

**Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education; the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; the Independent expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; the Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment**

Ref.: AL SRB 6/2025

(Please use this reference in your reply)

30 July 2025

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on the right to education; Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Independent expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism and Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 53/7, 51/8, 55/5, 52/9, 50/17, 52/4, 57/7, 55/3, 58/14 and 52/7.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning alleged violations of academic freedom, university autonomy, and the right to education within the context of the recent protests in Serbia. These allegations include actions that undermine the right to education, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression, the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, and the right to privacy, particularly affecting students and academic staff. Additionally, we have received reports of violence against peaceful protestors and the stigmatization of peaceful assemblies, student movements, human rights defenders, journalists and, in general, civil society actors and social movements.

Similar allegations have previously been considered by Special Procedure mandate holders in [SRB 1/2025](#); [SRB 2/2025](#) and [SRB 4/2024](#).

*According to the information received:*

### **Background information**

Since late 2024, Serbia has experienced a wave of student-led protests sparked by a tragic infrastructure failure at the Novi Sad railway station, which resulted in the deaths of 16 individuals. This tragedy, widely attributed to corruption and substandard construction practices, ignited widespread public outrage. This

student-led anti-corruption wave has expanded into a national movement, involving over 400 municipalities and encompassing criticism of the educational system. It seeks transparency, accountability, educational investment, and democratic renewal.

Under the banner “Students in Blockade,” the protests have employed decentralized organizing methods and symbolic actions, such as marches, traffic disruptions and university occupations. The movement has garnered significant support from academic staff, civil society, and the broader public. Professors have joined demonstrations in solidarity, citing their ethical responsibility to defend academic integrity and democratic values.

Among other concerns, the demands of protesters and the student movement include greater transparency in public infrastructure projects, accountability for those responsible for the initial tragedy and subsequent acts of violence, and increased investment in higher education. Specifically, they call for: (i) full disclosure and documentation of the Novi Sad railway station reconstruction project; (ii) the dismissal of charges against students involved in the protests; (iii) the prosecution of individuals responsible for attacks on students; (iv) a substantial increase in funding for the education sector; (v) the protection of media freedom, including the transparent and independent election of Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) Council members; and (vi) the holding of free and fair elections.

The protests persist, reflecting deep-rooted dissatisfaction. The following is a selection of allegations illustrating the current state of pressure on academic freedom and freedom of expression, assembly and association.

### **Latest protests**

Reports received indicate a sharp escalation in the policing of civic actions and student-led protests in Serbia since the end of June 2025. At a certain juncture, more than 200 peaceful protests have been documented across the country, reflecting widespread civic engagement. These assemblies have increasingly been met with a heightened and, at times, forceful response by police authorities. These developments follow a broader pattern of concern, including reports of mass surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and public defamation of protesters. Pressure on students has intensified, culminating in arrests, 30-day detentions, physical assaults by law enforcement officers, and widespread smear campaigns led by high-ranking state officials.

On 28 June 2025, during the most recent mass protest in Belgrade, several students, journalists, human rights defenders, and citizens reportedly sustained serious injuries. Of particular concern is the case of a student who recently had two urgent and serious surgeries. Despite his medical condition, he was reportedly handcuffed while in his hospital bed and, upon discharge on 7 July, transferred directly to a prison detention facility. Although he has since been released and placed under house arrest, no investigation appears to have been initiated into the alleged ill-treatment or potential acts of torture he may have suffered.

On 29 June 2025, eight students were arrested following the illegal wiretapping of student discussions held during plenums at the School of Electrical Engineering and the Faculty of Civil Engineering of the University of Belgrade. They were accused of conspiring to overthrow the constitutional order. A few days earlier, a student from the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Physics was similarly arrested after his WhatsApp messages were surveilled. Although all students were eventually released after several days in custody, it remains unclear whether the charges were formally dropped.

On 10 July 2025, the Higher Court in Belgrade upheld an appeal by the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office and ordered 30-day detention for two of the nine students, citing suspicions of preparing a violent constitutional overthrow. This followed a separate ruling by the Court in Užice, which imposed 30-day custody on nine individuals—including a student from the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Political Sciences—for allegedly assaulting a police officer during a civic blockade in the municipality. On 14 July 2025, 7 out of 9 students were released from prison.

Civil society organizations have documented at least 274 arrests of individuals participating in these actions, including high school and university students. According to information provided by the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office, the legal basis for arrests at protests and mobile blockades, states that "Members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs are authorized to undertake legally prescribed powers and actions in order to preserve public order and peace, security, protect the lives, rights and freedoms of citizens, as well as protect property".

Reports indicate that several detainees sustained serious injuries—including broken jaws, collarbones, and ribs—allegedly because of beatings during protests, during arrest, in police vehicles, or in detention. Particularly alarming are accounts from the night of 3 July 2025, when riot police reportedly stormed the area in front of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade, forcibly removing students attempting to seek refuge inside the building. At least 23 students were arrested and four hospitalized with serious injuries.

It is also important to note the lack of proper identification of law enforcement officers during recent operations within the context of protest management. A significant number of officers were observed either without any visible identification or operating in plain clothes, making it impossible to determine their affiliation or hold them accountable for their actions. This lack of transparency undermines public trust and raises serious questions about the legality and oversight of law enforcement conduct, particularly in the context of potential human rights violations.

These developments follow a broader pattern of concern, including reports of mass surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and public defamation of protesters. In the days following 28 June 2025 at least fifteen individuals, including nine students from the University of Belgrade, have reportedly been arrested, among others, on charges of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order, with a growing number since.

