

Dossier

Croatia

**Expulsion, Targeting and Other Human Rights Violations of
Croatian Citizens During the Political Crisis in Serbia (March
2025 – March 2026)**



**"OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN THIS PUBLICATION DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF THE
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY."**



SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD



AUTHOR: IVANA NIKOLIC
EDITORS: SOFIJA TOFOROVIĆ, MARKO MILOSAVLJEVIĆ
DESIGN: OGNJEN ĆIRIĆ
YOUTH INITIATIVE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, JULY 2026



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

1 „USTAŠE, NACISTI I FAŠISTI“: GOVOR MRŽNJE I DEZINFORMACIJE U MEDIJIMA KOJI POZITIVNO IZVEŠTAVAJU O ALEKSANDRU VUČIĆU I VLADI I NA SKUPŠTINSKIM ZASEDANJIMA

1.1. „USTAŠE“ U MEDIJIMA KOJI POZITIVNO IZVEŠTAVAJU O ALEKSANDRU VUČIĆU I VLADI

1.2. „USTAŠE“ NA SKUPŠTINSKIM ZASEDANJIMA

2 PROTERIVANJE GRAĐANA HRVATSKE NACIONALNOSTI IZ SRBIJE

2.1. „REKLI SU DA JE U PITANJU RUTINSKA KONTROLA“

3 UTICAJ ANTIHRVATSKE KAMPANJE NA GRAĐANE SRBIJE HRVATSKE NACIONALNOSTI I ONE KOJE MEDIJI I POLITIČARI NAZIVAJU „USTAŠAMA“

3.1. „KOLATERALNA ŠTETA“

3.2. „MANJA IZLOŽENOST I NEPOVERENJE U INSTITUCIJE“

4 POMIRENJE I DOBROSUSEDSKI ODNOSI

5 PREPORUKE

1

3

5

8

10

16

17

18

18

20

22

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the political crisis in Serbia, triggered by the collapse of the canopy at the Central Railway Station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, the highest state officials of the Republic of Serbia and media outlets close to the government have been conducting a systematic campaign of discrediting students participating in the blockades, civil society organisations, and the citizens of Serbia supporting the fulfilment of the students' demands. Since mid-December 2024 until the present day, that is, the end of March 2026, Croatian citizens visiting Serbia for any reason during the blockades and/or protests, as well as Serbian citizens holding dual Serbian and Croatian citizenship, have also found themselves targeted by government officials and tabloids. Verbal attacks, as well as narratives alleging that the Republic of Croatia and its Security and Intelligence Agency (SOA) were behind the students' protests with the aim of harming Serbia, were documented in detail in the report by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) titled **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)**, published in March 2025. In public discourse – primarily in pro-government media and statements by certain officials of the Serbian Progressive Party – the term Ustasha has been used to label students participating in the blockades, the opposition representatives, human rights defenders, and often all citizens of Serbia who openly express their dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in the country.

Instead of acting in accordance with the law and protecting the rights of everyone living in or visiting Serbia, institutions have often sided with the government, doing little to prevent frequent persecution of those holding different views or violations of the law committed by senior state officials, pro-regime media outlasts, and economic power holders. The systemic targeting and mistreatment of Croatian citizens living in Serbia has taken on a new form since the beginning of last year. By mid-April 2025, the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia had revoked the residence permits of 15 individuals, claiming that their presence in Serbia constituted an unacceptable security risk under Article 9 of the Law on Foreigners. Such treatment of foreign nationals in Serbia constitutes a gross violation of the Constitutions, the Criminal Code, the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, the Law on Police, the Law on Foreigners, and the Law on Public Information and Media, while also violating their rights to work, privacy, liberty and security, and freedom of expression. All of these developments led to a deterioration in relations between official Belgrade and Zagreb.

Simultaneously, media outlets close to the ruling party have acted as propaganda instruments, publishing false, manipulative, and discriminatory content. The word Ustasha has also made a major comeback in public discourse: in the period **from 11 December 2024** until 1 March 2026, words derived from the root ustaš were mentioned **at least 15,488 times** in pro-government media outlets in Serbia. By comparison, during the two years preceding the Novi Sad tragedy (11 December 2022 – 11 December 2024), such words were mentioned significantly less frequently (11,310 times). With regard to the sessions of the National Assembly of Serbia, words derived from the root ustaš were mentioned at least 200 times in the same period, compared to 71 mentions in 2022-2024. The highest-ranking state officials from the Serbian Progressive Party used these words **627 times** in public appearances, compared to **277** times in 2022-2024.

Although the use of these words does not necessarily occur in negative or discriminatory context and does not always constitute hate speech, the fact remains that during periods of major socio-political crisis and turmoil in Serbia, the Republic of Croatia and its citizens are most often portrayed as the usual culprits and enemies, being labelled as Ustasha in an attempt to establish continuity between present-day Croatia and the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). During the existence of the NDH, the Ustasha committed genocide against Serbs, Jews, and Roma in the Second World War. For this reason, labelling all dissenters, especially those within Serbia, as Ustasha is aimed at their complete dehumanization in public life.

