



**HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE
FOUNDATION**

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Item 6
Universal Periodic Review (Serbia)

Human Rights House Foundation statement

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Thank you.

Human Rights House Foundation welcomes Serbia's engagement with the UPR process. However, we remain concerned with the shrinking space for civil society, including intimidation, attacks and harassment of human rights defenders and journalists who report on sensitive issues.

Mr Chairperson.

Although there are currently no legal barriers to freedom of association, civil society organisations – in particular those with a focus on human rights – are sometimes subject to vilification and smear campaigns in the media. Smear campaigns often target organisations who receive foreign support and who are often labelled as 'foreign mercenaries'.

After its second periodic review, Serbia made commitments to "denounce more forcefully all verbal and physical attacks on human right defenders" and to "strengthen the protection of journalists, media personnel and human right defenders against the attacks and prosecute those responsible for such kind of attempts". However, the government has failed to effectively operationalise these recommendations. None of the five recommendations on protection of HRDs were implemented.

Among its concluding observations after Serbia's third review in 2017, The Human Rights Committee stated in 2017 that it was "concerned about allegations of public officials publicly vilifying and intimidating media workers and about the narrowing space for debate, in particular through the prosecution of journalists and members of civil society for expressing their opinions". It recommended that Serbia "take immediate steps to provide effective protection to media workers from all forms of intimidation and ensure that all cases are duly investigated and perpetrators of those acts of intimidation prosecuted and appropriately sanctioned".

Journalists in Serbia continue to be subjected to harassment, intimidation, threats and physical attacks, forcing some to resort to self-censorship to avoid reprisals. According to the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, there were at least 231 assaults on journalists since 2013, with at least 42 recorded physical attacks. 69 journalists were assaulted in 2016, and at least 45 were attacked in the first six months of 2017. Investigations into these incidents are rare and do not lead to a criminal conviction of the perpetrators. High levels of impunity have had a chilling effect on media freedoms in Serbia.

Mr Chairperson.

We make the following recommendations:

1. Civil society members, journalists and human rights defenders should be provided a safe and secure environment to carry out their work. Serbia should conduct impartial, thorough and effective investigations into all cases of attacks, harassment, and intimidation against them and bring perpetrators of such offenses to justice. In this, the 20th anniversary year of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Serbia should push a strong public dialogue praising human rights defenders and promoting their essential social function;
2. Serbia should ensure that journalists and writers can work freely and without fear of retribution for expressing critical opinions or covering topics that the Government may find sensitive, and Serbia should take adequate steps to adopt a framework for the protection of journalists from persecution, intimidation and harassment.
3. Serbia should systematically consult with civil society on the implementation of the recommendations of its UPR including by holding periodical comprehensive consultations with a diverse range of civil society sectors.

Thank you.

This statement also enjoys support from the following organisation:

- Human Rights House Belgrade