

Civil Society in Serbia: A Force for Change or a Target for Suppression?

by Ljiljana Kolarski

Protest in Novi Sad.

On November 1st, 2024, the roof of the Novi Sad train station collapsed. Sixteen people died. Within hours, shock turned into grief—then rage. Citizens demanded answers, accountability, and justice. Instead, they got police sirens, search warrants, and the ransacking of NGO offices. What began as a national tragedy quickly escalated into a political turning point. In the days following the disaster, several prominent civil society organizations—particularly those involved in election monitoring and anti-corruption—found themselves raided by the police. The government claimed it was investigating alleged misuse of USAID funds. But no violations were found. For many, the message was clear: don't investigate the system—because the system will investigate you. This chilling episode marked the latest chapter in the increasingly hostile relationship between the Serbian state and its civil society sector. Once celebrated as engines

of reform and democratization, independent NGOs have become scapegoats in the government's strategy to consolidate power.

A turning point in 2012

The decisive shift came in 2012, when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) rose to power. While publicly pro-European, the party under Aleksandar Vučić swiftly adopted authoritarian methods at home. Civic organizations that had contributed meaningfully to Serbia's democratic transformation were sidelined and slandered. Public consultations became performative. NGOs were demonized as "foreign mercenaries" or "agents of Western powers," echoing accusations often repeated by Vučić himself. "They receive millions from abroad to attack Serbia and work against our interests," he declared in a 2024 televised speech. Alongside the rhetorical assault came a structural one. The state

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Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia.



strategies: hyper-local organizing, international coalitions, and solidarity-based networks. Their goal is no longer just to be heard—it is to make an impact. The path forward is steep, but Serbia's civic sector has proven it will not be silenced. "Civil society is not the enemy of the state—it is the voice that reminds society of its values and responsibilities." That line, spoken at a recent forum in Brussels, rings louder than ever in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and beyond. There are no easy answers. But the courage, adaptability, and persistence of Serbia's civic movements offer one certainty: they are not giving up. Not quietly—and not alone.

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began promoting GONGOs—government-organized NGOs—which served to simulate civic engagement while amplifying official narratives. These regime-friendly groups flooded the public sphere and absorbed significant portions of available public funding. Meanwhile, authentic civil society actors like CRTA, Civic Initiatives, and CINS faced defunding, bureaucratic harassment, and coordinated media smear campaigns. "In Serbia today, defending human rights or fighting corruption has become a risky endeavor. It can get you raided, followed, or discredited on national television".

Protest and pushback

The Novi Sad tragedy on November 1, 2024, lit a fuse that reignited alternative political activism across Serbia. Student-led protests erupted nationwide, as young people—many of them politically disengaged until then—saw the collapse not just as an accident but as proof of systemic negligence. It was no longer just about human rights or election monitoring—it was about basic safety, failed institutions, and impunity. In response, they organized plenums to discuss civic resistance and revive deliberative democracy. They cycled from Novi Sad to Strasbourg and ran from Novi Sad to Brussels, carrying a message of justice, accountability, and urgent reform. What began as grief transformed into a bold civic campaign that challenged state indifference with creativity, determination, and solidarity. This new momentum did not emerge in isolation—it connected seamlessly with other ongoing civic struggles. Yet, even in the face of repression, civil society proved resilient. Environmental movements like Ne Damo Jadar and Ekološki Ustanak had already shown that organized resistance could force policy changes. Their successful campaign to block lithium mining projects, including the withdrawal of agreements with Rio Tinto, marked one of the few tangible victories against

entrenched interests. In Belgrade, citizens rallied against illegal construction on protected green spaces. These movements were grassroots, decentralized, and driven by communities rather than professional advocacy. Social media, street protests, and public art became tools of resistance.

As public support swelled, traditional NGOs began forging deeper alliances with citizen-led initiatives. Legal experts, environmental activists, journalists, and community organizers now collaborate through shared platforms and digital networks. In towns like Kraljevo and Vranje, EU-supported civic hubs offer free legal advice, community events, and media literacy workshops. These efforts aim to rebuild trust—especially in regions historically disconnected from national-level activism. Still, hostility remains the norm. State-aligned media continues to vilify CSOs. In one infamous 2023 tabloid headline, *Informer* ran: "They Take Money to Destroy Serbia: Who Really Stands Behind the Protests?" The effect of such propaganda is corrosive, sowing public doubt and polarizing communities. Yet the narrative is beginning to crack. According to recent research by CRTA, nearly half of Serbian citizens now believe that NGOs work in the public interest—a stark contrast to the skepticism of a decade ago. EU officials have taken notice. Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Várhelyi stated, "A vibrant and independent civil society is essential for Serbia's democratic development." EU support has increased under the IPA III funding mechanism, but many activists remain cautious. "We hear the words, but we need stronger action. The EU cannot keep turning a blind eye," said one Belgrade-based NGO leader.

A crossroads moment

As Serbia's ruling elites consolidate power, civil society stands at a defining crossroads. Without institutional allies, many groups are turning to new