

## **Non-governmental organizations between slander and reality**

In Serbia, for a decade, a campaign has been conducted from the highest levels of government against non-governmental organizations, which are labeled as foreign mercenaries and domestic traitors. Frequently, individual employees in the non-governmental sector were directly targeted in the National Assembly or in the addresses of the President of the Republic. NGOs are considered to be funded by foreign governments and to work in the interests of other countries.

In some countries with autocratic rule, they went a step further, adopting or trying to adopt the Law on "Foreign Agents" in order to stigmatize the media and civil society organizations that have a critical attitude towards the authorities, and make their work difficult or impossible. In this way, the government's retaliation against the critical voices of those who are financed from abroad is practically legalized. The "recipe" was prepared by Vladimir Putin's regime, when the law on "foreign agents" was adopted in 2012, and later the law on "undesirable organizations" was added in 2015 and in 2022 the "law on fake news".<sup>1</sup> The adoption of such a law was recently prevented in Georgia, and in the Republika Srpska, after it was withdrawn from the procedure in 2024, it was adopted at the end of February 2025. In Serbia, the Movement of Socialists party, which participates in the ruling coalition and whose president Aleksandar Vulin is under US sanctions because he participated in "corrupt and destabilizing acts that also enabled Russian malignant activities in the region" (on July 11, 2023), submitted to the parliamentary procedure in November 2024. Draft law on a special register of agents of foreign influence. The bill is still in the parliamentary procedure, and it is uncertain whether the MPs of the largest political party in the ruling coalition - SNS - will vote for it. Meanwhile, in pro-regime media in Serbia, the narrative about foreign mercenaries is getting stronger.

What is often "forgotten" to mention is that from the same foreign sources from which certain non-governmental organizations are financed, the state of Serbia receives significantly more funds, from the European Union and the now defunct USAID - American Agency for International Development, several billion euros every year. The negative narrative of the authorities towards donors and verbal attacks on non-governmental organizations have been criticized for several years in the European Commission's annual reports on Serbia.

*2024 - However, state authorities should still provide more proactive and objective information about the EU and the process of Serbia's accession to the EU. [...] Circumstances for the work of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Serbia are difficult. Further efforts are needed to ensure systemic, real and meaningful cooperation between the Government and CSOs. Verbal attacks and smear campaigns against some CSOs continued, among others by high-ranking officials.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/dobro-jutro-uz-ruski-zakon-ko-u-srbiji-smatra-nvo-stranim-agentima/>

*It is necessary to significantly improve the transparency of public financing of civil society.<sup>2</sup>*

*2023 - Additional efforts are needed to ensure systemic and real cooperation between the Government and civil society. An enabling environment for establishing, running and funding civil society organizations has yet to be established on the ground, as verbal attacks and smear campaigns against such organizations continue, including by senior officials.<sup>3</sup>*

*2022 - In accordance with the goal of joining the EU, the Serbian authorities should prioritize responsibility for proactive and objective communication about the EU, which is undoubtedly Serbia's main political and economic partner. [...] Additional efforts are still needed to ensure systemic cooperation between the Government and civil society. An enabling environment for the development and funding of civil society organizations still needs to be established on the ground, as verbal attacks and smear campaigns against such organizations continue.<sup>4</sup>*

*2021 - However, further efforts are needed to ensure systematic cooperation between the Government and civil society. An encouraging environment for the development and financing of civil society organizations (CSOs) has yet to be established in practice, given that verbal attacks on CSOs have continued, including in the Parliament.<sup>5</sup>*

In February 2022, Serbia adopted the Strategy for the creation of an encouraging environment for the development of civil society for the period 2022-2030. As foreseen in the Action Plan, the Council for Cooperation and Development of Civil Society was established in September 2023. However, it is still necessary to create an enabling environment for the development and financing of CSOs, given that verbal attacks and smear campaigns against these organizations continue.

It is already clear that the adopted Strategy is meaningless, since the established trend of putting the civil sector in a negative connotation by the ruling elite continues. There is no trace or voice of the "incentive environment". Ignorance of the basic role and working mechanism of the civil sector on the part of citizens is a fertile ground for the "implantation" of narratives about conspiracy theories. On the other hand, civil society plays a key role in strengthening democracy, as it enables citizens to participate in

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu\\_dokumenta/2024/izvestaj\\_24.pdf](https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/2024/izvestaj_24.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu\\_dokumenta/godisnji\\_izvestaji\\_ek\\_o\\_napretku/izvestaj\\_ek\\_23.pdf](https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku/izvestaj_ek_23.pdf)

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[https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu\\_dokumenta/godisnji\\_izvestaji\\_ek\\_o\\_napretku/Serbia\\_Report\\_2022\\_SR.%5B1%5D.pdf](https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku/Serbia_Report_2022_SR.%5B1%5D.pdf)

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[https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu\\_dokumenta/godisnji\\_izvestaji\\_ek\\_o\\_napretku/izvestaj\\_ek\\_oktobar\\_21.PDF](https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku/izvestaj_ek_oktobar_21.PDF)

decision-making and control the government. Its legitimacy derives from its autonomy and ability to articulate the voice of different social groups, often filling gaps that institutions cannot address. Active non-governmental organizations, trade unions and citizens' associations contribute to transparency, protection of human rights and social justice. Without a strong civil society, democracy becomes just a form, because it loses connection with citizens and their needs. Unlike political parties, which confirm their legitimacy through elections and winning power, civil society organizations build their influence through activism, advocacy and social engagement. While parties often act within political interests, civil society remains closer to citizens, protecting pluralism and encouraging government accountability.

A strong civil society is a key barrier against the strengthening of government and autocracy, which is why non-democratic regimes often seek to weaken it through legal restrictions, financial pressures, discrediting activists and repressive measures to stifle critical voices and control public space. The European Commission's latest Report on Serbia for the year 2024 recognizes and lists several problems: "Verbal attacks and smear campaigns against some CSOs have increased, among other things by high-ranking officials. Campaigns have also been conducted by tabloids, among other things in the form of disclosure of personal information about CSO activists. Human rights defenders who have been the target of spyware attacks have not filed a formal complaint because they do not trust the process. Organizations and individuals who criticize the government are still under pressure, especially those who monitor alleged election irregularities and damage to the environment or those who protest against the glorification of war criminals and against the exploitation of lithium. The large number of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP), which are especially filed by representatives of national and local authorities, is a serious cause for concern."

These findings indicate a continuous narrowing of the space for civil society action in Serbia, which directly threatens democracy and the rule of law. Systematic attacks on organizations and activists not only make their work more difficult, but also send a clear message of discouraging civic engagement and critical thinking. In such an environment, freedom of expression and the right to association become seriously threatened, while mechanisms of government accountability are further weakened.

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