



Balkan Civil Society
Development Network

BCSDN Calls for an End to Crackdown on Serbian Civic Freedoms, Urging the EU and International Community to Join in Support

In solidarity with Serbian civil society, BCSDN stands firmly with those facing increasing pressure to defend democratic values and fundamental rights. We support their right to protest and demand an accountable government. BCSDN urges the Serbian government to respect civic freedoms and immediately end the crackdown on civil society.

The rise of protests

In recent years, Serbia has seen a wave of protests driven by widespread concerns about corruption, environmental threats, and the erosion of democratic values. Citizens have rallied together to oppose government policies that undermine the rule of law and human rights, with claims of rigged elections further fueling discontent. A significant flashpoint has been the controversy surrounding major industrial and mining projects, such as Rio Tinto's lithium mining plans, which many view as emblematic of government priorities favoring corporate interests over environmental protection. The revival of these projects, especially in sensitive areas like the Jadar Valley, has reignited frustration among citizens who believe their voices are being ignored in the pursuit of economic gain.

This surge in protests has been met with a systematic, state-backed campaign to undermine civil society, where activists and organizations have been subjected to relentless smear campaigns, targeted intimidation, and politically motivated detentions. These efforts, orchestrated at the highest levels, form part of a broader and escalating assault on civil liberties, including the fundamental rights to freedom of assembly and expression. Activists have been facing [intimidation](#), including [death threats](#), fueling concerns of a broader crackdown on civil liberties like freedom of assembly and expression. During a [major protest in Belgrade](#), activists blocking the railway station and highway were arrested for [verbally assaulting](#) a journalist of the pro-government media Informer. Although the activists were [released](#) after an appeal and public pressure, the government's accusations against civil society groups persisted with intensifying efforts to discredit them. The gravity of the situation is comprehensively discussed in a report by Civic Initiatives, available [here](#).

The role of the EU

In July 2024, the EU signed a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) with Serbia to support the lithium project, citing it as crucial for [Europe's green transition](#). European officials emphasized the economic benefits, such as job creation and reduced reliance on Chinese lithium. However, critics argue that the deal exploits Serbia's [weak legislative and regulatory framework](#) and undermines the EU's commitment to democratic values, prioritizing economic interests over environmental and democratic concerns.

The EU-Serbia deal of lithium mining sparked [continued protests](#), amid the government [undermining of basic freedoms](#). Led by CSOs and environmental groups, tens of thousands of citizens [rallied](#) in [cities](#) across Serbia. The protesters have also [called](#) the RTS public broadcaster to stop ignoring the detentions of activists against lithium excavation. President Vučić [claimed](#) the protesters were plotting to overthrow the government, echoing past authoritarian rhetoric, while pro-government outlets have consistently portrayed activists as traitors. In just ten days, 33 activists were [arrested or detained](#), while a coordinated media smear campaign targeted 11 international donors, and 39 organizations, including BCSDN.

While the pressure on civil society is ongoing, worryingly, there has been no official response by the EU to condemn these actions yet.

Organizations like the [European Federation of Journalists](#) and [Freedom House](#) condemned the repression, calling for an end to smear campaigns against civil society and the media, urging the Serbian government to respect civic freedoms and the right to protest.

BCSDN supports the Serbian civil society [calls](#) for an end of the government repression and respect of the citizens' right to protest. Despite unjust accusations by the Serbian media Informer of BCSDN attempting to topple the government, we remain committed to our mission to protect the civic space. As a regional network promoting a more enabling environment for civil society, BCSDN remains dedicated to monitoring the situation and responding as necessary as it continues to develop.