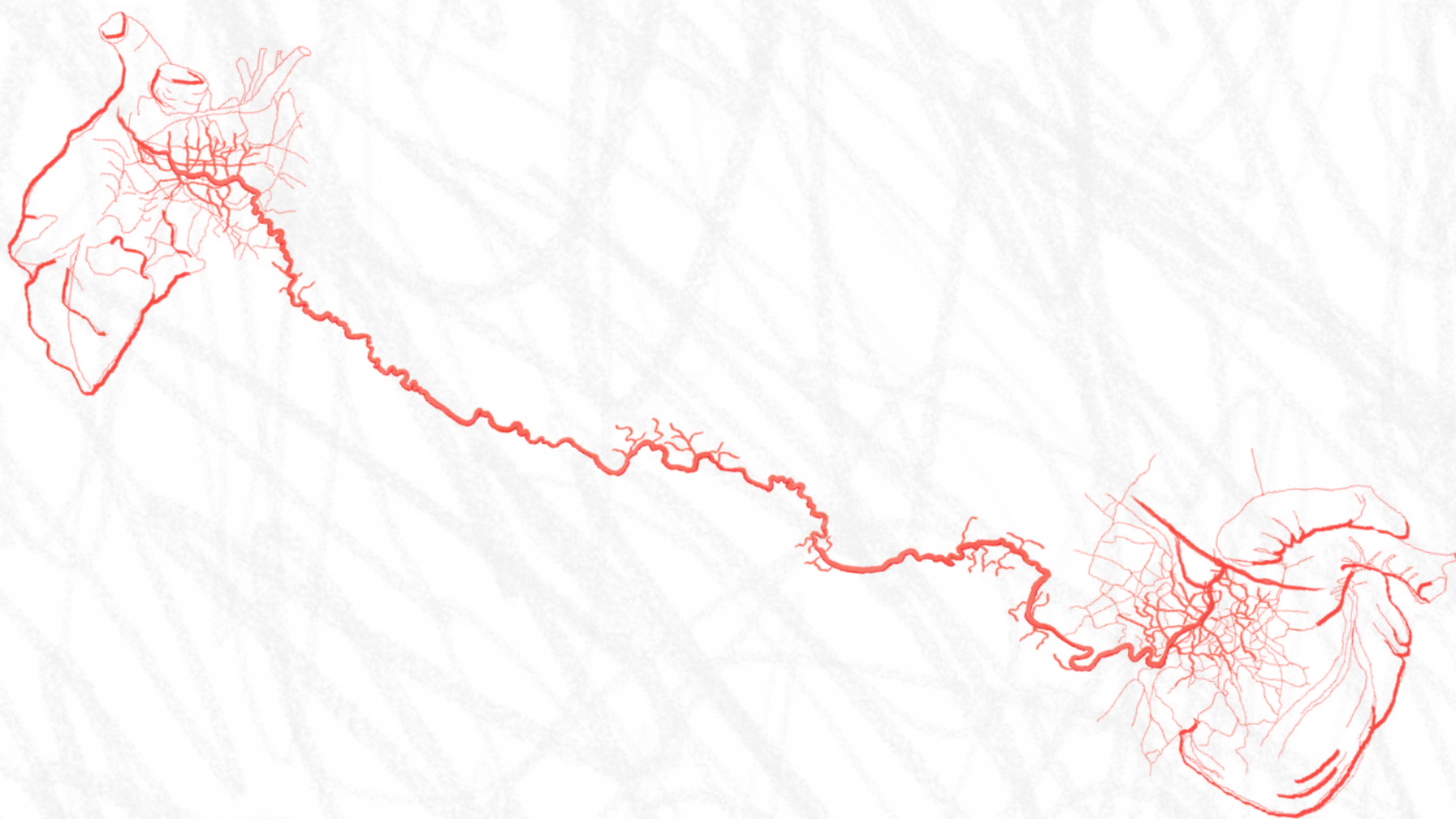


DOSSIER: **CROATIA:**

COORDINATED HATE

Human Rights Violations Against Croatian Citizens and the Promotion of Hatred During the Political Crisis in Serbia **(December 2024 - February 2025)**



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INTRODUCTION

Bilateral relations between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia/Serbia and Montenegro - later Serbia - and Croatia began to take shape in the first decade of the 21st century, following democratic changes in both countries. The late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by the incitement of national and religious hatred between the former Yugoslav republics, culminating in the armed conflict in Croatia, which resulted in at least 20,000 casualties.