## **Prior attacks against students and protesters**

Since November 2024, more than 278 separate violent incidents have reportedly targeted students, academic professionals, human rights defenders, and peaceful demonstrators across Serbia. Numerous documented incidents reveal a pattern of intimidation aimed at silencing dissent and discouraging participation in peaceful protests. Physical violence has included assaults during demonstrations, the use of unidentified devices causing physical and psychological harm, and other forms of intimidation that have created a climate of fear within academic and civic spaces. Such acts not only endanger the physical safety of individuals but also represent a serious infringement on the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and academic freedom.

*Inter alia*, on 22 November 2024, a silent vigil at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts of the University of Arts in Belgrade to honor victims of systemic corruption and public negligence, was violently disrupted by masked individuals who assaulted students and faculty. At least three students were hospitalized, and others reported psychological trauma. Authorities have faced criticism for their inadequate response and failure to identify the perpetrators.

The trial of individuals accused of violently assaulting students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts of the University of Arts in Belgrade in late November 2024 was set for 27 March 2025 but postponed, reportedly due to a plea bargain. This led to widespread university blockades as students continued to demand full accountabilities for all those involved.

On 5 December 2024, students at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, faced physical and psychological intimidation during a peaceful blockade and candlelight vigil protesting corruption and state-linked abuses. The demonstration was violently dispersed by security forces and unidentified individuals. Eyewitnesses reported the use of force, threats of academic expulsion, and significant emotional harm. In the aftermath, many students reported trauma and heightened anxiety, leading to strong condemnation from civil society organizations and academic unions.

The use of surveillance technologies and digital repression tactics by Serbian authorities as tools of broader state control targeting civil society has been documented. For instance, a report published in December 2024 reveals the pervasive and routine deployment of spyware, including NSO Group's Pegasus and a previously undisclosed, domestically developed Android spyware system known as NoviSpy. The report also highlights the widespread misuse of Cellebrite's UFED mobile forensics tools, particularly against human rights defenders, environmental defenders and protest leaders. Since the report was published, there have been several additional instances of unlawful surveillance, including phone tapping and physical monitoring of students, activists, and other citizens.

In early December 2024, the Extended Rector's Collegium of the University of Belgrade issued a public statement in response to the violation of university

autonomy during recent protests. The Collegium condemned the actions of law enforcement authorities, including the use of brute force and the detention of students within academic premises, describing them as “not only unconstitutional, but also deeply anti-civilizational.” The statement emphasized the constitutionally proclaimed autonomy of the university and the legally guaranteed inviolability of academic space and called for an immediate end to all forms of repression against members of the academic community. However, the statement did not clarify whether any legal action had been initiated by the University in response to these serious breaches, raising concerns about the effectiveness of institutional safeguards for academic freedom and student rights.

On 16 January 2025, during a peaceful student blockade on Kralja Milana Street in central Belgrade, a blue Ford Focus drove into the crowd, seriously injuring several protesters, including a young woman who was carried on the hood of the car before being hospitalized. The driver was detained and charged with attempted murder. The incident sparked public alarm over rising violence against demonstrators and inadequate police protection.

On 24 January 2025, in New Belgrade, near the Faculty of Organizational Sciences of the University of Belgrade, a woman deliberately drove her car into a group of students gathered near the Faculty of Organizational Sciences in New Belgrade. The students were participating in a coordinated strike and blocking a major intersection as part of a broader protest wave. One student sustained serious injuries and required emergency medical care. Authorities arrested the driver and charged her with attempted murder. The incident intensified concerns over politically motivated violence and further galvanized student-led resistance.

On 2 February 2025 a vehicle, refusing to stop, rammed into musicians performing a 15-minute silent protest at Republic Square in Belgrade, injuring four. Organized by the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra in solidarity with student protests, the event aimed to denounce state corruption through art. The incident, which led to the driver’s arrest, sparked outrage across artistic and academic communities.

The protests reached a peak on 15 March 2025, when an estimated 300,000 people, especially students, human rights defenders, and civil society actors, gathered in Belgrade in one of the largest public demonstrations in recent Serbian history. In response, the government has accused the movement of having foreign influence and has implemented measures to suppress dissent.

During this protest, thousands of participants were reportedly targeted with violence, including the alleged use of an undetermined acoustic weapon, resulting in numerous injuries and widespread panic, as well as over 50 documented cases of physical assault. The gatherings were also stigmatized. These allegations were the subject of a communication to the Government ([SRB 2/2025](#)), which has since provided a reply on 2 June 2025 ([SRB 2.06.2025](#)).

Human rights organizations have collected approximately 4,000 testimonies from affected individuals, and the European Court of Human Rights has issued an interim measure urging Serbian authorities to cease the use of such acoustic devices [Đorović and Others v. Serbia (App. no. 8904/25), ECtHR, Interim Measure, 29 April 2025]. Despite international condemnation, including an appeal signed by over 2,000 academics, the perpetrators who ordered the alleged use of this sonic weapon have not been held accountable.

Additionally, six individuals, including a student and a high school teacher, were arrested ahead of the 15 March protest based on covert surveillance of a private meeting, and remain in detention. The recorded conversation was later broadcast on national television, yet no legal justification for surveillance or arrests has been provided. Arrest warrants were also issued for six other students who were abroad at the time, and their homes were searched. These events appear to be part of a broader pattern of unlawful surveillance and intimidation targeting students, activists, human rights defenders, and academic leaders.

