

Serbia must halt crackdown on student movement, uphold human rights and academic freedom: UN experts

GENEVA – UN human rights experts* today expressed deep concern over Serbia’s intensifying crackdown on students, professors, human rights defenders, civil society actors and citizens amid one of the largest protest movements in the country’s recent history.

“What we are witnessing in Serbia is a systematic attempt to silence critical voices and dismantle the independence of academic institutions,” the experts said. “This is not just a student protest — it is a test of human rights accountability and democratic resilience.”

“Access to justice, effective remedies and reparation is a fundamental right under international human rights law,” the experts said. “Victims of human rights violations must be able to seek justice, obtain redress, and be protected from further harm and retaliation.”

The protests, led by the “Students in Blockade” movement, erupted in late 2024 and have since swept across Serbia. What began as a call for accountability following the tragic collapse of the Novi Sad railway canopy — which killed 16 people and severely injured others — has grown into a nationwide demand for accountability, transparency, justice, and investment in education. The movement reached a peak in March 2025, when hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Belgrade in a powerful display of civic unity, the experts said.

The experts noted that the Government’s response has been marked by a troubling pattern of repression. Peaceful demonstrators have reportedly faced intimidation, physical attacks, surveillance, and arrests, often without legal justification. Students and university officials have allegedly been targeted in coordinated smear campaigns, with state-aligned media publishing hundreds of defamatory articles, and labelling demonstrators as ‘terrorists’, a term also used by government representatives.

Since late June 2025, Serbia has experienced an escalation in policing of peaceful, student-led protests, with reports indicating that, at certain junctions, over 200 demonstrations have occurred daily. Authorities have responded with excessive force, arbitrary arrests, and prolonged detentions, including among high school and university students. Reports of unlawful surveillance, serious injuries, and the deployment of unidentified or plainclothes officers have raised grave concerns about transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights. “Instead of listening young people’s voices, the Government has chosen to punish them,” the experts said. “This approach not only violates international human rights standards, but also, by its very nature, undermines the very foundation of a democratic society.”

They stressed that educational institutions have come under pressure. Faculty salaries have been slashed and/or suspended and research funding drastically reduced. Highschool teachers and students have reportedly been subjected to administrative scrutiny and threats of disciplinary action for participating in or supporting the demonstrations.

“As the academic year closes and enrolment begins, we urge Serbia to renew its commitment to human rights and meaningful dialogue,” the experts said, hopeful that the new school year will enable students and educators to learn and teach free from intimidation. They stressed that academic freedom and student rights are pillars of any democratic and inclusive society.

The UN experts called on the Serbian Government to immediately cease all forms of retaliation and intimidation, ensure the safety and rights of students, educators, human rights defenders, civil society actors and citizens and engage in meaningful dialogue with academic institutions.

*The experts:

- **Farida Shaheed**, [Special Rapporteur on the right to education](#);
- **Alexandra Xanthaki**, [Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights](#);
- **Irene Khan**, [Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression](#);
- **Gina Romero**, [Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association](#);
- **Mary Lawlor**, [Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders](#);
- **George Katrougalos**, [Independent Expert on international order](#);
- **Ben Saul**, [Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights](#).

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