Significant progress was made after both countries clearly committed to European integration and started aligning their policies and legislation with the European Union (EU). In the early 2000s, cooperation expanded across multiple sectors, economic exchange between the two countries intensified, and high-level official visits became more frequent. Additionally, senior state officials from both sides issued apologies for the mass war crimes committed during the 1990s.

Croatia became an EU member on 1 July 2013, while Serbia obtained candidate status on 1 March 2012. Two years later, Serbia began accession negotiations with the EU. To date, out of 35 negotiating chapters, 20 have been opened, and two have been provisionally closed. Serbia's most significant challenges on its EU path remain the rule of law and a failure to align with the EU's common foreign policy.

Despite increased cooperation in various fields and official apologies, tensions and harsh rhetoric between Belgrade and Zagreb remain frequent. Numerous unresolved or open issues from the 1990s - such as missing persons, mass graves, the status of the Croatian minority in Serbia, the return and legal status of refugees in Croatia, and the prosecution of war crimes – continue to be major points of contention. Moreover, almost every anniversary of key wartime events sparks renewed accusations and inflammatory rhetoric from high-ranking officials in both countries. This is particularly evident on the anniversaries of Operations Flash and Storm, as well as the fall of Vukovar - dates when one side celebrates victory while the other mourns defeat. Verbal disputes between Belgrade and Zagreb are largely driven by these unresolved issues from the past, often resulting in the exchange of protest notes and the expulsion of diplomats.

In recent years, Croatian and Serbian citizens have frequently been detained at border checkpoints between the two countries, often due to the so-called verbal delict. In the summer of 2024, [singer Severina Vučković](#) was held at the Serbian border, where border police officers questioned her about Srebrenica, Operation Storm, and her support for protests against lithium mining. A few days earlier, [Nemanja Berić](#), a lawyer from Belgrade, was arrested at the Bajakovo border checkpoint in Croatia and taken to the magistrate in Šibenik, where he was sentenced to 15 days in prison. According to media reports from both countries, the reason for his arrest were songs he sang while driving to Croatia, which he later posted on his Facebook profile, along with posts glorifying leaders of the Chetnik movement. Even high-ranking state officials have not been exempt from entry bans. Thus, in April 2024, Croatian authorities barred Serbia's Minister without Portfolio, Đorđe Milićević, from entering Jasenovac Memorial Centre, prompting yet another [protest note from Serbia to Croatia](#). A similar incident occurred two years earlier, in July 2022, when Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić was [prohibited from making a private visit to Jasenovac and Pakrac](#).

In an effort to resolve outstanding issues and strengthen bilateral relations, the two states established national coordinators for open issues a few years ago. Just a few weeks before the high-ranking Serbian officials and pro-government media launched a campaign of accusations and targeting Croatian citizens, Serbia's and Croatia's coordinators for open issues had agreed to intensify work on bilateral relations during a [meeting in Zagreb](#) in October 2024. Yet, less than two months later, Croatian citizens were once again portrayed as the greatest enemies of the authorities in Belgrade.

The Dossier before you provides a detailed account of yet another wave of anti-Croatian political propaganda orchestrated by senior Serbian officials and tabloids under their control. It includes specific examples of attacks, major narratives and media manipulations, as well as inflammatory and discriminatory statements made by state officials and other political actors. The primary drivers of this hate campaign have been media outlets aligned with the ruling party. Their coverage of the events described here has deepened social polarisation both within Serbia and across the region.

Moreover, through such reporting, these media outlets have violated nearly all professional and ethical principles outlined in the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics, particularly those concerning accuracy, journalistic responsibility, respect for human dignity, and respect and protection of privacy. The Council of the Regulatory Body for Digital Media (REM) ceased to function when its term expired on 4 November 2024, and thus failed to respond to the digital media's reporting.

This treatment of foreign nationals in Serbia, including Serbian citizens with dual nationality, constitutes a serious violation of the Constitution, the Criminal Code, the Anti-Discrimination Law, the Law on Police, the Law on Personal Data Protection, the Law on Public Information, and the Law on Aliens, while their rights to work, privacy, freedom and security, and freedom of expression have all been violated.

The Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) Dossier also includes recommendations for institutions of the Republic of Serbia, including the Ministry of the Interior, the State Prosecutor's Office, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, the Ombudsman, REM, the Government of Serbia, the President of Serbia, the Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia, as well as for the media. Implementing these recommendations should provide minimum safeguards to prevent the recurrence of similar human rights violations against Croatian citizens and Serbian citizens holding Croatian nationality.