In addition, on 30 March 2025, the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Niš was physically assaulted with a knife shortly before the commencement of a peaceful academic protest titled “Under the Magnifying Glass of Science”. The Dean sustained injuries to her hand and was treated for both physical wounds and psychological trauma, including elevated blood pressure and shock. The assailant was apprehended at the scene, and eyewitnesses reported that the attacker had verbally harassed the Dean prior to the assault. This violent act followed months of targeted defamation of the Dean by high-ranking government officials, including the President of Serbia. Notably, she had previously been included in a presidential pardon in January 2025, despite her public statement that she was unaware of any legal proceedings against her.

In addition, the lack of transparency on the use of street cameras in the persecution of students and people who participate in protest, as well as the type of technology that these have and the protocols for data storage are concerning.

### **Smear campaigns**

The academic community in Serbia has been allegedly subjected to aggressive and sustained smear campaigns and public vilification. Authorities and pro-government media have increasingly framed the protests as a threat to national stability, advancing narratives of a planned coup and foreign interference. These campaigns reportedly orchestrated or supported by state authorities, including through official public statements, have systematically targeted students and university representatives. They have been accompanied by intensified calls for arrests and, in some cases, acts of violence against members of the academic community.

Of particular concern is a coordinated and prolonged smear campaign directed at academic leaders and students, raising serious questions about the misuse of state resources to discredit dissenting voices within the education sector. Notably, the Rector of the University of Belgrade has reportedly been publicly

vilified by senior government officials, including calls for his arrest by high-ranking state representatives. He has been portrayed as the instigator of university blockades and labeled a symbol of corruption. Calls for his arrest have reportedly intensified recently.

Additionally, the government has allegedly exerted pressure on university deans to initiate disciplinary proceedings against students. According to civil society actors, student organizers and independent observers, critics seeking to discredit the wave of protests-including pro-government commentators and media outlets, have disseminated narratives through particular media outlets alleging that the university is complicit in efforts to destabilize the state, including by inciting violence, conspiracy, terrorism, and contributing to economic decline that are said to threaten the country's credit rating.

According to media monitoring reports, over 300 articles targeting the Rector of the University of Belgrade and the deans of several faculties were published in mainstream media outlets in March 2025 alone.

The rhetoric of protests being a threat to national stability, advancing narratives of a planned coup and foreign interference, has been echoed at the highest levels of government, including by the President, and has been amplified by statements from foreign officials and pro-government media. Protesters have reportedly been labelled as 'terrorists' and 'Nazis' by government representatives, including by the President, who made such remarks during a televised interview and through statements made on his official social media accounts. These statements raise serious concerns about the stigmatization of dissent and the potential misuse of state power to suppress legitimate civic expression and academic freedom.

Smear campaigns targeting independent journalists and media outlets covering or commenting on the protests have also been reported, often involving statements by public officials aimed at delegitimizing the work of the targeted media.

### **Administrative pressure**

Academic institutions in Serbia are allegedly facing escalating administrative pressure, particularly in response to ongoing student-led blockades demanding accountability and reform. Between February and March 2025, authorities have issued warnings that the entire academic year may be annulled if protests are not immediately halted and urged university leadership to initiate disciplinary proceedings against participating students. In parallel, the government has introduced significant changes to the salary structure for academic staff, drastically reducing, in early March 2025, the weight of scientific research in calculating staff salaries from 50% to just 12.5%.

These developments were preceded by severe salary reductions and instances of non-payment, affecting both faculty and support staff alike, beginning in late 2024 and continuing into early 2025.

Although initial negotiations were launched between the new Prime Minister and the Rector of the University of Belgrade, further dialogue was disrupted following legal actions initiated against the Rector, widely perceived by academic union as politically motivated. In response to this breakdown, the deans of all 31 faculties of the University of Belgrade adopted a unified negotiation platform, which was initiated by the Extended Rector's Collegium, calling for the reversal of all unlawful financial and administrative measures imposed on universities and their personnel, including salary cuts, threats of academic year annulment, and disciplinary actions against students.

These developments underscore the growing tension between the state and higher education institutions, revealing how financial pressure and legal intimidation have been allegedly used to suppress institutional autonomy and stifle dissent within academia.

Another form of pressure exerted by the Government of Serbia on academic institutions is the withholding of enrollment quotas for new students for the 2025/2026 academic year. This measure directly impacted universities, as a substantial portion of each faculty's funding is derived from tuition fees, with the remainder subsidized through the Republic of Serbia's national budget.

There is also concern regarding the Government's initiative to establish a working group tasked with amending the Law on Higher Education, which raised widespread fears that such reforms could formally dismantle university autonomy.

In response to these escalating pressures, the University of Belgrade organized a week-long blockade of Belgrade's main intersection, beginning on 9 June 2025, directly in front of the Government building.

This action led to a preliminary and loosely defined agreement between the Government and university leadership—an agreement that has since been questioned by both university staff and the Ministry of Education. According to the arrangement, the Government committed to abandoning its proposed amendments to the Law on Higher Education and to setting enrollment quotas, on the condition that faculties implement a make-up model for lectures and examinations. Notably, the decree altering salary calculations was excluded from this initial agreement.

### **High school teachers**

In January 2025, representatives of education workers' unions signed a collective agreement with the Government of the Republic of Serbia, addressing some of the financial demands that had led primary and secondary school teachers to initiate a strike in December. The strike resulted in the winter break beginning one week earlier than scheduled and raised concerns about a potential extension of the school's closure. In this regard, it is important to note that the former Minister of Education announced an early winter break citing "security reasons." Notably, these same "security concerns" persisted beyond the break, prompting professors and students to initiate a strike. The invocation of security

as a justification for disrupting the education system raises serious questions about the broader impact of the situation on fundamental rights, including access to education and freedom of expression.