Dossier Croatia II: Expulsion, Targeting and Other Human Rights Violations against Croatian Citizens in Serbia During the Political Crisis in Serbia (March 2025 – March 2026), produced by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), provides a detailed overview of the continuation of what was described in the first Dossier as anti-Croatian political propaganda, aimed at shifting responsibility for the political crisis in Serbia onto Croatia and its citizens, as well as justifying attacks against them, their expulsion, and other measures directed against them.

Dossier Croatia II is based on interviews with Croatian citizens whose residence permits were revoked by the Ministry of the Interior, Serbian citizens of Croatian ethnicity, and individuals labelled as Ustasha by the media and politicians. A separate section of the report is dedicated to the analysis of content published by pro-government media outlets, as well as media appearances and speeches by the highest-ranking Serbian state officials relating to the current political crisis and the alleged involvement of Ustasha in it. The analysis was conducted on the basis of data from the media library of the Bureau of Social Research (BIRODI). The report concludes with recommendations addressed to the 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 Ombudsman, the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), the Government of Serbia, the President of the Republic, the President of the National Assembly, and the media.

“USTASHA, NAZIS AND FASCISTS”

: HATE SPEECH AND DISINFORMATION IN PRO-GOVERNMENT MEDIA OUTLETS AND PARLIAMENTARY SESSIONS

The discriminatory and populist actions of the authorities, as well as hate speech by the highest-ranking state official, have throughout the period been accompanied by unethical, discriminatory, dehumanising, and irresponsible reporting by media outlets close to the regime. An analysis of tabloid media content shows that in the period from **11 December 2024**, when the President of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić, first mentioned the “blockade cookbook” and directly linked the Republic of Croatia and its citizens to the protests and blockades in Serbia, until **1 March 2026**, words derived from the root ustaš were mentioned at least 15,488 times in pro-government media outlets in Serbia. By comparison, during the two years preceding the Novi Sad tragedy (11 December 2022 – 11 December 2024), such words were mentioned significantly less frequently – 11,310 times.

With regard to parliamentary sessions, in the same period, words derived from the root ustaš were mentioned **at least 200 times**, while during the two years preceding the Novi Sad tragedy (2022–2024), the number of such references was **significantly lower – 71**.

The highest-ranking state officials from the Serbian Progressive Party have been no less active in using these words: over the last year and a half, they mentioned them **627 times, compared to 276 mentions between 2022 and 2024**.

In pro-government media outlets and parliamentary sessions, the terms Ustasha and Ustasha-like have been used in the context of the current political crisis in Serbia and the alleged involvement of the Republic of Croatia and its citizens in a conspiracy against the government of Aleksandar Vučić, as well as in discussions relating to the Second World War and crimes committed by Ustasha in the NDH. They have also frequently appeared in connection with a series of concerts held by Marko Perković Thompson in Croatia in the summer of 2025, whose performances have long been associated with Ustasha symbolism and the glorification of the NDH. Although the crimes committed by the Ustasha movement are indisputable, the frequency with which these references appear in pro-government media, regularly accompanied by conspiracy theories and exaggerations regarding the number of Serb victims, is indicative and serves to portray contemporary Croatia and its citizens to the domestic public as a continuation of the NDH,

The following media outlets were analysed: B92, Happy, Prva, Pink, Informer, Kurir, Tanjug, Alo, Politika, Večernje novosti, and Republika. The analysis was conducted using software developed by BIRODI.

a collaborationist entity from the Second World War. This is particularly important for the Serbian authorities and media outlets closed to them in their effort to discredit, before the widest possible audience, Croatian politicians who criticise certain actions of the Republic of Serbia before the international community, most notably Tonino Picula, the European Parliament's Standing Rapporteur for Serbia, and Stephen Nikola Bartulica, a Member of the European Parliament from the Croatian party Home and National Rally (DOMiNO). While Picula is a Social Democrat who has frequently condemned the fascisation of Croatian society, Bartulica is known for relativising crimes committed by the NDH.

The attacks on critics of the government described in the following chapters – regardless of whether they are citizens of Serbia or not – are aimed at further discrediting them by associating them with the NDH Ustasha regime or with war crimes committed by Croatian military and police forces against Serb civilians during the wars of the 1990s. In this process, it appears largely irrelevant whether those targeted actually have any connection to either.

In this way, an atmosphere is created in which any criticism of the government is delegitimised in advance, as political opponents and critical voices are portrayed as allies of our historic enemies. Public debate is thus reduced to disqualification rather than serving as a space for argument-based discussion.

“USTASHA”

IN PRO-GOVERNMENT MEDIA

Informer is by far the media outlet in which the word Ustasha appears most frequently. Over the past year and a half, this word and other words derived from the root ustaš were used 4,123 times on TV Informer, a further 200 times in its print edition, and 675 times on its web portal. Pink is not far behind, either: in its morning programme and the show Hit Tvit alone, such words were used 1,511 times, with an additional 342 mentions on its web portal. Večernje novosti also stands out, with these words appearing 1,467 times on its web portal and a further 375 times in its print edition.

