

The State of the World's Human Rights; Serbia 2025

Protesters, journalists and civil society organizations continued to face intimidation, harassment and unlawful surveillance as authorities sought to rein in widespread discontent. Discrimination remained a significant concern affecting women and girls, Roma, LGBTI people and people with disabilities. There was limited progress on ensuring the right to a healthy environment. War crimes prosecutions and regional judicial cooperation were sidelined. The government stepped up arms transfers to Israel.

Background

The year was marked by persistent demonstrations across the country, triggered by the November 2024 collapse of a railway station's concrete roof in the northern city of Novi Sad, which killed 16 people. Protesters alleged corruption-fuelled negligence and demanded political accountability from President Aleksandar Vučić as well as early elections and broad reforms. The protests prompted a heavy-handed response by police and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Protesters were subjected to excessive use of force in multiple cases across the country, with police cracking down on largely peaceful demonstrations. Human rights monitors and journalists recorded cases of intimidation, beatings and ill-treatment by plain-clothes and uniformed police. Student protesters were also violently attacked by supporters of the Serbian Progressive Party, whose actions were subsequently condoned and pardoned by the president.

In mid-March, police used what appeared to be an unidentified sonic weapon – also known as an acoustic device – against protesters in the capital, Belgrade, causing a stampede. Some protesters reported long-term effects from the weapon including hearing problems, nausea and dizziness. At the end of April, the European Court of Human Rights issued an interim measure indicating that the government must prevent the use of sonic weapons or similar devices for crowd control.

Police detained hundreds of protesters arbitrarily. Dozens were subjected to slapping and kicking while already restrained, and some detainees were threatened with rape, violence and death.

Journalists were targeted while reporting on the protests and other public-interest issues, with over 160 cases of intimidation and attacks recorded by mid-year.

Freedom of association

The European Commission reported that high-level officials and government-friendly tabloids were intensifying verbal attacks and smear campaigns against civil society organizations and activists advocating for the rule of law. These included disclosure of personal data.

In February, Serbian police raided the offices of four NGOs to investigate an alleged “abuse of USAID funds,” citing statements by senior US government officials on the USAID funding freeze.

In June, UN special rapporteurs publicly expressed concern at what appeared to be “a systematic campaign” aimed at discrediting human rights defenders, election observers and journalists through concerted media stories by pro-government outlets, surveillance and criminalization.

Unlawful surveillance

Authorities continued the unlawful use of spyware and other invasive digital forensic tools against activists and journalists. In January, the Prosecutor for High Technological Crime formally registered a complaint by an association of 10 civil society organizations, which had filed criminal charges against police and intelligence authorities.¹ In February, two journalists from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) were targeted with NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware.² The same month, digital forensics company Cellebrite announced that it would suspend the use of its equipment by some of its customers in Serbia over concerns of abuse.³

Discrimination

OHCHR, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed concern about a rise in hate speech targeting women, Roma and other communities, as well as LGBTI people and journalists.

Women and girls

In September, the Council of Europe’s independent Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) reported ongoing prevalent discrimination against women and girls related to childbirth, maternity and childcare. This continued alongside gender-based violence and killings, as well as “obstetric violence, digital violence, public insults and belittling comments targeting women”, GREVIO said.

Roma

The continued implementation of the Law on Social Cards, which introduced algorithmic decision-making in determining who should receive monetary social support, resulted in 60,000 people losing access to financial aid over the three years since its roll-out in March 2022, disproportionately affecting Roma. Roma communities continued to face high poverty rates, exclusion, and limited access to healthcare, education, employment and other essential services.

People with disabilities

Following a visit to Serbia in June, the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture called for more measures to protect people with disabilities from ill-treatment in state institutions.

Right to a healthy environment

In November, the European Commission made a number of recommendations to Serbia to improve its policies and legislation on environmental issues. These included recommendations in relation to climate change, waste management, water quality, nature protection, industrial pollution and public participation in environmental matters, among others.

The government submitted its third NDC in September, committing Serbia to a 40.1% decrease in greenhouse gas emissions by 2035, compared to 1990 levels. The NDC noted that Serbia had suffered at least EUR 10.45 billion in losses and damages due to extreme weather and climate-related events between 2000 and 2024.

Right to truth, justice and reparation

By year's end, the High Prosecutorial Council had failed to appoint a permanent Chief War Crimes Prosecutor. The government blocked effective judicial cooperation with other countries in the Balkans and failed to deliver on its commitment to promote accountability for long-standing war crimes in the region.

Irresponsible arms transfers

In the first half of the year, Serbia exported over EUR 55 million worth of ammunition to Israel, violating its obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty and international humanitarian law. Serbia rejected freedom of information requests for details of the transfers between the two countries.