CONTEXT

The collapse of the canopy at the main train station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, which claimed fifteen lives, sparked mass protest across Serbia. These protests – considered by many to be the largest not only in Serbia's recent history but also in Europe since 1968 – were initiated by students from state universities and colleges, with the first blockades beginning in late November. On 26 December, the students presented four demands: the publication of full documentation on the reconstruction of the Novi Sad train station; the dropping of charges against those detained and arrested during the protests; the prosecution of individuals who physically attacked students and teachers, with their identities to be immediately confirmed; and a 20% increase in the budget allocation for state universities.

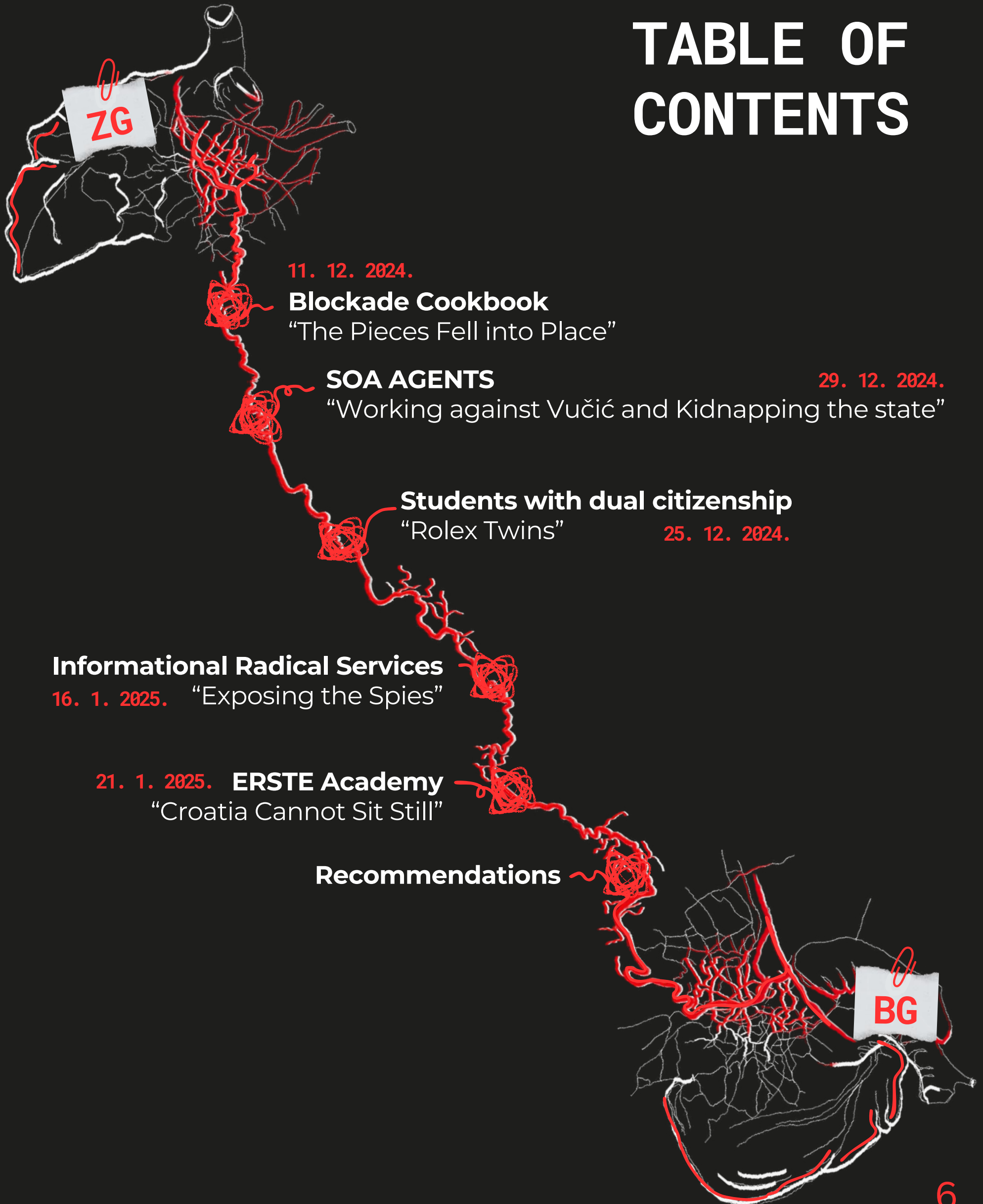
In an effort to discredit students and delegitimise their struggle, the Serbian authorities and pro-government tabloids launched a coordinated campaign against them, as well as anyone supporting them in any way. This led to the systematic targeting and mistreatment of Croatian citizens visiting Serbia for any reason during the blockades, as well as Serbian citizens with dual Serbian-Croatian nationality. A narrative suggesting that the protests and blockades in Serbia were orchestrated by Croatia and its security agencies was gradually constructed by senior state officials, including the President, the Prime Minister (in a caretaker government), and the Speaker of the National Assembly, along with media aligned with them. The first to directly link Croatian visitors to the protests and blockades was the Speaker of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić, on 11 December. Tabloid editors quickly picked up the story. Over the following month and a half, the targeting of Croatian citizens in Serbia, as well as students at Serbian universities with dual nationality, continued unabated. Media manipulation reached its peak in mid-January when several foreign nationals, including five Croatian citizens, were expelled from Serbia and banned from re-entering for one year.

