of inciting the persecution of Croats from Hrtkovci, publicly disclosed the personal data of Croatian citizens, including their personal identification cards, accusing them of being secret spies. This disclosure was later amplified online.

Similarly, online portal Novosti,¹³ among others, published an article about two students unjustly accused of being destabilizers and "leaders" of the student protests. The article included their names and photographs of their passports as "evidence" of their alleged involvement in "state subversion."

Private information about citizens that appears in tabloids has been obtained "illegally," says Marija Babić from the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS),¹⁴ adding that information leaks are a major problem in Serbia.

The fact that pro-government media and tabloids have access to such personal data (such as ID photos or airport surveillance videos) and, in violation of media ethics, publish them without consequences, raises the suspicion that state institutions are leaking the information in an attempt to vilify critics of the regime. This practice appears to have been a well-established tactic of the ruling party for more than a decade, experts previously told BIRN.

Ana Toskić Cvetinović¹⁵, director of the Partners Serbia organization, a civil society organization dedicated to upholding the rule of law and supporting civil society, notes that on paper there are certain protection mechanisms, such as filing a criminal complaint, initiating a private lawsuit or submitting a complaint to the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, but in practice these mechanisms fall short.

"These mechanisms have so far not proven effective, particularly in politically sensitive cases where institutions either deliberately stall proceedings or fail to act at all," she told BIRN.

¹¹ BIRD (Digital Freedoms Monitoring). "Serbian Student Activist Targeted in Image-Based Abuse by State Official and Journalist." Case ID 1528. Accessed October 2025. <https://monitoring.bird.tools/cases?language=ALL&countries=RS&page=1&name=Serbian+Student+Activist+Targeted+in+Image-Based-Abuse-by-State-Official+and+Journalist&caseld=1528&title=Serbian-Student-Activist-Targeted-in-Image-Based-Abuse-by-State-Official-and-Journalist>

¹² BIRD (Digital Freedoms Monitoring). "Šešelj je povredio pravo na privatnost hrvatskih građana u Srbiji." Case ID 283. Accessed October 2025. <https://monitoring.bird.tools/cases?language=ALL&page=1&name=seselj&caseld=283&title=Seselj-Violated-Privacy-Rights-of-Croatian-Citizens-in-Serbia>

¹³ BIRD (Digital Freedoms Monitoring). "Serbian Pro-Regime Media Accused of Privacy Violations Against Belgrade Students." Case ID 284. Accessed October 2025. <https://monitoring.bird.tools/cases?language=ALL&countries=RS&page=3&caseld=284&title=Serbian-Pro-Regime-Media-Accused-of-Privacy-Violations-Against-Belgrade-Students>

¹⁴ Marija Babić, interview by Tijana Uzelac, Belgrade, October 24, 2025.

¹⁵ Ana Toskić Cvetinović, interview by Tijana Uzelac, Belgrade, August 19, 2025.

Surveillance remains a significant concern in Serbia, particularly during times of political tension and protest. Citizens, activists and journalists have been targeted through cameras surveillance and spyware.

BIRN reported that the Security Information Agency (BIA) hacked activists' phones and installed spyware,¹⁶ that surveillance software¹⁷ was found on a student's phone, and two BIRN journalists¹⁸ were targeted with the Pegasus spyware program, though attempts to install it were unsuccessful.

An investigation by BIRN and a forensic analysis by Amnesty International¹⁹ from November last year revealed that the Security Information Agency (BIA) used Israeli technology Cellebrite to "unlock" phones of activists it had summoned or detained for questioning. The agency then installed the domestic spy software NoviSpy on these devices. In addition to collecting messages and contacts, the software enabled access to private photos and the activation of cameras and microphones. Over the past year, NoviSpy was installed on at least four activists' phones, with traces of unsuccessful attempts found on about a dozen more devices. Cellebrite decided to revoke licenses²⁰ for some users after this investigation.