Of concern, is that the negotiation process has been marked by several critical shortcomings. Firstly, the union representativeness involved in the negotiations have not been verified for over a decade, raising concerns about the legitimacy of the negotiating parties. Secondly, the collective agreement provides specific benefits exclusively to members of these unions, namely, an additional monthly salary as severance pay and a 50% increase in jubilee awards, raising concerns about unequal treatment and lack of transparency in the negotiation process.

## **Criminal charges and police interviews**

### Universities

There is growing concern over the use of criminal proceedings and police interventions as tools of intimidation against academic leaders in Serbia.

The Rector and the Dean of the Faculty of Economics of the University of Belgrade were both urgently summoned for police questioning following criminal complaints alleging Abuse of Office and Violation of Equality filed by individuals identifying themselves as “students who want to study.” The proceedings around the complaints were allegedly highly irregular, such as the interrogation of the university Rector on a national holiday at the headquarters of the Criminal Police Directorate. Excerpts from his statement selectively leaked to the public media allegedly misrepresented his position and, allegedly, aimed to portray the Rector as blaming the students entirely in order to evade criminal responsibility.

On 1 April 2025, the Dean of the Faculty of Economics of the University of Belgrade was notified that she was required to report to the police within two hours, under a warning that a patrol unit would be dispatched to escort her should she fail to comply. Her request to postpone the questioning to the following day due to pre-scheduled official obligations was denied. The Dean subsequently complied with the summons and provided the requested information in relation to a criminal complaint concerning the alleged offense of *Violation of Equality* under article 128 of the Criminal Code.

The Dean of the Faculty of Law in the University of Belgrade and his vice-deans resigned on 30 April 2025, following a meeting with the Prime Minister and the University Leadership Team, amid mounting pressure and a criminal complaint filed by a senior member of parliament and Chair of the Parliamentary Education Committee, accusing the dean of the criminal offense of Abuse of Office.

### High school students

In the context of the protests, the Ministry of Education reportedly sent an unsigned letter to high school principals stating that “it is necessary to examine

and determine, as soon as possible, the responsibility of employees who do not fully carry out activities involving direct work with students, as well as to investigate and establish the reasons for students' absences and take measures prescribed by law.”

This communication has been widely interpreted by teachers and students as a form of direct pressure, perceived as a threat to job security for educators and to the academic standing of students.

Recent reports suggest that several high school professors had been dismissed previously, although the exact number remains to be confirmed. Additionally, a substantial number of teachers have either not received their salaries or have experienced significant reductions in pay, raising serious concerns about potential retaliatory actions targeting members of the academic community. Moreover, the abrupt and urgent conclusion of the academic year for both primary and secondary schools has deprived students of the necessary time to complete the curriculum, consolidate their knowledge, and improve their academic standing. This disruption has had a detrimental impact on the quality of education. Compounding the issue, the prolonged and insecure process surrounding enrolments for the 2025/2026 academic year has further intensified the situation, creating considerable anxiety and logistical difficulties for students and their families.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of the allegations received, we wish to express our deep concern regarding the mounting pressure on the education system, especially higher education, academic community, human rights defenders, and civil society actors in the Republic of Serbia. The sector is under growing strain, marked by a troubling decline in university autonomy, academic freedoms of assembly and expression, and the broader enjoyment of fundamental rights by students and academic personnel. These developments raise serious concerns about respect for democratic principles, the right to education, and institutional independence in Serbia’s academic sphere.

The above-mentioned attacks underscore an increasingly hostile environment for academic leaders and raise concerns about their safety and a climate of intimidation. The allegations include political interference, censorship, intimidation and attacks against students, faculty, and other civil society actors. These circumstances suggest significant deterioration in core academic and civic freedoms, and the safety and well-being of those within the academic community.

We are particularly alarmed by reports of restrictions on academic freedom and university autonomy; violations of the rights to education, privacy, peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression—especially targeting students and staff—as well as violence against peaceful protestors and the stigmatization of student movements, human rights defenders, journalists, and other civil society actors. Of further concern is the labeling of protesters as “terrorists” by media outlets, government representatives, and the President himself, which, in addition to appearing contrary to the presumption of innocence under article 14 of the ICCPR with respect to protesters charged with criminal offences, risks having a chilling effect on the exercise of protected rights and freedoms. We stress that measures to combat terrorism and

preserve national security should not hinder the work and safety of individuals, groups and organs of society engaged in promoting and defending human rights (A/HRC/RES/22/6, para. 10(a)).

If confirmed, these developments may constitute violations of Serbia's obligations under international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Serbia on 12 March 2001. They raise serious concerns about the State's compliance with its duty to respect, protect, and fulfil the rights to education, freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, association, and academic freedom, the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, as well as its commitment to democratic values and the protection of academic institutions.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please explain what measures are currently in place, or will be introduced, to ensure physical safety, psychological well-being, institutional protection, academic freedom and the enjoyment of human rights, including the right to education and freedom of expression, association and participation in public affairs, of university personnel and students. Please also indicate the measures taken to provide access to remedies, particularly for those involved in protests or whose rights have been unduly violated.
3. Please provide information regarding how the protests are being managed, the use of force during protests, and the numbers and types of injuries sustained by protesters.
4. Please provide detailed information on any investigations initiated into alleged violent acts committed by law enforcement officers during the protests, including reports of excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests, and potential acts of torture or other forms of inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Kindly specify the number of such investigations, their current status, and any outcomes or disciplinary measures taken.
5. Please provide information on any investigations or legal proceedings initiated against participants in the protests, including students and individuals exercising their rights to education and freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. We request details on the number of

individuals arrested or charged, the legal basis for such actions, and the current stage or outcome of these proceedings.

