

Serbia 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Serbia during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists and unjustified prosecution of journalists; and trafficking in persons, including forced labor.

The government took steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

c. War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, and Evidence of Acts that May Constitute Genocide, or Conflict-related Abuses

The Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor (OWCP) investigated war crimes from the conflicts of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia and issued indictments.

Criminal proceedings before the Higher Court in Belgrade against eight individuals charged by the OWCP for war crimes against civilians in Srebrenica/Kravica in 1995 entered their eighth year.

Appeals proceedings against the three defendants from the former Army of Republika Srpska and the paramilitary group “Avengers” for war crimes against Bosniak civilians during the 1992-95 war in Štrpci, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), who were still alive — Gojko Lukic, Dusko Vasiljevic, and Dragana Djekic — restarted in January.

On April 24, after a 14-year trial, the High Court announced the first-instance verdict in the retrial for war crimes committed in the villages of Ljubenic, Cuska, Pavljan, and Zahac in Kosovo during April and May 1999 (the Cuska case). The court sentenced Toplica Miladinovic to 20 years in prison, Predrag Vukovic to 13 years in prison, Abdulah Sokic to 12 years, Sinisa Misic to five years, and Slavisa Kastratovic, Lazar Pavlovic, and Boban Bogicevic to

two years each. Two other defendants, Veljko Koricanin and Milan Ivanovic, were acquitted of all charges. The Cuska case was the last case before the Higher Court in Belgrade for crimes against Albanian civilians in Kosovo.

The Humanitarian Law Center's 2024 annual report on war crimes cases in the country restated that the OWCP continued to be ineffective. The report repeated concerns that were raised in previous years regarding the practice of excessive and unnecessary anonymization of the indictments available to the public on the OWCP's website, circumvention of regional cooperation, failure of witnesses to appear at war crimes trials, the proposal of trials in absentia, and officials' continued glorification of war criminals and misrepresentation of the history of the wars in the 1990s. Observers maintained that, as in past years, relatively few individuals were indicted for war crimes.

The OWCP did not make substantial progress on a caseload the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunal's (IRMCT) Office of the Prosecutor estimated was 1,200. As of December 2023, the OWCP had 30 open investigations against 84 suspects as well as 18 war crimes trials involving 38 accused. The accused were rarely detained during trials, despite the seriousness of the suspected crimes, which often involved murder or other violent crimes.

Overall regional cooperation on war crimes remained limited. Bilateral agreements existed between the OWCP and its counterparts in BiH, Croatia,

and Montenegro, and monitoring bodies reported some improvement in investigative cooperation between Serbia and BiH.

There were no remaining cases involving substantive atrocity crimes arising from the conflict in the former Yugoslavia at the IRMCT.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution provided for freedom of speech, including for members of the press and other media, but threats and attacks on journalists, a lack of transparency of media ownership, and the oversized role of the state in the country's media sector undermined these freedoms in some instances.

The constitution prohibited the expression of beliefs that provoked or incited religious, ethnic, or racial hatred. Those who provoked or incited intolerance faced punishment ranging from months to years in prison.

Article 75 of the Law on Public Information and Media banned hate speech, noting "ideas, opinions, and information published in media must not incite discrimination, hatred or violence against individuals or groups based on their (non)belonging to a certain race, faith, nation, sex, due to their specific sexual preferences, or other personal quality, regardless of whether their publishing constituted criminal offense."

The Law on National Minorities stipulated the symbols of the country's

national minority communities could not be identical to those of another state and made it obligatory to fly the Serbian flag and a Seal of the Republic of Serbia together with national minority symbols during the celebration of a registered holiday of a national minority. The law also stipulated minority symbols could be displayed throughout the year at the entry to official premises of the National Minority Council but only when displayed together with state symbols of the Republic of Serbia.

In its final action before its dissolution on November 4, the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) announced it was granting a regional broadcast license (covering Belgrade) to Informer TV, a privately owned television station with close associations to the ruling party. This grant was made without the legally mandated open competition for the license, including public hearings.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

The law prohibited threatening or otherwise putting pressure on public media and journalists or exerting any other kind of influence that might obstruct their work. Some attacks on journalists took place despite the government's efforts. According to data from the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, there were 183 attacks on journalists in 2023 and 97 attacks between January and September, including verbal threats, death threats, and violence.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

Financial pressure sometimes led media outlets to refrain from publishing content critical of the government due to a fear of government harassment or financial consequences, according to media association representatives.

The law mandated equal coverage for official campaign messages during election campaign periods, which broadcasters including the public service Radio Television Serbia (RTS) largely respected.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of workers to form and join independent unions of their choice, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. Trade unions had to register with the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans, and Social Affairs, and employers had to verify that union leaders were full-time employees. The government designated more than 50 percent of the workforce as “essential,” including workers whose jobs fell outside of the International Labor Organization’s definition of “essential,” and these workers faced restrictions on the right to strike. Essential workers had to provide 10 days’ advanced notification of a strike and provide a “minimum level of work” during the strike. By law, strikes could be staged only on the

employer's premises. The law prohibited discrimination based on trade union membership but did not provide any specific sanctions for antiunion harassment, nor did it expressly prohibit discrimination against trade union activities. The law provided for the reinstatement of workers fired for union activity, and fired workers generally returned to work quickly.