Serbian authorities utilize various technologies²¹ to monitor citizens, including Griffeye Analyze, Cognyte, Maltego, Social Links, Mozenda, Predator, Pegasus, Clearview A and others. The capabilities of these tools demonstrate that the state engages in both mass and targeted surveillance. Enabled functions²² are biometric facial recognition, access to data stored on personal devices, geolocation tracking, telecommunications interception, and advanced data analysis and profiling. However, identifying or proving the use of many of these surveillance technologies is nearly impossible.

Serbia also continues to develop the "Safe City"²³ project in cooperation with the Chinese company Huawei, which involves the introduction of an intelligent video surveillance system and an eLTE network, a system designed for secure communication and data transmission, despite warnings and opposition from the public. ■

¹⁶ BIRN. "Dokazano: BIA hakuje telefone aktivista." December 16, 2024. Accessed October 2025. <https://birn.rs/hakovanje-telefona-bia-spijkenaza-aktivista/>

¹⁷ BIRN. "Student priveden, telefon hakovan špijunkim softverom." February 28, 2024. Accessed October 2025. <https://birn.rs/student-spijkeniski-nadzor-hakovan-telefon/>

¹⁸ BIRN. "Dve novinarke BIRN-a mete Pegazus špijunkog programa." March 27, 2025. Accessed October 2025. <https://birn.rs/birn-novinarke-meta-pegazus-spijkenaza/>

¹⁹ BIRN. "Dokazano: BIA hakuje telefone aktivista." December 16, 2024. Accessed October 2025. <https://birn.rs/hakovanje-telefona-bia-spijkenaza-aktivista/>

²⁰ BIRN. "Cellebrite obustavlja saradnju s pojedinim korisnicima u Srbiji nakon otkrića BIRN-a i Amnestija o zloupotrebljama." February 26, 2025. Accessed October 2025. <https://birn.rs/cellebrite-obustavlja-saradnju-s-srbijom-zbog-zloupotrebe-tehnologija/>

²¹ BCBP. Digitalni nadzor u Srbiji. Accessed October 2025. <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/digitalni-srb-02-1.pdf>

²² Balkan Insight. Surveillance and Censorship in the Western Balkans (WB6). Accessed October 2025. https://balkaninsight.com/plus_pdf/Surveillance-and-Censorship-in-the-Western-Balkans-WB6.pdf

²³ Radio Slobodna Evropa / RFE. "Pod oznakom 'poverljivo', Srbija unapređuje kinesku mrežu za video nadzor." August 13, 2025. Accessed October 2025. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/pod-oznakom-poverljivo-srbija-kina-video-nadzor/33501411.html>

Spinning, Spreading Disinformation and Hate Speech

Over the past year, pro-government media and troll accounts have been extremely active in spinning narratives and disseminating disinformation, creating a climate of fear in society, further deepening divisions, and fuelling hatred toward those who hold different opinions. This included publishing simplistic explanations online that portrayed protests as part of a “colour revolution” and “Vojvodina separatism”²⁴, insinuating that changes taking place in Serbian society were the result of foreign influence.

The disinformation turned demonstrators into targets, “created” protest leaders held responsible for blockades, and potentially delegitimized protests and demonised participants. Media articles and spin campaigns against these individuals were followed by violations in the offline sphere, through real-world violent attacks, police detentions²⁵ because of their online activities, the destruction of private property by unidentified perpetrators, and even attacks on family members.

In response, on social media protesters were urged as a safety measure to wear masks at protests to remain unidentified, while citizens were called on to blur participants’ faces to protect their privacy if they posted protest footage online.

Spreading disinformation and hate speech can “create a completely distorted picture of society, which affects not only those individuals but also the wider community” Marija Babić told BIRN. She notes that such reporting fuels polarization in society and undermines the foundations of democracy and social development.

Freedom, pluralism of information, and protection from manipulation in the digital sphere were violated in at least 31 documented cases, primarily due to pro-government media undermining journalistic standards and ethics.

Pro-government outlet *Informer*, among other tabloids, claimed that the collapse of the canopy in Novi Sad was a terrorist attack,²⁶ and for months continued publishing articles labelling students as terrorists;²⁷ with no institutional response to date.