This event heightened tensions between Belgrade and Zagreb and drew international concern. On 23 January, the European Commission expressed concern over the arrest and deportation of “peaceful civil society activists from EU Member States and the Western Balkans, deemed a security risk”. The political crisis in Serbia was also discussed during the [plenary session](#) of the European Parliament (EP) in Strasbourg on 11 February. Addressing EP members, EU Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos talked, inter alia, about the student protests and raised concerns about the government’s actions against civil society organizations and activists expelled from Serbia.

“It is unacceptable to publish the personal data of protesters, this needs to be investigated by the competent authorities. Furthermore, spreading disinformation and hostile political rhetoric against the EU, against our citizens, against respectful members of the European Parliament, and against the EU Delegation, has no place and will have no place on the path to EU integration.”

The latest in a series of reactions came in the EP draft report on Serbia, prepared by the EP rapporteur for Serbia and Social Democrat MEP (S&D), Tonino Picula. [TV N1 obtained access](#) to this document and reported on it on 14 February 2025. The draft report condemns violent attacks against peaceful protesters and expresses concern over the arrest and prosecution of some demonstrators. It also calls on EU and Member States diplomatic missions to continue monitoring developments related to the protests. Furthermore, the report denounces the “unfounded accusations by the Serbian authorities” that EU Member States were involved in organising student protests to incite “colour revolution”. It also condemns the *“unlawful arrests and expulsions of EU citizens and publication of their personal data by convicted war criminals”*.

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BLOCKADE COOKBOOK

„The Pieces Fell into Place”

When the Zagreb-based Centre for Anarchist Studies published a manual-guide for student blockades titled “Blockade Cookbook” in 2009, probably no one could have imagined that, 15 years later, in December 2024, the Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia, Ana Brnabić, and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić would use it to discredit student protesters in Serbia. The **“Blockade Cookbook”** was not authored by a single individual but by a group of unnamed contributors, who explained that, “as the actions were collective, so too is this manual - an anonymous and collective work”. This manual provides a detailed account of how the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb operated under student control for 35 days during the 2009 blockade. However, as journalist Dejan Kožul points out, **a “cookbook from Serbia” existed before the “cookbook from Croatia”** – a different guide documenting three-month protests in Belgrade in 2006. This book was written by a group of authors, “Fight for Knowledge – The 2006 Student Protests”, which also included a “Short Guide for Students Self-Organisation”.

“The Blockade Cookbook previously had a Serbian title, but it does not sound as convincing or as threatening as the claim that everything originates from Croatia”, wrote Kožul.

The narrative alleging interference by the Croatian government and its citizens in student protests and blockades in Serbia emerged at the end of 2024, following Ana Brnabić’s **remarks** to the media and a post on X. On 11 December 2024, Brnabić told reporters that the current student blockades “for some reason” stemmed from the “Blockade Cookbook” from Croatia:

“This Blockade Cookbook as a plenum, it doesn’t exist at our faculties. I don’t know who we are supposed to talk to because we don’t have a student parliament, only this plenum defined by the Blockade Cookbook.”

The next day, Brnabić once again referenced the “Blockade Cookbook” – this time in a [post on X](#):

“I haven’t read the Blockade Cookbook, so I don’t know what it prescribes as the next step when someone fulfils your demands? Should you pretend, with media ‘support’, that the day your demands were met never happened, just to issue new demands? Or should you tell the one who granted your demands – we didn’t ask that from You, ergo, we don’t care about the demands? In any case, drop the Blockade Cookbook, the one who gave it to you does not have Serbia’s best interest at heart!”