Regardless of the media outlet, the narratives remain largely the same: Picula and Bartulica are Ustasha, and it is therefore necessary to carry out the “de-Ustashisation of the European Parliament” (Predrag Sarapa, journalist at TV Pink); Picula and Bartulica are “two declared Ustasha” (Predrag Sarapa, journalist at TV Pink); Croatia supports the blockaders because they are “God-given” to Croatia, as they are also opposed to Vučić, and because it is in the strategic interest of the Republic of Croatia for Aleksandar Vučić not to lead Serbia (Ana Brnabić, statement to TV Pink); the blockaders are “pro-Ustasha oriented” and “within the Belgrade city centre (...) you have the greatest Ustasha today, more Ustasha in central Belgrade than in central Zagreb” (Saša Milovanović, director of the newspaper Srpski Telegraf, statement to TV Pink); the blockaders and the citizens supporting them “embrace the ideas of Ustashism; on Vidovdan, they call for the murder of the President of Serbia, who is what remains of a family that barely survived the Ustasha knife” (Nenad Stevandić, President of the National Assembly of Republika Srpska, statements to B92 and Pink); “Descendants of Ustasha butchers arriving from Croatia: Assistance to blockaders for Vidovdan chaos” (headline on the Večernje novosti website); “there is no genuine desire in Croatia to reject Ustashism, and hatred towards Serbia is evident” (Miodrag Linta, Member of Parliament, Serbian Progressive Party, statement to TV Happy); “Croatia is an Ustasha state that exists because Serbs exist; if, God forbid, there were no Serbs, they would not exist either, because they have no other reason to exist except hatred towards Serbs” (Vjerica Radeta, Serbian Radical Party, statement to TV Happy); “more Serbs were killed in the NDH in four years than in the Ottoman Empire in four hundred years; the Ustasha killed more than 400,000 people in Srem”.

Pro-government media outlets have been traditionally used to aggressively discredit political opponents and dissenting voices. Thus, in the Hit Tvit programme on TV Pink, Dragan J. Vučićević, owner and editor-in-chief of Informer, stated that lawyer Božo Prelević was “more Ustasha than the greatest Ustasha”, while the acting director of the Serbian Post, Zoran Anđelković, claimed that the protests in Novi Sad involved “pro-Croatian forces, or rather, I will not say pro-Ustasha forces, but pro-Croatian forces, pro-Albanian forces” seeking to undermine the Serbian state.

Independent media outlets and their journalists, in particular N1 and Nova, were also targeted by pro-government media outlets on an almost daily basis. For example, in the programme “Novo jutro” on TV Pink, Dragan J. Vučićević stated that Željko Veljković, a journalist with Nova, was “more Shqiptar than the Shqiptars, a worse Ustasha than the Ustasha”. On the same television channel, pro-government political analyst Luka Stajić claimed that N1 was spreading a “pro-Ustasha, anti-Serb narrative (...) where they glorify some so-called Vojvodina nation and attack the Serbian Orthodox Church”. Speaking about N1, journalists and guests on TV Pink’s morning programme referred, in late February 2026, to the “Ustasha appearing there on that Zagreb-based N1, hardened Ustasha (...), Bartulicas, Piculas, the worst possible, and even worse than that” (Predrag Sarapa, journalist at TV Pink). In the same programme, political analyst Stevica Dedanski claimed that “pro-Ustasha elements” were present on the streets of Serbia, led by journalist Dinko Gruhonjić, Professor Jovo Bakić, and Professor Jelena Kleut. In short, on TV Pink and similar media outlets independent media are routinely labelled “Ustasha media”.

Although this rhetoric appears to distance itself from the collective stigmatization of Croats, it ultimately fails to do so. The underlying premise of this line of argument is that Ustashism and Croatian national identity are inherently linked. As a result, despite the superficial rejection of collective blame, the association between Croatian national identity and the Ustaša movement remained embedded in public discourse.

Stefan Janjić, one of the editors of Fake News Tragač, a platform that monitors and analyses disinformation in Serbian-language media and in media content relating to Serbia, explains that articles published by pro-government media outlets about the alleged role of Croats and Croatia in Serbia's socio-political life are almost identical. According to Janjić, this "creates the impression that tabloids operate as an integrated newsroom, since the same content appears simultaneously on different websites in an almost identical format". Through such reporting, media outlets in Serbia have violated several provisions of the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics, particularly those relating to the accuracy of reporting, journalist's responsibility, the prohibition of hate speech, respect for privacy, and due journalistic care, Janjić concludes.

Janjić further notes that the campaign against Croats – particularly those living in Serbia or connected to Serbia through their professional activities – unfolded along several lines: "Croatia was primarily portrayed as the main logistical centre for the destruction of Serbia. According to the tabloids, the Croatian intelligence Service, the NGO sector, and academic institutions were all involved in this process". When a Croatian student from Graz expressed support for the students' marathon, the tabloid Alo concluded that "her statement to the camera sounded more like that of an operative than a spontaneous comment by a student", adding that "the logistics and infrastructure behind this protest movement come from Croatia". In the same vein, Alo also claimed that journalist and professor Dinko Gruhonjić acts "under the direct orders of the Croatian and Western intelligence services". A programme organised by YIHR in Osijek was described by Informer as a "briefing", while the same outlet published unfounded claims that the Department of Slavic Studies at the University of Vienna was linked to Croatian intelligence structures.