²⁴ Balkan Insight. “Changing the narrative: how the Serbian state works to demonise protesters.” January 22, 2025. Accessed October 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/01/22/changing-the-narrative-how-the-serbian-state-works-to-demonise-protesters/>

²⁵ Balkan Insight. “This will happen to you: critics see intimidation behind Serbia arrests.” September 26, 2025. Accessed October 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/09/26/this-will-happen-to-you-critics-see-intimidation-behind-serbia-arrests/>

²⁶ BIRD (Digital Freedoms Monitoring). “Informer and Officials Label Protest in Front of SNS President’s Home as ‘Terrorist Attack’ in Serbia.” Case ID 1372. Accessed October 2025. <https://monitoring.bird.tools/cases?language=ALL&countries=RS&page=1&name=Informer&caseId=1372&title=Informer-and-Officials-Label-Protest-in-Front-of-SNS-President%27s-Home-as-%22Terrorist-Attack%22-in-Serbia>

²⁷ BIRD (Digital Freedoms Monitoring). “Informer Spreads Disinformation About Novi Sad Incident, Labels Protesting Students as ‘Terrorists’ in Serbia.” Case ID 1373. Accessed October 2025. <https://monitoring.bird.tools/cases?language=ALL&countries=RS&page=1&name=Informer&caseId=1373&title=Informer-Spreads-Disinformation-About-Novи-Sad-Incident-Labels-Protesting-Students-as-%22Terrorists%22-in-Serbia>

In an effort to put a face on the student blockades, tabloids spent months targeting the rector of the University of Belgrade, Vladan Djokic,²⁸ which many saw as an attempt to pressure him into withdrawing his support for protesting students and start using his powers to squash protests. The rector was subjected to continuous attacks, with tabloids reporting in detail on him, his private life and his movements, attempting to portray him as a political actor and “enemy of the state”. This included smear campaigns against him, with fabricated, unverified and false information.

Companies that host the servers used by the tabloids’ websites have requested that the tabloids provide proof of the accuracy of their information. Since the tabloids were unable to present evidence for the claims made in their articles, the companies warned them that if they did not remove the texts, they could face consequences, including the shutdown of their website, server and registered domain. Between 110 and 135 articles²⁹ containing false claims about students participating in faculty blockades were removed from the tabloids’ portals.

Bots³⁰ have also been used, as well as a high number of fake profiles spreading disinformation, triggering account suspensions and takeovers. Such profiles have also been used to send threats to protestors and students and spread hate speech. However, there have been no recorded instances of these cases being investigated. ■

²⁸ BIRD (Digital Freedoms Monitoring). “Pro-Regime Media Targets Belgrade’s Economic Faculty Rector Vladan Đokić in Serbia.” Case ID 1253. Accessed October 2025. <https://monitoring.bird.tools/cases?language=ALL&countries=RS&page=1&name=pro-regime&caseld=1253&title=Pro-Regime-Media-Targets-Belgrade%27s-Economic-Faculty-Rector-Vladan-Djokic-in-Serbia>

²⁹ BIRD (Digital Freedoms Monitoring). “Serbian Tabloids Forced to Remove Defamatory Articles About Students.” Case ID 286. Accessed October 2025. <https://monitoring.bird.tools/cases?language=ALL&countries=RS&page=1&name=Serbian+Tabloids+Forced+to+Remove+Defamatory+Articles+About+Students&caseld=286&title=Serbian+Tabloids+Forced+to+Remove+Defamatory+Articles+About+Students>

³⁰ BIRD (Digital Freedoms Monitoring). “Video Exposes Bot Network Boosting SNS on X.” Case ID 1289. Accessed October 2025. <https://monitoring.bird.tools/cases?language=ALL&countries=RS&page=1&name=bot&caseld=1289&title=Video-Exposes-Bot-Network-Boosting-SNS-on-X>

Attacks and Threats Against Journalists and Newsrooms

According to Safe Journalists,³¹ in Serbia institutional pressures are the most common threat, affecting 46.2% of journalists, followed by economic pressures and job insecurity at 40.2%.

