

High School Students in Protest in Serbia: Their Perspective

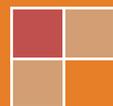
The Perspective of High School Students as Human Rights Defenders: Participation in Civil Protests for Democratic Values and the Rule of Law in Serbia, 2024–2025

[Prepared during August and September 2025]

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MODS, 2025

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“It is important that we all persist and keep pumping until we gain freedom!!!” (High school graduate 2, girl, bigger town)

Introduction

This report was developed by a group of high school students and child rights experts as part of preparations for a meeting with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders.

The views and voices of high school students have often been met with disapproval, neglect, or dismissal by political authorities and the media. Yet, amid Serbia's ongoing social crisis, children and young people as holders of civil and political rights have emerged as active participants – particularly high-school students – and shown a keen interest and clear understanding of the issues facing their society. In recognition of this, the core section of this report is dedicated to their perspective on participating in peaceful civil protest for democratic values and the rule of law, ensuring that their experiences and insights are given the space and attention they deserve.

The second section provides a brief overview of the rights of child human rights defenders, mapping violations based on their testimonies and other sources. This information can contribute to holding relevant institutions accountable through UN human rights mechanisms, with the goal of improving the implementation of children's rights in Serbia.

This report, grounded in the testimonies from children and young people, is a valuable resource for improving our understanding of how children and young people exercise - and advocate for - their civil and political rights and freedoms.

The video call by the Special Rapporteur inviting children and young people from Serbia to the meeting and her blog, reflections on the meeting could be accessed [here](#) and [here](#). More about the work of the Special Rapporteur could be found: [here](#).

We would like to thank all those who took part in this process, and in particular the high school students whose experiences, opinions and concerns form the core of this report.

Civil protests for democratic values and the rule of law in Serbia 2024–2025

On November 1, 2024, the newly renovated railway station canopy in Novi Sad collapsed, killing 16 people. The tragedy sparked public outrage, with citizens pointing to widespread corruption, a lack of transparency, and official negligence as the root causes. Paying tribute to those who died under the canopy and demanding a transparent investigation, citizens and students began daily peaceful protests in silence for the victims. During this type of protest, citizens and students were exposed to violence, verbal and physical attacks, in which government representatives were also involved. Unfortunately, the attacks on citizens and students were left without an adequate response from institutions, which led to blockades of universities across the country and student demands for justice for the victims and

accountability for the violence. Over time, this grew into the largest civil protests in the history of Serbia.

High school students across Serbia were among the first to support the student-led protests, organizing school blockades and other peaceful actions. In doing so, they emerged as young defenders of democracy and human rights. Yet, their peaceful civic engagement did not receive adequate respect, protection, or support from state institutions.

Recent report on youth and protests (Teixeira, 2024) states that the participation of children and youth in protests and social movements contributes to their inclusiveness, peace and effectiveness – to more sustainable positive change. Yet despite this, children and youth often do not benefit equally from the results to which they contribute, because they are usually excluded from decision-making processes.

The focus of this report is therefore on the experiences of high school students in Serbia during their participation in the protest started in November 2024. The goal is to showcase their contributions, the problems they face, and to affirm their right to have their voices heard and respected in social and political decision-making at all levels: local, national, and international.

Report Preparation

The report was developed using adapted standard questions from the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, focused on youth and the context of mass civil protests in Serbia. The questionnaire in English can be found [here](#). Six young defenders (one 18-year-old boy and five 17- and 18-year-old girls from different cities) answered the questionnaire anonymously, sharing their own and their peers' experiences. Those who were interested and had time also participated in individual interviews, which provided space for self-reflection and the deepening of certain topics. Their testimonies were anonymized to protect their identity. The contextual labels linked to the testimonies of young defenders reflect their educational status during the period of school blockades.

The first draft of the report was shared with the entire group, and individual statements were reviewed with each participant to gather feedback and finalize the report.

High school students' participation in the ongoing peaceful protests in Serbia

"This was, or rather still is, a difficult but necessary fight for freedom of speech, freedom of expression, the fight against corruption and the fight for the continued functioning of institutions. It was not easy for anyone; each of us has suffered insults and torture by the ruling minority in one way or another. Each of us continues to suffer this torture, going through regular fear of institutions that function only when it suits them.