"With content like this, an impression is created, among other things, that measures against Croatian citizens in Serbia are 'justified' because operatives of the Croatian intelligence service allegedly appear in a variety of roles (students, professors, activists, journalists). According to this interpretation, the deportation of randomly selected individuals from Serbia to Croatia or the imposition of entry bans becomes a legitimate precautionary measure", says Janjić.

kaže Janjić.

“USTASHA”

IN PARLIAMENTARY SESSIONS

The word Ustasha was, unsurprisingly, carried from pro-government web portals, TV studios, and the streets into the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, where it was used at least 200 times during the period under review (11 December 2024 – 1 March 2026), compared to 71 mentions between December 2022 and December 2024. In parliamentary debates, references to the Ustasha generally appeared in two contexts: discussions of Ustasha crimes committed in the NDH and the current political crisis, in which the terms Ustasha, fascists and Nazis were used as derogatory labels for political opponents – the opposition, students, and citizens supporting them. Thus, Borko Stefanović (Freedom and Justice Party) stated that Serbia is “a country in which political opponents are called terrorists, Ustasha, thieves and fascists”; Milenko Jovanov (Serbian Progressive Party) claimed that they had “sent that Ustasha from the Assembly of Vojvodina” to Kosjerić; while Aleksandar Vulin (at the time Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia) stated that “Dinko Gruhonjić is not a measure of our democracy, but rather a measure of our willingness to allow those who proudly invoke the Ustasha name to lecture our children”.

Referring to the incidents and unrest during the National Assembly session of 4 March 2025, initiated by the opposition, MP Uglješa Mrdić (Serbian Progressive Party) claimed that they were “supported by pro-Ustasha media from Croatia and Croatian politicians of Ustasha orientation in Zagreb, as well as anti-Serb media and politicians in Sarajevo”, while MP Nebojša Bakarec, (Serbian Progressive Party) stated that the “attempted murder of three female MPs (...) was carried out by this Ustasha opposition of Kurti’s; they are acting on the orders of the Croatian intelligence services”.

Ana Brnabić also continued making such accusations. On 26 November 2025, commenting on an incident outside the parliament building and conducts of opposition MPs, she claimed that one of the MPs used “Ustasha scissors” and that the opposition was attempting to forcibly remove the tents erected in front of the National Assembly. On the same day, Nebojha Bakarec accused the opposition of waging “a hybrid war against Serbia”, claiming that some opposition actors were acting in coordination with “Serbia’s regional enemies”, while pro-government media relayed his message in the context of accusations against “Ustasha structures”. A few months later, on 2 February 2026, Brnabić stated that certain protesters were relativising Ustasha crimes and making “monstruous claims”, such as alleging that “the Serbs were responsible for Jasenovac”.

Similar messages could also be heard in public appearances by local officials of the ruling party. In December 2025, Stevan Bakić, the Mayor of Subotica, stated that “it has become clear that Ustasha have attacked Serbia once again”, claiming that the demonstrations were orchestrated by actors connected to Croatia and its political structures. This statement is particularly concerning given that it came from the mayor of a city in which, according to the 2022 census, more than 6,700 ethnic Croats live.

However, particular attention should be paid to the parliamentary session of 22 January 2026, during which references to the Ustasha were made by representative of both the ruling coalition and the opposition. On that day alone, words derived from the root ustaš were used at least 34 times, accounting for 17% of all references recorded during the reporting period. Namely, the debate concerned an upcoming visit by an eight-member fact-finding mission of the European Parliament (EP), sent by its Committee on Foreign Affairs. The Croatian members of the mission were EP’s Standing Rapporteur for Serbia Tonino Picula (SDP), and Davor Ivo Štir (HDZ/EPP). For days, the **mission** had been attacked by pro-government media outlets, as well as government representatives themselves, while Ana Brnabić and Aleksandar Vučić stated that they would not meet the MEPs due to previously scheduled commitments. Most pro-European opposition parties, by contrast, welcomed the mission’s arrival in Belgrade.

The first MP to address the issue in the parliament was Bojan Torbica (the Movement of Socialists, ruling coalition), who argued that support should be given to Vučić for refusing to meet a mission whose members included individuals who were “Serbophobic”. Torbica stated that it was shameful for Tonino Picula to be coming to Serbia, insinuating that he bore responsibility for some of the war crimes committed against Serbs during the wars of the 1990s. The issue was also taken up by Milimir Vujadinović (Serbian Progressive Party), who opened his speech with the lyrics of what he described as “a famous Ustasha song from the ‘40s: ‘Oh, Ustasha, dear brothers, the River Drina is deep; we shall cross the Drina and set Serbia ablaze (oj, ustaše braćo mila, duboka je reka Drina, Drinu ćemo pregaziti a Srbiju zapaliti)”, claiming that Croatian military and police forces had often sung the song during the wars of the 1990s. According to Vujadinović, one of those who had sung it was also Milorad Bahilj, a “follower of Ustasha ideology”, whose daughter, Vanja Bahilj, had publicly criticised the regime on several occasions. Vujadinović went a step further and asked the “patriotic opposition” whether it was possible that they were not troubled by “the ancestors of a person who today publicly calls for the lynching of the Serbian people in Belgrade and who is a descendent of declared Ustasha soldiers”. In reality, however, Vanja Bahilj’s father and the man shown in the recording merely share the same name and surname – but that fact was of little importance to Informer.