Independent trade unions were able to organize and address management in state-owned companies on behalf of their members. Independent union activity and representation was generally greater in private companies than state-owned enterprises.

The labor law protected the right to bargain collectively, and this right was effectively enforced and practiced. The law required collective bargaining agreements for any company with more than 10 employees. To negotiate with an employer, however, a union had to represent at least 15 percent of company employees. The law provided the possibility of collective bargaining agreements to employers who were not members of official employers' associations or who did not engage in collective bargaining with unions.

The government generally enforced the labor law with respect to freedom of association, collective bargaining, and right to strike, and penalties were commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination. Penalties were rarely applied against violators, however. Both public- and private-sector employees could freely exercise

the right to strike.

There were allegations of antiunion dismissals and discrimination. Yura Corporation workers who were members of the Autonomous Metalworkers Trade Union of Serbia initiated a series of strikes on June 7 in the town of Leskovac. Media outlets reported workers went on strike due to the unsanitary conditions in the restrooms and an increase in food prices in the cafeteria. Workers demanded a 20 percent pay raise from the minimum wage, the cessation of the punitive attendance bonus policy, an increase in meal allowance, and additional funds to improve conditions in the company's sanitary facilities. After Yura's management threatened workers with dismissal, the workers gave up the strike on June 26.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The law provided for a monthly minimum wage above the poverty level for a single-member household but below the poverty level for a larger household.

The law stipulated a standard workweek of 40 hours and provided for paid

leave, annual holidays, and premium pay of at least an additional 26 percent for night and overtime hours. A worker could have up to eight hours of overtime per week and could not work more than 12 hours in one day, including overtime. A 12-hour break was required between shifts during a workweek, and at least a 24-hour break was required during a weekend. The standard workweek and mandatory breaks were observed in state-owned enterprises but not always in smaller, private companies, where inspectors and unions had less ability to monitor practices.

Alleged violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws were common in most sectors of the economy, including in the construction and automobile industries, among food delivery and information-technology-sector workers, and within the government, judicial, armed forces, and public enterprise sectors.

Occupational Safety and Health

Occupational safety and health (OSH) standards were generally appropriate for the main industries in the country, although insufficient funding and staffing prevented them from being implemented effectively in all cases. In 2023, the government adopted a Law on Safety and Health at Work, which replaced a 2005 law. It included significant updates to align the country's internal occupational safety and health regulatory system and changing workplace conditions with EU legislation, and ratified International Labor Organization conventions. The law defined employers' responsibilities to

provide for the health and safety of employees working from home or remotely, required firms to employ a minimum number of health and safety advisors based on the size of the company and the relative risk of the work, obliged employers to fund regular medical examinations at employees' request to assess potential occupational health concerns, and stiffened penalties for OSH violations. Many of these provisions were scheduled to be fully implemented or enforceable by May 2025.

In case of a direct threat to life and health, employees had the right to act or to remove themselves from the job or situation without responsibility for any damage it could cause the employer and without jeopardy to their employment.

Deaths and injuries were most common in construction; agriculture and forestry; utilities and recycling; transportation and storage; wood processing; production and distribution of electricity; wholesale and retail industries; production of metals, machines, and other equipment; as well as in the repairing of machines and equipment.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The government enforced OSH laws with varying degrees of effectiveness. Penalties for violations were less than those for similar crimes, such as negligence. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators. The government did not effectively enforce minimum wage and overtime laws,

and penalties were less than those for similar crimes, such as fraud. Trade unions within a company were the primary agents for enforcing overtime pay, although the Labor Inspectorate had enforcement responsibilities in companies and industries without union presence.

The Labor Inspectorate, part of the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans, and Social Policy, was responsible for enforcing wage, hour, and OSH laws. Labor inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions. Trade unions reported that while standards, legislation, and strategies for OSH might be adequate, the system suffered from a lack of implementation and capacity, and the Labor Inspectorate lacked enough inspectors and resources to cover the more than 400,000 registered legal entities it was mandated to oversee.

Companies with a trade union presence generally respected minimum wage requirements because of monitoring by the union.

There were concerns regarding employers recruiting migrant workers from countries outside the EU. There were reports some employers seized migrant workers' passports and refused to pay migrant workers in a regular fashion, if at all. Migrant workers also described poor working conditions upon entering the country.

According to labor force survey data, informal-sector employment represented 12.1 percent of total employment in the first quarter of the

year, 0.1 percentage points less than in 2023. Independent estimates suggested the informal sector was approximately 20 percent of the economy. Informal arrangements existed most often in the trade, hospitality, construction, agriculture, and transport sectors. The government did not consistently or effectively enforce laws in the informal sector.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any persons to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court and provided the right to obtain prompt release and compensation if found to have been unlawfully detained. The government generally observed these requirements.

