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[Back to Serbia](#)

SERBIA 2022

Threats against independent journalists and media outlets and malicious civil prosecutions jeopardized media freedom. Similar prosecutions affected environmental activists, who also faced excessive use of force by police when protesting. The new social assistance law discriminated against minority communities. An increasing number of refugees and migrants reached Serbia.

Background

President Vučić was re-elected in April; the new parliament did not sit until September. Serbia juggled EU membership aspirations with investment-based relationships with China and Russia.

In August, EU-sponsored talks concluded a Serbia-Kosovo agreement, enabling equal terms for cross-border freedom of movement. By November, Kosovo Serbs had

resigned from Kosovo institutions in protest over licence plates. Tensions increased in December as Kosovo Serbs erected barricades, far-right groups marched in support in Belgrade and President Vučić called for the return to the border of the Serbian Army. Following international pressure, Kosovo Serbs dismantled barricades on 29 December, but political tension remained.

Right to truth, justice and reparation

Serbia continued to honour and promote convicted war criminals, while failing to prosecute high-ranking military officials or address 1,731 pre-investigative cases. War crimes trials progressed slowly at the Belgrade District Court. In July, a former Serbian paramilitary testified against 11 members of the 177th Yugoslav Army Unit indicted for killing 118 Kosovo Albanians in Zahac/Zahaq, Ćuška /Qyshk, Pavlan/Plavljane and Ljubenić/Lubeniq in May 1999. He subsequently requested protected witness status.

In October in the first trial in Serbia of a Bosnian-Serb commanding officer, Milenko Živanović, former commander of the Republika Srpska Army's Drina Corps, denied that he had issued orders for the forced expulsion of Bosniak civilians from Srebrenica in July 1995.

In July, after urging the government to officially commemorate the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, NGO Women in Black's Belgrade office was daubed with red paint.

As of August, 1,621 disappeared and missing persons from Kosovo remained unaccounted for.

Freedom of expression

In April, the OSCE highlighted an increase in violent threats and verbal attacks against media workers, including death threats and accusations of being foreign mercenaries or traitors. At year's end, the independent journalists' association NUNS reported 107 attacks, threats or attempts to pressurize journalists.

In June, 14 television companies applied to the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media for broadcast licences; all four were awarded to pro-government channels.

Independent journalists and media critical of the government continued to be sued for "reputational harm" by politicians and businesses in Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs), creating a chilling effect on media freedom. In November, the judgment in a suit against the Crime and Corruption Reporting

Network brought by security service director Bratislav Gašić threatened journalists' right to report on court proceedings.

Freedom of assembly

Environmental activists continued protests against extractive industries across Serbia, facing over-zealous policing and the threat of SLAPPs from affected companies.

In July, during demonstrations opposing Novi Sad's plan to construct a residential and business complex along the river Danube, police arrested two environmental activists. A video showed private security guards forcing a protester to the ground and restraining him. Protests continued in October, when police – without visible identification – again used excessive force.

In September, two protesters against mining developments near Majdanpek were seriously injured after being held overnight at Negotin police station without access to a lawyer.

In December, under significant civil society pressure, the government withdrew the draft Law on Internal Affairs, which sought to introduce intrusive biometric surveillance and limit the right to peaceful assembly.

Torture and other ill-treatment

In March, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture reported on its 2021 visit to police stations and prisons, highlighting continued ill-treatment, sometimes amounting to torture, and the lack of effective action to implement its previous recommendations.

Violence against women and girls

After four women were killed, three by family members, between 21 March and 1 April, 61 women's NGOs urged the authorities to consistently implement existing measures to prevent and protect women from violence. At least 21 women were killed by family members during the year. In October, while President Vučić proposed higher sentences for rape and domestic violence, the Autonomous Women's Centre urged implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), ratified by Serbia in 2013, including the adoption of its consent-based definition of rape.

LGBTI people's rights

Belgrade hosted EuroPride 2022 in September. The Interior Ministry initially banned the parade, citing security concerns, but later permitted a short, heavily policed march. Some participants, four press crews and several police officers were attacked by anti-LGBTI counter-protesters; 64 individuals were reportedly arrested.¹

Economic, social and cultural rights

The Law on Social Cards entered into force in May, introducing an algorithm to determine a person's eligibility for social assistance. NGOs challenged the law before the Constitutional Court, arguing that decision-making by algorithm posed human rights risks, including collection of excessive personal data, weak privacy protection and outcomes that potentially discriminated against minority groups, in particular Roma.²

Refugees' and migrants' rights

In September, the number of people reaching already overcrowded asylum and refugee centres almost doubled, stretching inadequate capacity and posing health risks, while the number of unofficial camps and squats increased. The number of single women, families and unaccompanied minors increased.

Police violently raided unofficial camps in October, led by then interior minister Aleksandar Vulin, who called migrants "scum" and "bandits", encouraging anti-migrant rhetoric and harassment. Hungary pushed back thousands of people into Serbia, while Serbia extended its fence bordering North Macedonia. By October, 84,512 people had reached government centres: while 3,371 expressed an interest in seeking asylum, only 270 applied. By 31 December, 27 individuals were awarded some form of international protection.

Ecevit Piroğlu, a Kurdish political activist detained in Serbia since June 2021, remained at risk of extradition to Türkiye. International rights groups urged Serbia to grant him asylum because he would be at risk of serious human rights violations upon return, including torture and arbitrary detention.

Human trafficking

In January, the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons expressed grave concerns about 402 Vietnamese migrant workers trafficked to Serbia to build the Shandong Linglong tyre factory at Zrenjanin. NGOs had documented cases of forced

labour including bonded labour, and unsafe and unhealthy living and working conditions.

Environmental degradation

Although in January the government said it had revoked permits for Rio Tinto's development of a lithium mine after nationwide protests in 2021, local organizations reported continued activities in the Jadar valley.

Serbia's weak regulatory system was widely criticized for enabling predominantly Chinese and Russian mining and processing companies to bypass inadequate environmental protections, potentially leading to irreversible environmental damage.

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1. "Serbia: Authorities must repeal 'shameful' ban on Euro Pride walk", 16 September
 2. "Serbia: Social Card law could harm marginalized members of society – legal opinion", 28 November