EXPULSIONS OF CROATIAN CITIZENS FROM SERBIA

THEY SAID IT WAS A ROUTINE CHECK"

The anti-Croatian campaign in Serbia reached its peak in April 2025 when, according to the Croatian Ambassador to Belgrade Hidajet Biščević, five Croatian citizens were expelled from Serbia within the span of three days, and as many as 15 since January. All of them lived and worked in Serbia legally and held valid residence and work permits.

One of them is Arien Stojanović-Ivković, who received a phone call from the Aliens Department of the Serbian Ministry of the Interior on 8 April 2025, asking her to come for an interview as soon as possible. When she asked whether she had to come immediately and whether there was a problem, she was told that it was "a routine check". However, during this "routine check", she was served with a decision terminating her right to temporary residence in Serbia, banning her from entering the country, and ordering her to leave within seven days. The decision, seen by YIHR, stated that four days earlier the Aliens Department had received a document indicating that "the authority responsible for safeguarding the security of the Republic of Serbia had assessed that the stay of the Croatian citizen Arien Stojanović-Ivković in the territory of the Republic of Serbia represent an unacceptable security risk". At the time, Stojanović-Ivković held a residence permit valid until 2027, which had been issued only a few months before she received the decision in question.

"I laughed when I read the document and said, 'What is this?' When I asked them what I was supposed to do with my child, one of the inspectors slapped his forehead and said 'Oh, you have a child'. They asked me what I had done, and I said that I had attended protests and supported the students. The women sitting in the office then said, 'Well, that is probably why,'" Stojanović-Ivković told YIHR researchers.

Stojanović-Ivković nevertheless believes that the decision was prompted by stories she had posted on Instagram, criticising Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.

Three days after receiving the decision, she filed an appeal with the Administrative Court, stating that she had graduated from the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, was married to a Serbian citizen, had a child, and had never been convicted of either a criminal offence or a misdemeanour. Her legal representative pointed out that the decision contained no specific reason explaining why it had been issued. During the proceedings, the composition of the judicial panel was changed, while her request to postpone the enforcement of the Ministry of the Interior's decision was rejected because, according to her account, "they did not see any material evidence of how that decision could harm me".

When she appealed to the Administrative Court for the second time, the decision was overturned and her request was granted. The court found that "the enforcement of the decision whose postponement is sought before the conclusion of the appeal proceedings would cause harm to the applicant that would be difficult to remedy". In late June 2025, the Ministry of the Interior announced that it had revoked the decision of the Belgrade Police Department ordering Stojanović-Ivković to leave Serbia. The Ministry stated that it had requested the state authority responsible for safeguarding the security of the Republic of Serbia to reassess whether Stojanović-Ivković's stay still constituted an "unacceptable security risk". The authority replied that "in light of new information and changed circumstances, the grounds for revoking her temporary residence permit and imposing a one-year entry ban to Serbia no longer exist".

In 2025, Arien Stojanović-Ivković filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of the Interior seeking compensation for non-material damages resulting from the unlawful expulsion decision. However, to her knowledge, no action has yet been taken on that claim.

According to information obtained by YIHR, the Ministry of the Interior also revoked the decision in at least one other case involving a person who had appealed against a similar measure.

“

I submitted my application for a residence permit to the Ministry of the Interior's Aliens Department in Belgrade, together with all the required documents and instructions provided by my organisation. When I arrived for my scheduled appointment to collect the permit, I was informed that my application had been rejected on the grounds that, according to the opinion of the authority responsible for the security of the Republic of Serbia, I represented a security risk to Serbia. After consulting my organisation's lawyer, I lodged an appeal. Following the appeal, I was summoned for an interview at the Ministry of the Interior's premises in Savska street, where I was met by two members of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA). They questioned me for nearly three hours about every aspect of my life and career.

This conversation appeared friendly on the surface, but beneath it was a clear effort to learn as much as possible about my work, as well as a subtle attempt at recruitment. They suggested that we could occasionally meet for coffee and have a chat”.

He declined, stating that he did not intend to continue living and working in Serbia if he were to be subjected to any form of pressure. He also said that, should BIA contact him again for the same reason, he would inform the Croatian Embassy, his employer, and the embassy of the country where his organisation is headquartered. It should be noted that he has no criminal record. “A few days after this interview, I was informed by the Ministry of the Interior that my work permit has been approved, and I had no further contact either with the BIA or the police.”

During the following five years, he regularly applied for extension of his work and residence permits and received them without any difficulties. That remained the case until November 2024.

“

About two months later, I was informed that my residence permit had been approved and that I should come to the Ministry of the Interior building in Novi Beograd to provide my biometric data. However, around ten days after receiving the positive decision and being invited to collect the documents, I received a new decision rejecting my application for residence and work in the Republic of Serbia on the grounds that I represented a security risk to the Republic of Serbia. What is important to emphasise is that, fully aware of the context and the situation I was in, I did not support the intense protests that followed the collapse of the canopy in any way, either through my words or my actions. I did not attend a single protest, nor did I post a single status update or word of support to social media. Of course, I did express my views in private conversations with friends and colleagues.”