A several-week long, systematic disinformation and smear campaign against Croatian citizens, including those of Serbian nationality holding Croatian citizenship, was officially launched by Serbian officials and pro-government media. Two weeks later, Brnabić escalated these accusations. In her statement to [TV Pink](#) on 26 December, she claimed that Croatia was involved in the student protests in Serbia and that the university blockades had been organised according to the “Blockade Cookbook”. She explained:

“This is where plenum came from - here we don’t have plenums at the faculties - this is the recipe from the Blockade Cookbook. You have the plenum, then you have working groups and sections, monitors, programme sections, the operation of the faculty during the time of students’ control, direct democracy... and so on. Everything we’ve heard in the last couple of weeks, all of these things are from the Blockade Cookbook.”

She also linked the blockades of universities in Serbia to the presidential elections in Croatia, stating that “the pieces fell into place”, and that Croatia’s strategic interest is for Aleksandar Vučić not to remain in power in Serbia, which, she claimed, is also the consensus among Croatian presidential candidates. According to her, this strategic interest encompasses logistical, intelligence, and financial support:

“It is clear that Croatian intelligence services are also behind many events happening not only now, but over the past ten years, precisely since 2017 when Vučić became president.”

Moreover, Brnabić stated that video footage from the Security Intelligence Agency of Serbia also confirmed that Croatian intelligence services *“lobby and put under their influence certain opposition leaders and people from the non-governmental sector, and that some of them consciously, while others unconsciously, work in the interest of Croatia to bring Vučić down”*.

In the same address, Brnabić characterised this situation is a colour revolution, a putsch and an attempted coup.



SOA AGENTS

“Working against Vučić and Kidnapping the state”

Just three days later, on 29 December, the tabloid Informer published a series of articles and TV shows about Croatian students in Belgrade, calling them “[disguised members of the SOA \[Croatian Security and Intelligence Agency\]](#)” and “a group of Croatian intelligence agents disguised as a group of Croatian students”. Hour by hour, Informer reporters released photos of students from Zagreb during their visit to Belgrade, claiming they had come to overthrow Vučić. This narrative was picked up by other tabloids, in particular [Alo!](#). Informer Editor-in-Chief, Dragan J. Vučićević, discussed the matter on the live TV Informer programme:

“A group of fake students - maybe they are students according to their index, but they are a group of Croatian intelligence agents dressed as a group of Croatian students, tourists, who came to Belgrade, together with Ukrainian extremists. And here they are, working on overthrowing Vučić and kidnapping the state, alongside the students who are blocking certain universities. A student from Zagreb named Oleksej Čomakov is currently in Belgrade and, along with an unidentified number of others – so far, we have identified eight - he is staying in here.”

These individuals were, in fact, students from the Club of the Students of Electrical Engineering (KSET) in Zagreb, which has had a long-standing collaboration with the Belgrade Club of the Students of Electrical Engineering (KST). For years, students from these clubs have visited each other: the KST students travel to Zagreb every November, while the KSET students visit Belgrade every December. However, December 2024 was different, as upon their arrival in Belgrade, the Zagreb students found themselves under the intense scrutiny of Serbian tabloids, politicians, and even Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.

Vučićević also had detailed information about the location where the bus carrying the students had parked and the places they had visited in Belgrade, wondering how it was possible that the House of Flowers had been visited by *“all the worst Ustashas”*.

“Have you ever heard of tourists visiting the ETF [the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, University of Belgrade]?! They even come at night, during the blockades. This is M.J., what was he doing there? What were Croatian and Ukrainian extremists looking for at the ETF last night, and when journalists approached them, they pretended not to know what it was all about”, Vučićević said.

That evening, the TV show [Open Studio – Croatian Attack on Serbia](#) was broadcast on TV Informer, with Vojislav Šešelj, a convicted war criminal and leader of the Serbian Radical Party, among the guests. Šešelj brought with him a list of passengers from the bus that had transported the students from Zagreb to Serbia. The list was shown to the audience, with some names read loud.

“It is obvious that they are on an espionage mission. They visited the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, where many students are not allowed to enter. But Croatian spies are, indeed, welcome”, Šešelj said.

However, this was far from the end of the attacks on Croatian students. On 29 December 2024, during a guest appearance on TV Pink, [Serbian President Vučić](#) also mentioned the Croatian students, referring to them as “members of non-governmental organizations” who were helping Croatian intelligence services and supporting protests, *“Not a problem, except that this speaks to the influence of the Croatian intelligence agency”*, Vučić said, adding, *“All of this is supported by other agencies, including those from the USA and other European countries”*. On that occasion, the President stated, ***“This is not about some naïve students, little students; these are people who have already committed crimes in the Republic of Serbia”***.

