

Serbia

Protesters and journalists faced intimidation, harassment and vexatious lawsuits for peacefully engaging on issues of public interest. No credible effort was made towards achieving accountability for war crimes; instead, the government focused on weakening a UN resolution on the Srebrenica genocide. Discrimination remained a significant concern affecting Roma, LGBTI and refugee and migrant people. Refugees and migrants transiting through the country decreased in number but remained vulnerable to abuse and border violence.

Background

There was no progress in implementing the EU-brokered agreement between Serbia and Kosovo on normalizing diplomatic relations between the two countries. In July, the Constitutional Court annulled the 2022 government decree that blocked the opening of a lithium and boron mine in the Jadar valley, triggering mass nationwide protests against the project. The government issued a new decree soon after, approving the exploitation plans. Also in July, Serbia and the EU concluded a memorandum of understanding and strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials. Tens of thousands of people demonstrated for months against lithium extraction, citing irreversible damage to the environment.

Freedom of expression

Investigative journalists, human rights defenders and activists continued to face attacks in pro-government media outlets and were subjected to strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). In July, a widely watched pro-government TV station named and accused some 40 civil society organizations of “waging a special war against Serbia” at the behest of foreign governments. The broadcast featured detailed charts of organizations’ finances, including the names of staff, bank details and transactions that were not publicly available. Senior government officials repeatedly called for the introduction of a “foreign agents law” to stifle dissent. The Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia reported over 150 threats and attacks against journalists throughout the year. The Crime and Corruption Reporting Network alone faced 16 vexatious lawsuits over its investigative reporting.

In March the UN Human Rights Committee noted the continued prevalence of discriminatory speech targeting journalists in both online and traditional media, including by politicians and high-level officials.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Demonstrations, especially environmental protests, were heavily policed, with participants subjected to excessive use of force and arbitrary arrests. At least 33 activists in 17 towns across Serbia were arrested following lithium mining protests in August. Many were detained or questioned over posts on social media or for merely participating in peaceful protests. Some of those detained were charged with disproportionate criminal offences, including “incitement to violently overthrow constitutional order” and subjected to extensive questioning, searches of their homes and seizure of their telephones and computers.

In December, Amnesty International found evidence of widespread use of unlawful spyware and other invasive digital forensic techniques against activists and independent journalists by the authorities.¹ Following the report, local civil society organizations filed criminal charges against the

police and the Security Information Agency for the development and use of spyware and unauthorized access to personal data.

Right to truth, justice and reparation

Serbia strongly objected to the adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution establishing 11 July as an official International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica.²

More than 1,700 war crimes cases remained to be investigated in Serbia.

The trial of seven Bosnian Serb ex-policemen for the July 1995 massacre of 1,313 Bosniaks from Srebrenica in the Agricultural Cooperative in Kravica remained stalled due to repeatedly delayed and postponed hearings.

Discrimination

In April, the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) noted in its periodic report that prejudice against LGBTI, Roma and refugee and migrant persons remained widespread in Serbia, most visibly through online hate speech. In December, UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, reported that the majority of refugees and migrants who had transited through the Western Balkans came from countries in the MENA region as well as Afghanistan.

Roma

In March, the UN Human Rights Committee noted that Roma, particularly those internally displaced in informal settlements, continued to suffer from high rates of poverty and exclusion, and had limited access to education, employment and healthcare, as well as to basic services such as electricity, drinking water and sanitation.

ECRI called on Serbian authorities to review the provision of social assistance through the Law on Social Cards to ensure that Roma and other disadvantaged groups had equal opportunities to access government support. The Law on Social Cards continued to be implemented without due consideration for its impact on human rights.

LGBTI people

There remained no legal gender recognition law based on self-determination in line with international human rights standards. Transgender people continued to be subjected to a compulsory year-long hormonal treatment as a requirement for legal gender recognition.

In February a gay man and his housemate were subjected to ill-treatment including physical, psychological and sexual harassment by a group of more than 10 police officers, who entered and searched their apartment in the capital, Belgrade. By the end of the year, no credible investigation into the incident had taken place.

In January, the Council of Europe Committee for the Prevention of Torture had urged Serbian authorities to adopt and implement a coherent strategy to eradicate police ill-treatment and effectively investigate such cases.

In September, the annual Belgrade Pride was held without homophobic incidents, with the participation of three government ministers.

Arbitrary detention

In July, Ecevit Pirođlu, a political activist from Türkiye who had been held in arbitrary detention since June 2021, was released and left the country.³

Refugees' and migrants' rights

The number of newly arriving refugees and migrants declined by up to 80% compared to 2023, prompting the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration to shut several of the country's reception centres. Refugees and migrants without access to shelter were increasingly vulnerable to abuse and violence, including summary unlawful returns.
