

Serbia: Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights observes deteriorating human rights situation



Following his visit to Serbia from 18-21 May 2026, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, issued the following end-of-visit statement, which should be considered in conjunction with his [previous interventions](#):

The Commissioner's visit to Serbia focused on issues pertaining to the right to freedom of expression, including media freedom, and to peaceful assembly, as well as the protection of civic space. He expresses his appreciation to his interlocutors and to those Serbian government officials in Strasbourg and Belgrade who facilitated his visit. The Commissioner considers that the situation has deteriorated since his previous visit in April 2025.

Freedom of expression and media freedom

The Commissioner heard consistent reports of an increase in violence, intimidation and harassment against journalists and civil society actors who express criticism of government policies. Against the backdrop of government-dominance of the media sector and the lack of a functioning media regulator, the rapidly shrinking space for dissent undermines political debate and enjoyment of the right of access to diverse sources of information. This is especially problematic in the current pre-electoral context.

The Commissioner is concerned about the physical attacks on and threats to the safety of journalists and their families, and the lack of response by the police. According to the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists in Serbia, composed of journalists' associations, the prosecution service, and the police, only five of some 200 evidenced attacks against journalists recorded during 2024 and 2025 resulted in final court judgments. The media environment is also compromised by a high number of SLAPPs (abusive litigation) targeting reporters, especially those covering the student protests and ongoing corruption investigations. He further observes a distorted media market in which state media funding and advertising are predominantly channelled to pro-government media.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

The Commissioner notes with concern the authorities' violent response to public gatherings and student-led demonstrations related to the tragedy in Novi Sad in November 2024. There are multiple reports of excessive force on the part of the police, as well as arrests of peaceful protestors and degrading treatment in custody.

There are also reports of police protecting unidentified and often masked attackers of journalists and protesters. It is a matter of concern that substantiated complaints of unacceptable police behaviour appear not to have been investigated or prosecuted. Furthermore, the Commissioner remains concerned that, despite the submission of testimonies of over 3000 citizens, no official investigation has been launched into the alleged sonic weapon attack of 15 March 2025.

The Commissioner considers that the current climate of impunity for police malpractice has eroded social trust in law enforcement and other public authorities.

Protection of civic space

The Commissioner was struck by a convergent assessment by many interlocutors that the overall situation of civic space in Serbia has degraded sharply since his last visit. Civil society organisations, particularly those working on human rights, anti-corruption, and election monitoring, are routinely portrayed as "traitors" or "foreign agents" in pro-government media, as well as by some high officials. The Commissioner is concerned by the high levels of hate speech targeting civil society and how this can trigger physical violence. He further notes with concern how public demonstrations of respect for the victims of the Novi Sad tragedy reportedly may trigger dismissal from public employment, intimidation and harassment.

General observations

The decline in the integrity of human rights-related state institutions must be arrested and reversed. The Commissioner considers it important that the recommendations of the Venice Commission on the so-called Mrđić laws be fully and consistently implemented, notably with respect to the safeguarding of prosecutorial autonomy. He also notes the importance of independent human rights institutions for the protection of human rights and regretfully concurs with his many interlocutors who consider that, regarding the subject areas of the visit, the Protector of Citizens (the Ombudsman) is not fulfilling his mandate.

More broadly, the Commissioner is concerned about the polarisation within Serbia where human rights-related civil society and government cooperation mechanisms no longer appear to function. He calls on the authorities to foster a favourable environment for free debate and public participation.

The Commissioner notes that large demonstrations are scheduled for Saturday, 23 May. He calls on the authorities to regulate and police these in full compliance with their human rights obligations. He will monitor the situation closely.

During his visit, the Commissioner met with the Prosecutor General Zagorka Dolovac, the Protector of Citizens Zoran Pašalić, and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Milan Antonijević. He also held meetings with a broad range of representatives from civil society, the media and the academic community. The authorities cancelled the scheduled meetings with the Minister of Justice, the Minister for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, and the Acting Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, in which regard the Commissioner re-affirms his commitment to dialogue.