We, as high school students, represent the youth who want change and for which we continue to fight. For this, we need recognition from an international body of justice, which would help in this fight." (High school graduate, boy, smaller town)

"For the first time, we got the opportunity to participate in something important and have our voices heard — not just be observers. It was a good experience but also exhausting. In our case, the hardest part was constantly explaining why we were the ones: "you're small, you're green, what do you know about how the state is run, what the opposition is..." That's why some of us felt a bit relieved when we decided to stop the school blockade — at least we didn't have to justify ourselves to everyone anymore." (Older high school student, girl, bigger town)

High school blockades

High school blockades, forms of student self-organization, were inspired by the example of university blockades and organized in support of student demands. Some had additional demands. The first blockades were organized in larger cities, but they quickly spread throughout Serbia, including smaller towns. This shows the scope and intensity of the protests but also points to the role of high school students, who in some smaller towns were the leaders of the protests.

"The blockade of my school began in January 2025 when teachers stopped teaching. In March, students took the initiative, when the pressure on teachers to stop their protest was big¹ — the blockade became a student blockade, and teachers became support.

In the first few weeks of the blockade, I was the security coordinator. I felt ready for this role though it is a very responsible position, since I was the first line of communication with the school director (who did not support the blockade), the police ... I felt personally responsible for the students at the entire school.

Although there were attempts at intimidation — the arrival of the police, provoking conflict, and pressure to end the blockade, we [high school students] showed seriousness, solidarity and courage.

In a small community where everyone knows each other, a protest is not an anonymous mass, but a personal decision with real consequences. The biggest fear among parents was losing their jobs — although many supported the protests, they forbade their children from

¹ Following increasingly intense threats from the government to teachers who suspended classes in support of student demands, their February salaries were either not paid at all or only partially paid. More information [here](#) (Vreme, 2025a).

participating, especially parents working in companies that are controlled by the ruling party. The risk of dismissal was real, and for some it did come true – either because of their own participation or because their children were part of the school blockade or took part in the protest otherwise. Because of this fear, the support from our fellow citizens – doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs – who brought us food and other necessities was also anonymous, we tried not to expose them to additional risk.

At the plenum, we openly discussed these fears and risks and looked for ways to deal with the pressures. Some students did not feel the same level of fear – mainly the children of entrepreneurs, who were financially secure and less exposed to retaliation.²

Differences among students existed in relation to other things, as well, but the discussions and plenums helped to understand different positions and maintain unity.” (High school graduate, boy, small town)

“The blockade of our school, also in a small town, was different from all the others in the surrounding towns, where the teachers started the suspension of classes, and the students took over later [when pressure on teachers intensified]. In our school, the students led the blockade from the very beginning. Our blockade started in January and lasted until the beginning of April – without interruption and without formal support from the teachers. The blockade for the younger students ended in April, but the graduates continued until May. The teachers begged them to stop because their salaries had been reduced or completely absent.

In addition to the university students' demands, an additional demand of our blockade was that the teachers be paid their suspended salaries.

The teachers mostly withdrew and stayed behind the students. True, they came, brought food and the like, but they never officially voted for the blockade. The graduates bore the brunt of it. They were under serious pressure – sometimes exposed to brutal verbal violence, especially from parents who were against the blockade and protests in general. In those moments, most of the professors withdrew. Only two or three remained with the graduates, ready to support them and stand by them. Some teachers threatened the graduates that they would not finish school because of the school blockade.

There were many parents, mostly younger students' parents, who were against it. Conflicts with them were getting bigger and stronger, especially since March.³ They often convened their parents' parliament,⁴ where they insulted the students who took part in the blockade. They said that the high school graduates "don't let the children study," and some even threatened physical violence. They also shouted "What do they know! They are children!"

² Small businesses that openly supported the protests have faced escalating attacks. A notable case is Milomir Jaćimović, a transport owner who faced severe threats after providing free rides to student protesters (more [here](#) (Vreme, 2025b)). In addition to these pressures, a growing number of businesses, like the restaurants and cafes in Valjevo in July and August, have been vandalized (more [here](#) (Todorović, 2025c)).