6. Please explain the immediate steps that the Serbian government will take to halt ongoing smear campaigns and defamatory narratives targeting students, academic representatives, student activists, human rights defenders, civil society actors and journalists, in state-affiliated media and public discourse. Furthermore, please provide information on the measures taken by Your Excellency's Government to ensure that these groups are able to carry out their legitimate work in a safe and enabling environment without fear of threats or acts of intimidation and harassment of any kind.
7. Please explain what concrete actions will be taken to initiate transparent, inclusive, and good-faith dialogue with university leadership and student representatives to restore trust and uphold the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.
8. Please provide information on measures taken by your Excellency's Government concerning the plans to advance justice and reparation, including measures to ensure non-repetition and access to justice and effective remedies.
9. Please provide information on the plans and measures adopted by the Government to ensure the proper functioning of the education system for the 2025/2026 academic year. In particular, we request details regarding the organization of new enrolments in primary and secondary schools as well as universities, the allocation of funding for public universities and faculties, and the steps taken to guarantee the right to education and uphold academic freedom. Please also indicate how the authorities intend to address the disruptions experienced in the previous academic year and ensure that students and educators are not adversely affected moving forward.

This communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

We call upon Your Excellency's Government to uphold the highest international law standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, including cultural rights. While awaiting your response, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their recurrence. We also call for investigations to be launched to establish if the allegations concerning the legality of the decisions are accurate, and to ensure accountability, access to remedies and reparation for the alleged violations.

Further, we would like to inform your Excellency that after having transmitted the information contained in the present communication, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention may also transmit a case to your Excellency's Government through

its regular procedure in order to render an opinion on whether a deprivation of liberty was arbitrary or not. The present communication in no way prejudices any opinion the Working Group may render. The Government is required to respond separately to the allegation letter and the regular procedure.

We may publicly express our concerns in the near future as, in our view, the information upon which the press release will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. The press release will indicate that we have been in contact with your Excellency's Government to clarify the issues in question.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Farida Shaheed  
Special Rapporteur on the right to education

Matthew Gillett  
Vice-Chair on communications of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention

Alexandra Xanthaki  
Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

Irene Khan  
Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Gina Romero  
Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Mary Lawlor  
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

George Katrougalos  
Independent expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order

Ana Brian Nougrères  
Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy

Ben Saul  
Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism

Alice Jill Edwards  
Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

## Annex

### Reference to international human rights law

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, we would like to refer your Excellency's Government to international human rights standards guiding the implementation of the human rights concerned.

In particular, we would like remind your Excellency's Government that the right to education is enshrined, among others, in article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, articles 13 and 14 of the ICESCR, and articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Serbia on 12 March 2001.

In this connection, we would like to refer to the report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, on the right to academic freedom, A/HRC/56/58, and the principles for implementing the right to academic freedom, A/HRC/56/CRP.2, included therein and presented to the Human Rights Council in 2024. As stressed by the Special Rapporteur, academic freedom comprises the freedom of individuals to access, disseminate and produce information, to think freely and to develop, express, apply and engage with a diversity of knowledge within or related to their fields of expertise or of study, whether inside ("intramural expression") or outside the academic community, including with the public ("extramural expression"). The Special Rapporteur recommended that States ensure students' right to academic freedom, including the right to express themselves on specific subjects without fear of reprisal (A/HRC/56/58, para. 84 (g) (iii)). In addition, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), in its general comment No. 13 on the right to education, specified that academic freedom includes the liberty of individuals to express freely opinions about the institution or system in which they work, to fulfil their functions without discrimination or fear of repression by the State or any other actor, to participate in professional or representative academic bodies, and to enjoy all the internationally recognized human rights applicable to other individuals in the same jurisdiction (para. 39).

Furthermore, the CESCR in its general comment No. 13 interpreted the provisions of article 13 of the ICESCR, emphasizing that education is a fundamental human right, and that access to education must be non-discriminatory, available, and accessible to all.

Additionally, article 15 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) explicitly protects the right of children to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, stating that "States Parties recognize the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of these rights other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (*ordre public*), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others".

We also refer to the report on academic freedom of the former Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Within the corpus of civil

and political rights, protected under the UDHR and codified in the ICCPR, the rights to peaceful assembly and association, privacy, and thought, conscience and religious belief can promote and protect academic freedom. Articles 13 (right to education) and 15 (right to scientific advancements) of the ICESCR expressly promote rights at the center of academic freedom (A/75/261, para. 5).