The students from Zagreb immediately informed the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and the Croatian Embassy to Serbia. They were subsequently photographed in front of the Croatian Embassy on Kneza Miloša Street, and these photos were published in *Informer*.

The students spent their last day in Belgrade at a hostel, watching disinformation about their visit being spread on *TV Informer* and *TV Pink*, where the President of Serbia was also featured.

On 30 December, the students left for Croatia, but their return home was not without surprises, either. At the Serbian border, a customs officer and an individual in civilian clothing entered their bus and handed them a parcel with a message written in Cyrillic. The parcel contained some 50 mini bottles of rakija, each labelled with the Serbian flag. The message read:

“Dear ‘students’, thank you for visiting our country. We hope you enjoyed your stay and will return soon. You are always welcome to Serbia! P.S. Say hello to the colleagues from the SOA.”

Informer also published [footage taken at the border crossing](#) that day, showing unidentified individuals in a room belonging to the Border Police Directorate of the Republic of Serbia, illegally recording the bus driver who had driven students from Belgrade to Zagreb. It is noticeable that the driver does not realize he is being filmed at that moment. In the recording, a male voice tells him to send greetings to the students and inform them that they are always welcome, and to bring them ***"a small token of attention [...] something representative,"*** while pointing to a box of brandy. The unidentified person also asks the driver to pass on greetings from SOA to the students. In another recording, the driver can be seen approaching the bus with the box.

Upon their return to Croatia, the students issued a statement explaining the situation they had found themselves in while visiting Serbia. They pointed out that Informer had published the names, ages, and addresses of eight of the 48 passengers, presenting them as SOA agents.

“We have not shared the names of our members with any agency in the Republic of Serbia, other than at the border checkpoint. Hence, we have no knowledge of how reporters came into possession of this information and how they identified our members and monitored their movements. Additionally, they were labelled in a manner we are not going to repeat, as these labels are untrue, offensive and upsetting”, statement read.

“We are disappointed by the irresponsible behaviour of reporters who, in this way, are attempting to intimidate our members and accuse them of aiding the protests organised by students of the Republic of Serbia, or of attempting to overthrow the Government of Serbia. It is difficult to describe the horror and discomfort our members felt when, in the middle of a foreign city, they learned that they had become public targets and the subject of media attention during their tourist trip and visit to colleagues. We are also disappointed by the individuals who, on the same night, published on their social networks unauthorised footage from the hostels where our members stayed, further compromising their safety.”

Soon after, [Croatian Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković](#), rejected Vučić's accusations that the Croatian students, in cooperation with the Croatian intelligence service, had come to Belgrade to assist with the blockades and to overthrow Vučić.

On 31 December 2024, Vučić mentioned the Croatian students again in a press release regarding his visit to the works at Tiršova 2 hospital, stating that when he studied, students from Croatia were chased out of the country.

“Now, they are welcomed, everything nice and normal; they are assisted and trained. We saw them off as good hosts, not as they do to our people for Facebook posts, arresting them”, [said Vučić](#).

The new wave of attacks on Croatian citizens took place on February 27, 2025, ahead of the large student protest announced for March 1 in Niš. The article in Informer states: [Croatian 'students' are heading to the protest in Niš?! SOA is once again sending its agent youth!?!](#) The text begins with an accusation that the Croatian service is "dangerously stirring things up in Serbia" by sending its agents to the large student protest in Niš on March 1. Informer supports these claims with photographs of buses and a travel document, and the article ends with a reminder that Croatian students were "caught" at the end of December last year when they were sent off from the country with a "suitable gift."

STUDENTS WITH DUAL CITIZENSHIP

„Rolex Twins”



Lazar Stojaković, a student at the Faculty of Organisational Sciences, University of Belgrade, first gained public attention on 25 December 2024, when he revealed on his Instagram account that members of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) had summoned him for an informational interview and contacted his parents, demanding they bring him. Although the interview was postponed, it was soon followed by attacks from pro-regime tabloids and media outlets.

Thus, after targeting Croats from Croatia, the focus shifted to students with dual nationality. In early January 2025, [Večernje novosti](#) published allegedly “exclusive” information, claiming that the leaders of the blockades at the Faculty of Organisational Sciences in Belgrade were twin brothers who held Croatian citizenship. This was allegedly corroborated by photos of their Croatian passports. The institutions have yet to explain how the Stojaković brothers’ passport details were obtained by the tabloids, despite the fact that this constitutes a clear violation of the Law on Personal Data Protection. [According to attorney Rodoljub Šabić](#), former commissioner for information of public importance and personal data protection, there is reasonable suspicion that a criminal offence of unauthorised data processing occurred in this case.