He received the negative decision in February 2025 and immediately lodged an appeal, which remained unresolved for the following six months. Throughout the period, he stayed outside Serbia. In the summer of 2025, he resigned from his job and found new employment.

“

The ban directly affected my departure from Serbia and forced me to make a sudden and unplanned reorganisation of my life. I have a child, and my plan had been for both my child and my partner to move to Belgrade, with my child enrolling in a kindergarten here.

The expulsions further strained the already poor relations between official Belgrade and Zagreb, prompting diplomatic reactions from Croatia and raising concerns among international institutions. At a diplomatic level, Croatia responded by sending a protest note to the authorities in Belgrade, seeking an explanation for the repeated expulsion of its citizens. In April 2025, Ambassador Bišćević said that the purpose of the note was to obtain an official explanation for these decisions, stressing that “Croatia has given no cause whatsoever, at any level” for measures that could be interpreted as a response to alleged interference in Serbia’s internal affairs.

The expulsions also prompted reactions from the senior Croatian officials. Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković stated that this was an “unacceptable practice of expelling Croatian citizens from Serbia, accompanied by insinuations that our citizens are interfering in Serbia’s internal affairs”. Croatian Foreign Minister Gordan Grlić Radman stated that he expected a response from Brussels regarding the expulsion of Croatian citizens from Serbia and assessed that the conduct of the authorities in Belgrade was not in the spirit of good neighbourly relations: “Any country aspiring to join the EU must fully embrace EU values, and freedom of movement is one of the Union’s fundamental freedoms”. The case also prompted a response from Guillaume Mercier, spokesperson for the European Commission, who stated that Brussels was “concerned by reports of cases involving the expulsion of EU citizens”. He stressed that measures taken in the interest of national security must comply with relevant legal framework and international human rights standards.

In response to YIHR’s questions about the frequent attacks on the Republic of Croatia and Croatian citizens in Serbia, the Croatian Embassy stated:

“

We strongly reject, condemn, and consider highly damaging (...) the labelling of the Republic of Croatia. We also condemn the inexplicable treatment of Croatian citizens, particularly in early April last year, and believe that such actions were entirely unnecessary, especially given that, nearly a year later, no explanation for these events has yet been provided. Bilateral relations between our two countries are not at a sufficiently high level, and dialogue on the many outstanding issues remaining since the Homeland War has been continuously and unilaterally absent. The Republic of Serbia, whose political leadership repeatedly stresses its commitment to the path towards EU membership, will also have to address this issue in order to demonstrate that it is fully prepared to take the desired step forward.

Representatives of the Serbian authorities did not publicly comment on the matter.

YIHR submitted freedom of information requests to the Ministry of the Interior and the Administrative Court of the Republic of Serbia, seeking the following documents: copies of decisions served between 1 November 2024 and 24 July 2025 terminating foreign nationals' right to temporary residence in the Republic of Serbia and prohibiting their entry into the country; and copies of final judgements rendered by the Administrative Court during the same period in proceedings concerning decisions terminating foreign nationals' right to temporary residence in Serbia and imposing entry bans.

The Administrative Court provided only a single final judgment from 2021, while the Ministry of the Interior rejected the request, claiming that the "presumed public interest in disclosure (...) is outweighed by the interest in protecting personal data and privacy", despite the fact that the request explicitly stated that all personal data should be anonymised in advance. In response to YIHR's appeal, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection ordered the Ministry of the Interior to provide the requested information. However, by the time this report was published, YIHR had still not received the requested documents.

THE IMPACT OF ANTI-CROATIAN CAMPAIGN

ON SERBIAN CITIZENS OF CROATIAN ETHNICITY AND THOSE LABELLED “USTASHA” BY THE MEDIA AND POLITICIANS

The anti-Croatian campaign in Serbia has had direct and far-reaching consequences for Serbian citizens of Croatian ethnicity, Croatian citizens visiting Serbia for various reasons, and all those whom media outlets and political actors arbitrarily labelled as Ustasha. As a result, individuals branded as Ustasha, regardless of their actual identity or background, have faced and continue to face an increased risk of discrimination and hate speech. Such rhetoric normalises hostility between states and nations that are already frequently engaged in verbal confrontations, fosters a sense of uncertainty, further deepens existing ethnic divisions, and hinders the process of reconciliation. As part of this research, YIHR conducted interviews with several citizens of Serbia who had experienced such treatment: one member of Croatian national minority from Subotica and three participants of the YIHR programme held in Osijek in May 2025, who were subsequently labelled as Ustasha by pro-government media outlets.

³ Odnosi između Srbije i Hrvatske detaljnije su objašnjeni u prethodnom izveštaju Inicijative mladih za ljudska prava Dosije Hrvatska: Koordinacija mržnje. Kršenje ljudskih prava građana/ki Hrvatske i propagiranje mržnje tokom političke krize u Srbiji (decembar 2024 – mart 2025), a proces pomirenja i izgradnja dobrosusedskih odnosa između Beograda i Zagreba u narednom poglavlju.

“COLLATERAL DAMAGE”

A member of Croatian national minority from Subotica, who requested anonymity, said that after years of being targeted, she is “not overly scared”, but that the messages communicated through the media and by those in power are dangerous because they encourage hatred towards other nations. She recalls that Croats were portrayed as Ustasha during the 1990s, too, but that this narrative never entirely disappeared.