The report also recommended that States recognize the vital importance of academic freedom by refraining from attacks on academic institutions and those who constitute academic communities, and by protecting them from attacks – insulating them from assault – by third parties. It stressed that States should at the minimum ensure “the institutional autonomy of universities, research institutes and other bodies that constitute the academic community. The recognition of such autonomy includes recognition of the special autonomous space of academic campuses and the importance of allowing that space to be a vibrant space for the exercise of the rights to expression, protest and other fundamental freedoms.” (A/75/261, para. 56). Academic institutions, when assured of institutional autonomy and self-governance, take on special roles within societies, which see them as places to educate the coming generations of thinkers, leaders and bureaucratic and business elites among others. Self-governance means ensuring that, within the space for academic freedom, institutions also act in ways that reflect those roles. Academic institutions must: (a) Respect the rights of all members of their communities, including faculty, students, researchers, staff, administrators and outsiders who participate in academic pursuits. That respect must include the right of all members to freedom of opinion and expression, including peaceful protest on academic premises; (b) Ensure that members of academic communities have protection against coercion by third parties, whether the State or groups in society. This requires institutions to stand up for members of their communities who face attack or restriction owing to the exercise of their academic freedom. (A/75/261, para. 58)

Academic freedom also derives from article 15.1 (a) of the ICESCR, recognizing the right of everyone to take part in **cultural life** and requesting States to respect the enjoyment and development of cultural practices and respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity.

We also refer to the ICCPR, in particular, articles 9, 19, 21 and 22.

Article 19 guarantees the right to **freedom of opinion and expression**, which includes the right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media”. This right applies online as well as offline and includes not only the exchange of information that is favourable, but also that which may criticize, shock, or offend. In its general comment No. 34, the Human Rights Committee stated that States parties to the ICCPR are required to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, including “political discourse, commentary on one’s own and on public affairs, canvassing, discussion of human rights, journalism, cultural and artistic expression, teaching, and religious discourse” (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 11). The Committee asserts that there is a duty of States to put in place effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those exercising their right to freedom of expression (para. 23).

Any restriction on the right to freedom of expression must be compatible with the requirements set out in article 19(3) ICCPR. Under these requirements, restrictions must (i) be provided by law; (ii) pursue one of the legitimate aims for restriction, which are the respect of the rights or reputations of others and the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals; and (iii) be necessary and proportionate for those objectives. The State has the burden of proof to demonstrate that any such restrictions are compatible with the Covenant and restrictions must be “the least intrusive instrument among those which might achieve their protective function”. (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 34). Moreover, any restriction on expression or information that a government seeks to justify on grounds of national security and counter-terrorism must have the genuine purpose and demonstrable effect of protecting a legitimate national security interest (general comment No. 34)

The report on hate speech by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression noted that “the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of expression must, however, go hand in hand with efforts to combat intolerance, discrimination and incitement to hatred” and called on States to carefully construe and apply their laws to combat hate speech, in line with international standards ([A/67/357](#), paras. 75 and 76). Further, in her report on online hate speech, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression urged States to “actively consider and deploy good governance measures, including those recommended in Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action, to tackle hate speech” ([A/74/486](#), para. 57 (c)).

Articles 21 and 22 protect the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. Article 21 states that “[t]he right of peaceful assembly shall be recognized. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (*ordre public*), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

The Human Rights Committee previously affirmed that States “should effectively guarantee and protect the freedom of **peaceful assembly** and avoid restrictions that do not respond to the requirements under article 4 of the Covenant. In particular, it should refrain from imposing detention on individuals who are exercising their rights and who do not present a serious risk to national security or public safety” (CCPR/C/THA/CO/2, para. 40). We would also like to refer to the general comment No. 37 of the Human Rights Committee on the right of peaceful assembly (CCPR/C/GC/37), which stressed that “the possibility that a peaceful assembly may provoke adverse or even violent reactions from some members of the public is not sufficient grounds to prohibit or restrict the assembly. [...] States are obliged to take all reasonable measures that do not impose disproportionate burdens upon them to protect all participants and to allow such assemblies to take place in an uninterrupted manner”.

According to the general comment No. 37, participants in assemblies can freely determine its purpose and expressive content. Any restriction imposed to peaceful assemblies “must be, in principle be content neutral, and must not be based on the identity of the participants or their relationship with the authorities. Moreover, while the time, place and manner of assemblies may under some circumstances be the subject of legitimate restrictions under article, given the typically expressive nature of

assemblies, participants must as far as possible be enabled to conduct assemblies within sight and sound of their target audience” (CCPR/C/GC/37, para. 22).

Besides, “while the right of peaceful assembly may in certain cases be limited, the onus is on the authorities to justify any restrictions”. Authorities must be able to show that any restrictions meet the requirement of legality (limitations must be imposed through law or administrative decisions based on precise laws that “may not confer unfettered or sweeping discretion on those charged with their enforcement”), necessity (“be necessary and proportionate in the context of a society based on democracy, the rule of law, political pluralism and human rights”), and proportionality (which requires individualized assessment “weighing the nature and detrimental impact of the interference on the exercise of the right against the resultant benefit to one of the grounds for interfering. If the detriment outweighs the benefit, the restriction is disproportionate and thus not permissible”). “The imposition of any restrictions should be guided by the objective of facilitating the right, rather than seeking unnecessary and disproportionate limitations on it. Restrictions must not be discriminatory, impair the essence of the right, or be aimed at discouraging participation in assemblies or causing a chilling effect” (CCPR/C/GC/37, para. 37).

The prohibition or dispersal of peaceful assemblies must be considered measures of last resort, only applied in exceptional cases “if the assembly as such is no longer peaceful, or if there is clear evidence of an imminent threat of serious violence that cannot be reasonably addressed by more proportionate measures, such as targeted arrests. In all cases, the law enforcement rules on use of force must be strictly followed” (CCPR/C/GC/37, para. 85).