Besides the breach of the law, Večernje novosti and other tabloids which published the passport photos also violated the Serbian Journalists’ Code of Ethics, which mandates that journalists respect the privacy of individuals they report on, and that the publication of private data, records and photos should only occur with prior consent from the person concerned or their representatives.

Milan Marinović, [the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection](#), commented on the case, stating that his institution would take appropriate measures and attempt to determine how the passport photos were sent to the media.

In addition to the passport photos, the media also published a registration document for the rally at Slavija square in Belgrade, held on 22 December, which listed Lazar Stojaković as the organiser. This document, like the passport photos, was provided to the media by the [BIA or Interior Ministry](#), according to Ahmed Delimedžac, the Stojaković brothers' attorney.

For [Večernje novosti](#) and other tabloids, all of this is simply *“another in a series of proofs of the strong Croatian influence on the attempts to destabilise Serbia”*. In the articles about the brothers from the Faculty of Organisational Sciences, the tabloids also [recalled the Croatian students](#), *“closely linked to and instructed by the Croatian secret service, the Security Intelligence Agency (SOA)”*, with the aim of *“inciting tensions and escalating developments at the blocked faculties”*.

The tabloids label brothers Lazar and Luka Stojaković as “Croatian fascists” and “Rolex brothers”, claiming they advocate for the prohibition of the right of Serbs from Republika Srpska to vote in elections in Serbia. The tabloids are filled with hate speech targeting the Stojaković brothers. For instance, [Nebojša Bakarec, an MP from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party](#), refers to them as *“faithful collaborators of intelligence services”* of Croatia, who seek the speck of sawdust in the eye of others and pay no attention to the plank in their own eye.

“Blinded by hatred towards the Serbian people and Serbs outside Serbia, they demonstrate their anti-Serb stance – ethnic Serbs who hate Serbs. Essentially, such individuals hate themselves. They learned this from their mentors, the anti-Serbs Đilas and Marinika, who have repeatedly proposed that Serbs from Republika Srpska should be prohibited from voting in Serbia. All this anti-Serb seed has various sick, fascist ideas, such as the one from the same circles advocating that people over 65 should be banned from voting. Pure Nazism.”

INFORMATIONAL RADICAL SERVICES

„Exposing the Spies”

Convicted war criminal and leader of the Serbian Radical Party, Vojislav Šešelj, shocked the public on 16 January 2025 in a live broadcast on [TV Informer](#) when he shared personal data and photos of several Croatian citizens. In the broadcast, Šešelj spoke about foreigners “who came to Belgrade to ruin Serbia, like Croats and Ukrainians tried to do a few months ago”.

“My informational Radical service is tasked with gathering the information we need for our work, as well as disseminating information on our work to the public. We possess information on a large number of spies – Croatian, British, various Westerners... We have obtained details on their stay in Belgrade and copies of their passports. We don’t act impulsively”, said Šešelj, displaying photos of the passports and IDs of several foreign citizens, accusing them of “various anti-Serb positions” and stating that he knew exactly where each was accommodated or had been accommodated during their stay in Belgrade.

One of the Croatian citizens whose personal data were shown on TV Informer is Doroteja Strelec, an activist from the Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Croatia. In her statement to [N1](#), Strelec explained that she had been in Belgrade for work, felt safe, and only learned of Šešelj’s targeting when she returned to Zagreb. Her friends told her that posts featuring her ID photo were circulating on X. She soon received a link to the broadcast on TV Informer.

“At first, I thought the posts on X were photoshopped, but when I saw with my own eyes a convicted war criminal saying my name, surname and date of birth, labelling me as a secret agent, I was overwhelmed with emotions which still affect me. From initial shock, followed by rage, then a sense of weakness and vulnerability, fear, and a desire for justice and to prevent this scenario from being repeated for anyone else traveling to and from Serbia in the coming period. I am disgusted by the fact that a Hague convict even mentioned my name, someone for whom this is the least of his crimes, having in mind everything he has done”, said Strelec.

The Youth Initiatives for Human Rights in Serbia and Croatia responded to Šešelj’s disclosure with a [joint public statement](#). They strongly condemned the practice of intimidating Croatian citizens in Serbia and called on the competent institutions in both countries to protect citizens’ rights and ensure their safety. The Croatian Personal Data Protection Agency (AZOP) sent a request to the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection of the Republic of Serbia “to promptly initiate an inspection procedure for the unlawful public disclosure of personal data of Croatian citizens in the Serbian media”. The office of the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection stated that they had [launched the inspection procedure](#) in accordance with their legal authority.