“

It seems as though it has become normal, if not acceptable, to speak in that way. What is interesting is that there were reactions when members of the Serbian people were labelled as Ustasha, with the public arguing that they could not be Ustasha because they were descendants of Serb refugees from Croatia. Yet when Croats were spoken of in this manner, the reactions were far fewer, and came from only a handful of actors. This suggests either a degree of habituation to such aggressive and defamatory rhetoric or the widespread and uncritical acceptance of the notion that Croats are inherently Ustasha-oriented and genocidal.

It is also evident that such rhetoric is not directed at members of the Croatian national minority in Serbia, but rather at the Croatian nation and the Croatian state. The Croatian minority in Serbia appears to be collateral damage here. At the same time, I believe that, in general, very little is known in Serbia about national minorities, and many people are not even aware that members of the Croatian national minority live in the country. It seems to me that portraying Croats as Ustasha serves a broader ideology and domestic political needs, in which Croats, that is, Ustasha, function as a convenient external enemy.

If you ask me personally, I see this as part of a fairly widespread perception of the outside world as hostile.

Asked how anti-Croatian propaganda affects the people around her, she replied:

““

No one feels comfortable when the nation they belong to is portrayed as Ustasha and villains. Most often, it is perceived as a lie that is deliberately spread in order to justify oneself or to ease one's guilty conscience. Many people in my surroundings, of course, object to this and wonder how it is possible for certain media outlets and politicians to speak in such a way in public. They see it as both an injustice and an insult. It is impossible to become accustomed to such things, but one can try not to pay too much attention to them and simply go on living one's everyday life.

“KEEPING A LOWER PROFILE AND DISTRUST IN INSTITUTIONS”

In early May 2025, the Youth Initiatives for Human Rights from Serbia and Croatia organised **the regional activist school “New Wave”** in Osijek, bringing together twenty young participants from Croatia and Serbia. Over the course of several days, participants engaged in education, dialogue, and joint activities focused on the wars of the 1990s, competing historical and political narratives, activist practices, and dealing with the past. The workshop attracted the attention of pro-government media outlets and tabloids in Serbia, which used it to “confirm” the narrative that Croatia was behind efforts to bring down the government in Serbia and that the participants were, in fact, Ustasha and traitors to their own people and country.

YIHR interviewed three participants from Serbia who attended the workshop. They stressed that the targeting did not remain confined to the media sphere but had tangible consequences for their private lives, including stress, family tensions, and a heightened sense of insecurity. For all three interviewees, the attacks led to increased caution in public spaces, withdrawal from public life, and avoidance of public exposure and gatherings. At the same time, they pointed out that such campaigns deepen distrust in social and institutional protection mechanisms, as those who are targeted are left without adequate protection or support.

“

These kinds of attacks affected my family more than they affected me, particularly in terms of the stress they caused. My everyday life remained unchanged, but the fact is that I was not especially publicly exposed even before to the attack. I mean, my approach in public is that I do not censor myself or conceal my work on issues related to dealing with the past, transitional justice, war crimes, and similar topics. At the same time, when I find myself in a new environment, I tend to speak cautiously about my work until I get a sense of the views held by the people around me. My trust in institutions was not particularly strong even before I was targeted. Now, after this experience, and not only because of our specific case, but also in the light of developments in our society over the past several years, it has almost completely disappeared.

Iva

Being targeted and labelled as an Ustasha had no impact on my professional life. What it did do, however, was reinforce my already existing view of the political and broader social climate in Serbia, which, in my opinion, is relied on nationalist narratives. The issue was never whether such narratives were being used, but rather how effective they proved to be. Their impact on a large number of people contributed to the perpetuation of this discourse, albeit in a more subtle and insidious way.

I have not changed my behaviour, but the experience has further distanced me from the majority in our society because we do not share the same views. I do not believe that differences of opinion are a problem as long they are grounded in facts and arguments, rather than in the repetition of slogans and ready-made phrases, which was the case here. In such circumstances, any kind of dialogue or discussion becomes a priori impossible.

Aleksa

My mother saw the media reports, and people kept calling her about them. She was angry with me, but it was really a parental instinct because she was afraid for my safety and worried that someone might attack us because we had been targeted in that way.

From the beginning of May until 28 June, I did not go out in public – there was a genuine fear that someone might attack us, because several of us had been singled out by tabloids by name, surname, and personal data. We were exposed to hate speech which could easily have escalated into a hate crime. The comments posted beneath tabloid articles affected my sense of security because we were portrayed as people seeking to undermine our own country and as supporters of crimes committed by other states. The institutions should have responded, but they did not.

RECONCILIATION AND GOOD NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS

In the post-conflict context in which the region has lived since the end of the Yugoslav wars, the development of good neighbourly relations is not merely a political recommendation but also an international obligation arising from the process of EU integration and the standards of transitional justice. Relations between Serbia and Croatia – which have experienced recurring ups and down over the past three decades – therefore remain one of the key prerequisites for the long-term stability of the Western Balkans. At the heart of the stained relationship between Belgrade and Zagreb lie a number of unresolved issues, including the fate of missing persons, the issue of displaced and expelled persons, inadequate efforts to deal with past, and, at times, the complete suspension of institutional cooperation. The history of relations between the two countries in the aftermath of wars of the 1990s is discussed in greater detail in the introductory chapter of YIHR's 2025 report **Dossier Croatia**.