The Model Protocol for Law Enforcement Officials to Promote and Protect Human Rights in the Context of Peaceful Protests (A/HRC/55/60) includes detailed protocols for the action of law enforcement prior, during and after protests. Among others, the Protocol indicates that when facilitating protests, law enforcers need to ensure that containment tactics, such as “kettling”, or any other similar tactic (including creating barriers around encampments) “are used only when it is necessary and proportionate to do so to address actual violence or an imminent threat, while avoiding the disproportionate restriction of protestors’ rights” (para. 75).

As the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association indicated in the recommendations sent in 2024 to Universities worldwide to safeguard these rights on campuses in the context of international solidarity with the Palestinian people and victims, since October 2023, the measures adopted by the governments and universities reveal a hostile environment for the exercise of the freedoms of assembly and of association. “Universities must recognize that their responsibility extends beyond campus borders, their actions have the potential to shape political discourse, culture, civic education and, ultimately, the future sustainability of democracy, freedoms and human rights”.

Besides, the Recommendations include ensuring “transparent and independent investigations into human rights violations that occurred in the context of the camps and other peaceful assemblies (...), sanctions unduly imposed on students and staff members should be reversed and institutions, including private universities, must establish

processes for internal remedy and accountability, acknowledgment of the impact of their decisions or omissions, reparations and guarantee of non-repetition”.

Furthermore, article 25 recognizes and protects the right of every citizen to take part in the conduct of public affairs. In its general comment No. 25, the Human Rights Committee emphasized that: “Citizens also take part in the conduct of public affairs by exerting influence through public debate and dialogue with their representatives or through their capacity to organize themselves. This participation is supported by ensuring freedom of expression, assembly and association” (para. 8).

Regarding the significant number of **arrests**, without expressing at this stage an opinion on the facts of the case and on whether the reported detentions were arbitrary or not, we recall that the Human Rights Committee’s general comment No. 35 and the jurisprudence of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention affirm that arrest or detention as punishment for the legitimate exercise of the rights as guaranteed by the Covenant is arbitrary, including freedom of opinion and expression (art. 19), freedom of assembly (art. 21) and freedom of association (art. 22), freedom of religion (art. 18) and the right to privacy (art. 17).

We draw your attention to article 9 of the ICCPR, whereby everyone has the right to liberty and security of a person, no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention, and no one shall be deprived of his or her liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law. We recall that a deprivation of liberty is considered arbitrary when it constitutes a violation of international law on the grounds of discrimination, including discrimination based on the status of an individual as a journalist or a human rights defender.

We also emphasize that article 14 of the ICCPR protects the right to a fair trial and due process. In particular, article 14(2) provides that “[e]veryone charged with a criminal offence shall have the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law.” In its general comment No. 32, the Human Rights Committee stated that “[i]t is a duty for all public authorities to refrain from prejudging the outcome of a trial, e.g. by abstaining from making public statements affirming the guilt of the accused” and that “[t]he media should avoid news coverage undermining the presumption of innocence” (para. 30). The presumption of innocence, as a fundamental tenet to the protection of human rights, guarantees that no guilt can be presumed until the charge has been proven beyond reasonable doubt (*ibid.*).

In addition, we refer to the fundamental principles set forth in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In particular, we would like to refer to articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration which state that everyone has the right to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels and that each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Article 5 (a) also provides for the right to meet or assemble peacefully. Article 12, paragraphs 2 and 3, further provides that the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of everyone against any violence, threats, retaliation, *de facto* or *de jure* adverse discrimination, pressure or any

other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the Declaration.

Moreover, we would like to draw your attention to General Assembly resolution 68/181, which urges States to acknowledge publicly the important and legitimate role of **women human rights defenders** in the promotion and protection of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and development as an essential component of ensuring their protection, including by publicly condemning violence and discrimination against them. The report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the situation on human rights defenders (A/62/225) recommends that States create a conducive environment that allows young adults to associate and express views on matters affecting them as well as on broader human rights issues. Student protests have a high educational value as they are among the first experiences of public participation and human rights defense of students. Ensuring a conducive environment for student protests is not only a legal obligation but also a social investment (para. 101).

The ICCPR imposes the obligation on States parties “to respect and to ensure” all the rights in the Covenant (art. 2 (1)); to take legal and other measures to achieve this purpose (art. 2 (2)); and to pursue accountability and provide effective remedies for violations of Covenant rights (art. 2 (3)). The obligation of States parties regarding the right of peaceful assembly thus comprises these various elements, although the right may in some cases be restricted. States are obliged, not to prohibit, restrict, block, disperse or disrupt peaceful assemblies without compelling justification, nor to sanction participants or organizers without legitimate cause. (CCPR/C/GC/37).

“States not only have a negative obligation to abstain from unduly interfering with the rights of peaceful assembly and of association but also have a positive obligation to facilitate and protect these rights in accordance with international human rights standards [A/HRC/17/27, para. 66; and A/HRC/29/25/Add.1]. The right of peaceful assembly is, moreover, a valuable tool that can and has been used to recognize and realize a wide range of other rights, including economic, social and cultural rights. It is of particular importance to marginalized individuals and groups. Failure to respect and ensure the right of peaceful assembly is typically a marker of repression” (CCPR/C/GC/37).

Where the presence of law enforcement officials is required, their action should be focused on facilitating the assembly and enabling it to take place as intended, with the objective of minimizing the potential for injury to any person and damage to property. Law enforcement officials are obliged to exhaust non-violent means and to give prior warning if it becomes absolutely necessary to use force, unless doing either would be manifestly ineffective. Any use of force must comply with the fundamental principles of legality, necessity, proportionality, precaution and non-discrimination, and those using force must be accountable with the requirements enshrined in international law, guided by standards such as the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials and the United Nations Human Rights Guidance on Less-Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement (CCPR/C/GC/37).