ERSTE ACADEMY

“Croatia Cannot Sit Still”

The most serious case of human rights violations against foreign citizens, mostly Croats, in the context of defamation related to the student protests in Serbia occurred on 21 January 2025 in Belgrade, when individuals in civilian clothing took 13 participants of the NGO Academy organised by Erste Foundation in for questioning. They were the citizens of Croatia, North Macedonia, Albania, Austria, Slovenia, Romania, Slovakia, Moldova, and Czech Republic. After being questioned at the police station, where they were asked about their education, the associations they were affiliated with, their funders, the topic of the workshop they attended, and their specific activities there, they were handed a document from the Interior Ministry, marking them as *“unacceptable security risk for the Republic of Serbia”*. Their stay in Serbia was revoked, and they were issued a one-year entry ban.

Among those arrested were five citizens of Croatia. One of them, art historian Ana Kovačić from Zagreb, told Jutranji list that men in civilian clothing were waiting for them in the hotel lobby on 21 January at 23.30. They identified themselves as police officers in charge of aliens and briefly showed their IDs.

“We didn’t know what was going on; they took our documents and ordered us to wait in the lobby”, said Kovačić. She added that she and her two colleagues were later taken two streets away and placed in an unmarked vehicle.

“We don’t know who they are; they didn’t answer any question, we didn’t know where we were going. I don’t know what I would have done if I had been alone”.

Kovačić explained that her turn for questioning came at 4 AM, but she was ultimately not questioned because the police officers’ shift ended.

“They handed us a document in Cyrillic and demanded that we sign it. I told them that I could barely read Cyrillic and asked them to translate it. They did so partially: they read a few sentences and said that the document stated we had compromised the security of the Republic of Serbia, that we should leave the country within 24 hours, and that we were banned from entering Serbia for one year”.

Two days later, on 23 January, Croatia sent a protest note to Serbia, demanding an explanation for the expulsion of five of its citizens from Belgrade. Shortly after, the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged its citizens to postpone all non-essential trips to Serbia *“due to the attitude and treatment of Croatian nationals in Serbia”*.

Croatian Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Gordan Grlić Radman, told the press in Davos that he would inform the EU Delegation in Belgrade, the European Commission, and the EU Council, which was then presided over by Poland. He also stated that he would gather *“all the cases of maltreatment of Croatian citizens”*.

The Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which deemed the note from the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs inappropriate, explained in its statement that Croatian citizens were *“treated in accordance with legislative procedures and standard international practice”*, adding that Serbian citizens, even President Vučić, had been *“treated even worse”* in Croatia.

A total of 374 civil society organisations from 27 European countries signed a joint statement, demanding accountability from the institutions of the Republic of Serbia, as well as a response from the EU. The EU issued a public statement condemning the expulsion of the activists, emphasising that “civil society plays a vital role in the development of healthy and democratic society” and that all measures taken in the interest of national security should be implemented in accordance with the laws of Serbia, as well as European and international human rights standards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Officials of the Republic of Serbia must cease unfounded attacks on foreign nationals currently or previously staying in Serbia, as well as accusations that they are members of foreign intelligence services with the aim of overthrowing President Vučić.
- State institutions, particularly the Ministry of the Interior, must not abuse the Law on Police and the Law on Aliens to compromise the security of foreigners in Serbia.
- The Ministry of the Interior and the State Prosecutor's Office should, through disciplinary and criminal sanctions, promptly determine how individuals and media outlets came into possession of the personal documents of foreigners currently or previously staying in Serbia. The responsible should be prosecuted, and the public should be duly informed.
- For the sake of good neighbourly relations and accountability for their words, the President of Serbia, the new Prime Minister or Prime Minister in a caretaker mandate, and the Chairperson of the National Assembly should publicly acknowledge that the foreign citizens targeted and accused, as well as Serbian citizens with dual citizenship, are not spies, and they should issue a public apology to them.
- The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, and the Ombudsman should promptly inform the public whether they have taken measures within their authority – and if so, which measures – regarding human rights violations, in particular those related to the Anti-Discrimination Law and the Law on Personal Data Protection.
- Media should adhere to the Journalists' Code of Ethics and refrain from publishing unverified information, as well as from promoting and disseminating hate speech and discrimination. The REM should also initiate proceedings against media outlets which spread hate speech and violate the rights of both Serbia citizens and foreign nationals, particularly those of the citizens of the Republic of Croatia in this case.