The Ministry of Justice awarded damages to those held in detention longer than the law prescribed and later acquitted or held in detention longer than their sentences.

Authorities could hold suspects detained in connection with serious crimes for up to six months before indicting them. By law, investigations were to conclude either within six months or within 12 months in cases of special jurisdiction (organized crime, high corruption, and war crimes).

Investigations often lasted longer because there were neither clear timelines for concluding investigations nor any consequences for failing to meet prescribed deadlines.

Courts were generally obliged by law to act with urgency when deciding on pretrial detention. There was no statutory limit to detention once the defendant was indicted. There also was no statutory limit for detention during appellate proceedings. Due to inefficient court procedures, cases often took extended periods to come to trial. The law provided a right to request compensation for the time spent in wrongful detention, i.e., if detainees were held in pretrial detention longer than the period prescribed by law in trials that ended in acquittal or were held in detention longer than their eventual sentence.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the constitution and law prohibited such practices, there were some reports government officials employed them.

On April 7, a detainee at the Bor police station died in violent circumstances. The Ministry of Interior announced on the same day that the individual died “despite the timely response of police officers and doctors, who attempted resuscitation.” The weekly news magazine *Radar* claimed in April that the results of an autopsy performed at the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Belgrade showed the detainee died in custody as a result of blunt force trauma, and not of natural causes, as was reported by police. The Ministry of Interior launched an investigation into the death by order of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office.

On November 21, Ilija Kostić, age 74, was beaten by five police officers while in custody in Novi Sad on charges of assaulting an officer during a protest.

Upon release, he was treated for injuries, and a testicle was removed due to his injuries. Kostic's lawyer filed a complaint against police officers for abuse and torture. The Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad ordered the Internal Affairs Division of the Ministry of Interior to investigate whether police had committed torture. The ombudsperson initiated an assessment of the legality of police conduct in the case.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

Child Marriage

The legal minimum age of marriage was 18. The law provided for a child older than 16 but younger than 18 to marry if mature enough to "enjoy the rights and fulfill the responsibilities of marriage." Available data suggested approximately 16 percent of women married before they turned 18.

According to the Republican Institute for Social Welfare, there were 182 child marriages in 2023. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) noted the majority of child informal marriages were not formally registered. Child marriages occurred in Romani communities but were not legal. UNICEF data indicated 56 percent of women in Romani communities entered marriage

before 18.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees. The Asylum Office within the Ministry of Interior (Border Police Department) was responsible for refugee status determination but lacked sufficient capacity, resources, and trained staff to do so effectively. Additionally, the law did not provide for a court to assess appeals, making the appeals procedure ineffective and cumbersome. A rejected asylum seeker could only file a lawsuit before the Administrative Court after an unsuccessful appeal before the Asylum Commission.

There were numerous documented cases of irregular migrants being expelled from the country without access to asylum procedures. There were some reported incidents of security force violence against asylum seekers and refugees. In February, NGO Legis, of North Macedonia,

released video footage of individuals without clothes walking in the dark in the border area between Serbia and North Macedonia. Legis claimed Serbian police forcefully returned Syrian and Bangladeshi migrants from the border to a village in North Macedonia.

The government's Centers for Social Work provided temporary guardianship for unaccompanied child refugees and asylum seekers. Together with NGOs and international organizations, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migrations ran integration programs for asylum seekers that included cultural integration programs and Serbian language classes. Together with UNHCR, the commissariat supported employment for asylum seekers whose applications were granted.

According to UNHCR, 850 persons expressed an intention to seek asylum, and 219 submitted applications. Seven were granted asylum, 83 were rejected or refused, and 113 cases were suspended.

Resettlement

Refugees who chose the option of integration in Serbia rather than returning to their country of origin enjoyed the same rights as citizens, including access to basic services such as health care and education, and had access to simplified naturalization in the country. They did not have the right to vote until their naturalization process was complete.

The Regional Housing Program, in which Serbia participated with BiH,

Croatia, and Montenegro, ended in December 2023. Authorities provided housing solutions for vulnerable refugee families, totaling 7,495 housing solutions for refugee families by the end of February.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

According to the 2022 census, in which respondents were able to self-identify their ethnicity, religion, or both, there were 709 Jews living in the country. The World Jewish Congress estimated the number of Jews at approximately 1,400.

While the law prohibited hate speech, Jewish community leaders reported translations of antisemitic literature were available. Antisemitic works such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were available for purchase from informal sellers or used bookshops or posted online. Holocaust education was a part of the school curriculum at the direction of the Ministry of Education, including in the secondary school curriculum. Reconstruction work on the Holocaust Memorial Center and Museum at Staro Sajmiste in New Belgrade, the site of a World War II-era concentration camp, continued.

In May, the president of Jewish Community Belgrade stated posters appeared close to the synagogue that contained claims that Israel and Serbia were engaged in weapons deals.

For further information on incidents in the country of antisemitism, whether

or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, see the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.