Besides, the dispersion of an assembly must be a last resort option, only used in exceptional cases when “the assembly as such is no longer peaceful, or if there is clear

evidence of an imminent threat of serious violence that cannot be reasonably addressed by more proportionate measures, such as targeted arrests. In all cases, the law enforcement rules on use of force must be strictly followed. Conditions for ordering the dispersal of an assembly should be set out in domestic law, and only a duly authorized official may order the dispersal of a peaceful assembly”. (CCPR/C/GC/37, para 85).

Public authorities also have specific duties to protect citizens from harm being perpetrated by private or non-state entities such as those in the context of public protests. Standing by or taking inappropriate or inadequate action also implicates a State’s due diligence responsibilities to protect its citizens, and depending on the full scope of circumstances this obligation includes protecting citizens from harm tantamount to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (See Committee against Torture, *Dzemajl et al. v. Yugoslavia*, CAT/C/29/D/161/2000).

As the Human Rights Committee stated, “all law enforcement officials responsible for policing assemblies must be suitably equipped, including where needed with appropriate and fit-for-purpose less-lethal weapons and protective equipment. States parties must ensure that all weapons, including less-lethal weapons, are subject to strict independent testing, and that officers deployed with them receive specific training, and must evaluate and monitor the impact of weapons on the rights of those affected. Law enforcement agencies must be alert to the potentially discriminatory impacts of certain policing tactics, including in the context of new technologies, and must address them” (CCPR/C/GC/37, para. 81).

During a protest, if a dispersion of a demonstration is considered lawful, law enforcers should “inform participants of the decision to disperse a protest in a clear, audible and understandable manner by providing specific reasons for dispersal, instructions on how to disperse safely and reasonable timing for voluntary dispersal”. After a protest, law enforcers should document any use or damage, of equipment, including the use of less-lethal weapons and digital technologies; and conduct debriefings “to review and evaluate the law enforcement operation, any operational or logistical errors and the possible human rights impacts of applied tactics”. Besides, “where any allegations or suspicion exist of misuse of authority or force or other misconduct leading to human rights violations in the context of protests, such as torture and other ill-treatment (...), law enforcement agencies should ensure that self-reporting is completed by officers who were deployed at the time of the incident and were in the vicinity of the incident” (A/HRC/55/60, para. 76, 77(a), 78, 83, 84, 86).

Furthermore, we recall Serbia’s obligations under article 12 of the ICESCR, which guarantees the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Accordingly, States have the obligation to ensure accessibility of health facilities, goods and services to everyone without discrimination, (CESCR, general comment No. 14 para. 12 (b)). In addition, by virtue of article 2.2 and article 3, the ICESCR proscribes “any discrimination in access to health care and underlying determinants of health, as well as to means and entitlements for their procurement, on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, physical or mental disability, health status (including HIV/AIDS), sexual orientation and civil, political, social or other status, which has the intention or effect of nullifying or impairing the equal

enjoyment or exercise of the right to health” (CESCR, general comment No. 14, para. 18).

Finally, we recall that although no universal treaty generally defines “terrorism”, States should ensure that counter-terrorism legislation is limited to criminalizing conduct which is properly and precisely defined on the basis of the international counter-terrorism instruments,<sup>1</sup> the General Assembly’s Declaration on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism (1994), and Security Council resolution 1566 (2004).<sup>2</sup> Based on these authoritative sources, the model definition of terrorism advanced by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism<sup>3</sup> provides clear, “best practice” guidance, by identifying conduct that is genuinely terrorist in nature and precisely defining the elements. States must ensure that measures to combat terrorism and preserve national security do not hinder the work and safety of individuals, groups and organs of society engaged in promoting and defending human rights.<sup>4</sup>

Many resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly, Security Council and Human Rights Council reaffirm that any measures taken to combat terrorism and violent extremism must comply with the obligations of States under international law, in particular international human rights law, refugee law and international humanitarian law.<sup>5</sup> Counter-terrorism measures must also conform to fundamental requirements of proportionality, necessity and non-discrimination, as well as with the principle of legal certainty under article 15(1) of the ICCPR. This principle seeks to prevent ill-defined and/or overly broad laws which are open to arbitrary application and abuse, to target civil society on political or other unjustified grounds.<sup>6</sup> Failure to respect these principles can have exceptionally deleterious effects on the protection of fundamental rights, particularly for minorities, historically marginalized communities, and civil society.

---

<sup>1</sup> See [https://treaties.un.org/Pages/DB.aspx?path=DB/studies/page2\\_en.xml](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/DB.aspx?path=DB/studies/page2_en.xml).

<sup>2</sup> A/RES/49/49, annex, para. 3.

<sup>3</sup> A/HRC/16/51, para. 28.

<sup>4</sup> See [A/HRC/RES/22/6](#), para. 10(a).

<sup>5</sup> Security Council resolutions 1373 (2001), 1456 (2003), 1566 (2004), 1624 (2005), 2178 (2014), 2242 (2015), 2341 (2017), 2354 (2017), 2368 (2017), 2370 (2017), 2395 (2017) and 2396 (2017); Human Rights Council resolution 35/34; and General Assembly resolutions 49/60, 51/210, 72/123 and 72/180, among others.

<sup>6</sup> [A/70/371](#), para. 46(b).