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Germany

Dr Nebojša Stefanović
Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia
Bulevar Mihajla Pupina. 2
Belgrade
Serbia

21 July 2020

Dear Minister of Interior, Dr. Nebojša Stefanović,

We, the undersigned organisations, call on the Ministry of Interior to ensure all police officers and ministry personnel protect journalists and media workers, and reaffirm your commitment to defend press and media freedom for everyone across Serbia. This is in accordance with [Article 46 and 50 of the Serbian Constitution](#), as well as all relevant European standards and principles.

Article 3 of the [2016 Serbian Law on the Police](#) outlines the requirement for all police officers to abide by the constitution and guarantee “human and minority rights and freedoms and other protected values in a democratic society.” However, in recent days, [Media Freedom Rapid Response \(MFRR\)](#), which tracks, monitors and reacts to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries, has documented numerous reports from Belgrade, Niš and Novi Sad of journalists and media workers being attacked, threatened and harassed by police officers and protesters during recent anti-Government protests.

Here are a number of examples where journalists have been threatened or attacked by police officers:

- On 7th July at a protest outside the Serbian National Assembly in Belgrade, [police officers tried to prevent a N1 TV crew](#) from filming police officers beating a protester;
- Despite identifying herself as a journalist, [Milica Božinović](#), a journalist for the Nova.rs news portal, was inappropriately hit on the buttocks with a baton by a police officer;
- On 8th July, a journalist from the Beta news agency, [Žikica Stevanović](#) required hospitalisation after being attacked by police officers with batons. As with Božinović’s case, Stevanović clearly identified himself as a journalist prior to the attack. Camera operators for the same agency, [Luka Pređa and Relja Pekić](#), were also attacked but escaped serious injury;
- [Igor Stanojević](#), a film critic and a journalist, was arrested during the Belgrade protest on 8 July. Although he clearly identified himself as a journalist, Stanojević was not only held by the police on the street for an hour, but was also later taken to custody. Stanojević was taken to the Magistrates Court, before being released to await trial.

- Returning to cover the protest on the 8th July, [Milica Božinović](#) of Nova.rs was again attacked by police officers when she was hit on the hand with a baton, which resulted in her dropping her phone. She was joined by her colleague, Nataša Latković who was also targeted.
- While reporting on the protest in Bulevar Kralja Aleksandra, Nova.rs journalist, Marko Radonjić was beaten with a baton by the police, before being verbally assaulted and threatened with arrest.

Further to the threats against journalists and media workers from police officers, a number were also attacked or threatened by individual protesters. This included a camera operator from the [Taniug news agency](#) who was grabbed and then punched in the stomach by a protester in an attempt to prevent him from filming, attacks on a [Radio Televizija Srbije \(RTS\)](#) crews in Niš and Novi Sad and an attack on the Novi Sad office of [Radio Televizija Vojvodina \(RTV\)](#), which resulted in the destruction of the building's glass door. On 9th July, Nova.rs photo reporter, Vojislav Milovančević required hospitalisation following an attack from men in black hooded shirts and his colleague, Uros Arsic was attacked by another group of men throwing stones. On 10th July, the fourth night of protests, journalists and camera operators from [N1 News, Beta News Agency, Al Jazeera and Kurir TV](#) were threatened and attacked by protesters at different locations in Belgrade, including outside the National Assembly building. Journalists were attacked by thrown bricks and stones, as well as metal poles, which resulted in medical attention for Miloš Miškov, Svetlana Dojčinović and Miša Batanjac. On 17th July, the [Standing Working Group for Safety of Journalists](#), which comprises of representatives from both the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (IJAS) and Association of Journalists of Serbia (JAS), alongside other media organisations, and representatives from the Republic Public Prosecutor's Office and the Interior Ministry reported that 28 journalists had been attacked in the period between 7th and 11th July.

This is wholly inadequate. Journalists need to be free to cover protests and should not face threats from either protesters or police officers. The responsibility of the police in this context is two-fold; protecting journalists from external threats to ensure they can carry out their work and secondly not themselves attacking journalists, especially when journalists clearly identify themselves as part of the media. This responsibility cannot be ignored as it would undermine public trust in the government's commitment to press and media freedom, while also dissuading journalists and media workers from carrying out public interest reporting if their safety and security cannot be guaranteed.

We, the undersigned organisations, call for all attacks and threats to journalists to be investigated fully to ensure that perpetrators of violence, including police officers and other state entities, are held to account. This will demonstrate to journalists and the public that no one is above the law. Further to this, we call on meaningful changes to ensure this situation is not repeated. This could include mandatory training for all existing and incoming police officers on media freedom and the protection of journalists and media workers within a human rights framework. This process should involve and encourage stronger collaboration and coordination between media organisations and state institutions to ensure all threats are reported and investigated, and all state responses to situations such as protests take into consideration the protection of journalists and media workers. This should all be underpinned by a meaningful commitment to strengthening all rule of law mechanisms within Serbia in line with international standards and principles.

We would be happy to organise time to meet virtually to talk about this and outline ways we can support journalists and media workers across Serbia and look forward to seeing improvements to ensure press and media freedom is protected and upheld in the country.

Yours sincerely,

ARTICLE 19

European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)

European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)

Free Press Unlimited

Index on Censorship

International Press Institute (IPI)

Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project

Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa

PEN International

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

This is sent on behalf of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), which tracks, monitors and responds to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. This project provides legal and practical support, public advocacy and information to protect journalists and media workers. The MFRR is organised by an consortium led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) with ARTICLE 19, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), the Institute for Applied Informatics at the University of Leipzig (InfAI), International Press Institute (IPI) and CCI/Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT). The project is co-funded by the European Commission. www.mfrr.eu

 **MEDIA FREEDOM
RAPID RESPONSE**