The monitoring data shows that independent journalists have been targets of digital attacks to a higher extent compared to previously monitored periods. These attacks also included direct threats to personal and family safety. According to the Council of Europe,³² online harassment has taken extreme forms, including deep fake disinformation campaigns against journalists. Such pressure creates an atmosphere of censorship and self-censorship in independent media, limiting critical reporting.

Within the category of freedom of expression and media, 38 incidents were recorded, with the most frequent subcategory involving intimidation tactics and pressures on journalists and media outlets, which potentially lead to self-censorship.

Interestingly, the monitoring data shows how journalists and media were victims of digital rights violations, in 35 cases, but also how pro-government media were the perpetrators of such violations in 49 cases. Ruling party politicians, public officials and representatives of public institutions were perpetrators in 50 recorded cases.

This further highlights the complexity of the media sphere in Serbia, which is clearly divided into two poles. “The authorities, as before, generally use the media to target dissenters, but also to attack media outlets and journalists who are critical of state officials,” Marija Babić told BIRN. She notes that in times of deep social crisis, campaigns targeting and discrediting individual journalists and media outlets are increasingly common, and their safety is often directly endangered.

The recorded cases show that the attacks on independent media and journalists in Serbia come either from individual pressure by anonymous actors, or from coordinated campaigns involving politicians, public officials and pro-government media. Through journalists’ email addresses, newsroom accounts and private messages on social networks, journalists faced insults, threats, hate speech and humiliation.

Particularly when reporting on the protests, independent media suffered publication of private and personal data, death threats and threats of physical violence, targeting of family members, and the spread of offensive and threatening content through social networks and pro-government channels.

³¹ SafeJournalists. “U Srbiji su najčešći institucionalni i ekonomski pritisci na novinare.” Accessed October 2025. <https://safejournalists.net/sr/seemo-izvestaj-u-srbiji-su-najcesci-institucionalni-i-ekonomski-pritisci-na-novinare/>

³² Balkan Insight. “Report lists Turkey and Serbia among Europe’s worst media freedom violators.” March 5, 2025. Accessed October 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/03/05/report-lists-turkey-and-serbia-among-europes-worst-media-freedom-violators/>

Through the use of threats and intimidation, a climate of insecurity, self censorship and fear is created among journalists, with long-term consequences for media freedom, information and pluralism in Serbia.

During the monitoring period, journalist associations (the Association of Journalists of Serbia, the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia, and the Press Council) adopted a new Code of Journalists of Serbia³³ as a self-regulatory document. The initiative responds to the need to adapt to the current media environment, but also to emphasize responsibility of the online sphere and introduce guidelines on the professional conduct of journalists on social media. ■

³³ Savet za štampu. Kodeks novinara i novinarki Srbije 2025. 2024. Accessed October 2025. <https://savetzastampu.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/KODEKS-novinara-i-novinarki-2025-korekcija.pdf>

Recommendations

- The Serbian government should ensure full transparency regarding its contractual agreements and procurement processes, particularly those concerning public security and surveillance. It should provide mandatory public reporting and oversight to prevent misuse. All surveillance activities must comply with GDPR principles to protect citizens' data and privacy rights.
- Law enforcement authorities should be equipped with the necessary resources and training to enable independent and effective investigation and prosecution of digital rights violations.
- The Serbian government should harmonize its laws and regulations with EU standards to ensure the protection and legal safeguarding of citizens' rights in the digital sphere, as well as to establish effective legal mechanisms for addressing digital rights violations.
- The government should revise and revisit articles in the new draft Criminal Code, particularly those focusing on the criminalization of social media activities and online speech.
- Public officials, politicians and media should refrain from behaviour and speech that encourages threats to the safety of citizens, activists, journalists and political opposition, as this also fosters violence in the online space, particularly on social media. Public officials must publicly condemn attacks, threats and hate speech and effective investigation must be guaranteed.
- Media and civil society should engage and continue reporting actively and transparently on digital rights violations, including attacks, threats and hate speech affecting citizens, activists, journalists and the political opposition.
- Media outlets should report responsibly and ethically, providing accurate and verified information while respecting the digital rights of all groups. ■