The painstaking work of reconciliation and active dealing with the past – which includes, among other things, acknowledging the facts about war crimes and publicly recognising victims on all sides – is undermined by nationalist narratives, inflammatory rhetoric employed by senior state officials and media outlets close to them, historical revisionism, and the glorification of war criminals. Over the past year and a half, Serbia has witnessed precisely such developments, and it is beyond doubt that the words and (harmful) actions of public officials, state institutions, and pro-government media in Serbia do nothing to foster good neighbourly relations or the peaceful coexistence of the citizens of Serbia and Croatia.

For years, YIHR has been actively engaged in the work of regional and international bodies and platforms dedicated to overcoming the legacy of conflict, creating a peaceful and secure environment, and strengthening ties between societies in the Western Balkans free from interethnic hatred and ethnic tensions. The findings of numerous international documents and reports, including the recommendations of the Civil Society Forum within the Berlin Process in 2024 and 2025, confirm that, despite the adoption of the Joint Declaration on the Reaffirmation of Good Neighbourly Relations and Regional Cooperation, progress in this area across the Western Balkans remains limited. The key obstacles continue to be the lack of political will and genuine dialogue, while bilateral tensions – including those between Serbia and Croatia – persist in obstructing the implementation of recommendations aimed at reconciliation.

Although international actors have recognised the importance of these recommendations and introduced certain monitoring mechanisms through reports and resolutions, implementation at the national level continues to fall short.

The reports also point to the important role of the media in peacebuilding processes in post-conflict societies. YIHR consistently emphasises that adherence to ethical reporting standards, combating hate speech, and countering false historical narratives and disinformation are essential to reconciliation. In practice, however, these standards are frequently violated. In the context of campaigns aimed at discrediting Croatia and its citizens, as well as measures involving the removal or expulsion of Croatian nationals from Serbia, it becomes clear that media and political discourse not only fail to contribute to reconciliation but actively deepen divisions. Such practices are directly at odds with the obligations arising from the promotion of good neighbourly relations and the protection of human rights. Rather than fostering trust, they create an atmosphere of hostility and collective stigmatisation, reviving patterns characteristic of the 1990s. The continuous fuelling of political disputes and animosities also contributes to a broader sense of insecurity across the region.

In such a context, campaigns aimed at discrediting Croatia and its citizens, as well as the arbitrary use of administrative measures leading to the expulsion of Croatian nationals from Serbia, are not merely isolated incidents but constitute a serious setback to the broader process of reconciliation. They run counter to international obligations, regional initiatives, and civil society recommendations, and have a cumulative effect that deepens mistrust and moves the region further away from sustainable peace and stable good neighbourly relations.

4. Among our most recent initiatives, we highlight our participation in the Berlin Process Summits in 2024, 2025 and 2026, as part of the group working on dealing with the past and reconciliation in the Western Balkans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this report, as well as those of the previous Dossier, YIHR issues the following recommendations to the institutions of the Republic of Serbia, in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and applicable domestic and international laws and standards:

- Officials of the Republic of Serbia must immediately cease the use of inflammatory and discriminatory rhetoric, including the labelling of citizens, students, journalists, and political opponents as “Ustasha”, “fascists”, or “enemies of the state”, as such language directly fuels hate speech and endangers the safety of individuals and groups.
- State institutions, and in particular the Ministry of the Interior, must refrain from misusing the provisions of the Law on Foreigners and other relevant legislation through arbitrary assessments of security risks. All decisions must be based on clear, verifiable, and legally grounded facts, while fully respecting the right to due process.
- The Ministry of the Interior and the State Public Prosecutor’s Office should promptly examine all cases involving the expulsion of, or refusal of residence to, citizens of the Republic of Croatia, establish responsibility for any unlawful actions, and ensure effective legal protection for all affected individuals.
- The State Public Prosecutor’s Office should respond proactively to the public dissemination of hate speech and discrimination in the media and in public appearances, including cases in which individuals or groups are labelled as “Ustasha”, and initiate appropriate proceedings in accordance with the law.
- Media outlets should adhere to the Serbian Journalists’ Code of Ethics, refrain from disseminating hate speech, ethnic stigmatisation, and conspiracy theories, and avoid publishing unverified or manipulative content that endangers the safety of individuals and undermines interethnic relations.
-

- The President of Serbia, the Government of Serbia, and the President of the National Assembly should publicly condemn the practice of targeting individuals on the basis of their nationality, distance themselves from narratives that contribute to the spread of hatred, and actively contribute to reducing tensions and improving good neighbourly relations with the Republic of Croatia.
- The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality and the Ombudsman should respond promptly to all cases involving discrimination and violations of the rights of Croatian citizens and other targeted groups, regularly inform the public of their findings, and make full use of all available mechanisms for the protection of citizens' rights.
- The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) should, without delay, initiate proceedings against media outlets that continuously disseminate hate speech, disinformation, and discriminatory narratives, and consistently apply the measures provided by law in order to protect the public interest.