³ It was also the time of increased government pressure on teachers. (More information is available in the first footnote.)

⁴ This refers to the Parents' Council that every school and local self-government unit is required to have under the Law on the Foundations of the Education System (Articles 120 and 121).

repeating words that came from the top of the government, where it was claimed that children have no right to express their opinion or even that they are the property of the state.

In addition to the plenum, there were other blockade activities. I am most proud of the humanitarian bazaar that we organized as a solidarity action for 2 sick fellow citizens, including one girl. I am proud because so many people responded.♥”(Younger high school student, girl, smaller town)

“My school was the last to enter the blockade in our area. The teachers did not go on strike at our school — unlike other schools, where the teachers first took the initiative, and then the students joined in. At our school, everything started with the students. It was not easy, but we organized ourselves very well... we had to.

From the very beginning, we had to prove, especially to the teachers, that what we were doing made sense. That we were not blocking the school in order to ‘stay home’, but to stand behind our demands and decisions.

Most of the parents in my environment supported us. Their biggest concern was our safety at the protest due to fear of the thugs brought in. But for some of my peers, the lack of parental support was mentally exhausting. They had to constantly explain why we - high school students - were protesting and what we could achieve by protesting. The older generations often asked these questions.

The blockade went gradually: first the final year, graduates, started, then the third graders, then the second, then the first. Each grade had its own process, its own decision, its own plenum. Each grade decided separately whether to enter the blockade, but we also had a joint plenum of all grades – the entire school. We had well-developed participation mechanisms before, experienced students who helped, and documents in which each class explained the reasons for entering the blockade. We kept lists and made sure that more than 50% of students were always present at the blockade — that was our rule. If there weren't enough of us, the blockade wouldn't stand. And we took that seriously.

The student parliament was already working well before the blockade — we were well-equipped, for organization, for debate, for achieving goals.

What was most important in the blockade of our school was not only the organization, but the spirit of our school. Our school is demanding, the students are hardworking, dedicated, and effort is truly appreciated here. And that's why it was important for that effort to be visible — to show that the blockade is not a passive one, but an active decision and engagement. For example, when it was time to clean the area for the blockade, so many students signed up that there weren't enough brooms and brushes or work for everyone. That willingness to get involved and contribute — that's what brought about the blockade of our school.

Our willingness to show and prove that students don't run away from responsibility but take it on. That the blockade was not a withdrawal from school, from education, but a form of civic engagement.” (Older high school student, girl, bigger town)

The Importance of the Plenum

Led by high school graduates, plenums were organised in each high school blocked by students. These open assemblies provided space for participants to exchange ideas, make collective decisions, and coordinate protest actions.

“During our blockade, we organized ourselves through a plenum. That was our first encounter with direct democracy. We started with discussing and agreeing on security – that was the most important for us at the beginning, and then on other things, food, hygiene, communication, media, and later entertainment. That’s how we formed working groups. We learned from each other, connected with other schools and universities, and adapted the plenum rules to our context.” (High school graduate, boy, small town)

“Each grade had its own process, its own decision, its own plenum. Each grade decided separately whether to enter the blockade, but we also had a joint plenum of all grades – the entire school. Each grade had a separate document explaining its reasons for the blockade. For us adolescents, it was a big step forward, because we were fighting alone.

At the plenums, we shared new, proven information and topics. There was a strong desire to learn more and to act with intention, with a goal.

I believe that the teachers will now take us and our ideas more seriously. That feeling of belonging, friendship and community, will remain in the school hopefully as well as the pride in how we managed it all well.” (Older high school student, girl, bigger town)

Participation of Younger Students in School Blockades

“The blockade in our school was led by graduates, fourth-year students, while younger students participated in the activities with the consent of their parents. They were not part of the working groups or voted in the plenum because we wanted to protect them from direct participation, decision-making, to reduce their exposure and risk, especially from the police. We were worried that we might be accused of manipulating the younger students. The environment was difficult, pressure and tensions were growing, which further hindered open participation and support.” (High school graduate, boy, smaller town)

“Students from the younger grades, including me, actively participated in the school blockade. We could be present every day, whoever wanted to - I, for example, was there every day. We had various activities: from cleaning the school and the yard, through humanitarian bazaars, to participating in plenums.

I had already been interested and active in the student parliament, which functioned well in my school before the blockade and at the class and school level – students had had a say in some decisions.

Our participation did not require parental consent. We could participate in the plenums, but without the right to vote. It was decided that way to protect the younger students from formal responsibility, because there was a lot of insecurity and fear of conflict. Many parents of

students from the younger grades were actively against the blockade.” (Younger high school student, girl, smaller town)

“Parental consent was not required for participation in the blockade itself, but it was required for everyone under 18 for activities outside of school during the blockade. For example, for the minutes of silence we held on the street. The school thereby distanced itself from responsibility, in case something happened.

The first grade was unlucky, I really feel sorry for them. They had just started high school, everything was new to them — they didn’t know each other well, they had no experience, and the teachers really took them “to the teeth”. We supported them as much as we could, because while we older students already had school parliaments and experience in self-organization, they were just learning how to manage.

The third grade — we were the best. We voted most unanimously, quickly reached an agreement and stuck together. We also helped the second grade formulate the reasons for entering the blockade, because they were a bit stuck there and it wasn’t easy for them.

The graduates – final grade students - pulled everything out. It wasn't easy for them. At the plenums, they were often divided between "50-50", they often had difficulties, and they were the first to be attacked by the teachers and under pressure to explain decisions and actions to them. In addition, they also needed help with preparing for the final exams - high school graduation. They led a campaign for voting in the elections – which became a key protest demand [since this government proved not to be interested nor capable to fulfill the initial protest demands]. Their goal was for students who had recently turned 18 to be better informed and prepared for their first election.” (Older high school student, girl, bigger town)

Response from Power Holders

Statements from political power holders emphasized the view that children had neither rights nor capacity, characterizing them as state property with no legitimate presence in public life. This was perceived as humiliating by children and young people. However, instead of discouraging participation, these comments motivated children and young people to become active and demonstrate their maturity and competence in standing up for their own opinions.

“All those laud statements that children don't have rights and that they are the property of the state by those in power were, on the contrary, a trigger – for me personally, but also for many other young people. It was precisely such statements that motivated us to show that we have our own position, that we are capable, that we are more mature than the representatives of the government and the opponents of our participation assume.

These statements caused different reactions among parents and others around us. Some parents got really angry; they were offended by these statements about children and their rights, while some other parents used the same statements as an argument against our participation in the protest.” (Younger high school student, girl, smaller town)

“The teachers [in my school] didn’t use that, they didn’t say "you are small, you have no idea and the like", which was crucial. Such an attitude is humiliating for both the younger and the

older children, and we adolescents, aware that we are getting closer to adulthood, feel a strong need to have our voices heard. We will soon be making personal decisions and taking responsibility, so it is important for us to be asked and for our contribution to be respected in collective decisions as well. Younger children can also give their input and can contribute according to their abilities, and it is important for all of us to have an influence on decision-making processes.” (Older high school student, girl, bigger town)

Lessons from the Blockade: Student Personal Development

Critics argued that students were not gaining knowledge during the blockades. However, students found ways to continue their academic development while developing important life skills. Through participation, they developed moral and ethical attitudes, skills in public speaking and argumentation, as well as dealing with conflicts and pressures. This experience, as they themselves point out, has shaped and prepared them for life in a way that is not possible to achieve through classical learning.

“There were often attacks and criticisms of school blockades pointing to the loss of knowledge. That was not true. In my school, during the entire blockade, we had a study room that was open to anyone who wanted to study, some were preparing for university entrance exams. In the last three weeks, for example, preparation was organized with the support of teachers. But the most important thing is that through participation in the blockade, we acquire knowledge and skills that are not learned from textbooks. We built moral and ethical attitudes, experienced for the first time how democracy works—through plenums, public presentation of opinions in front of 50 or more people, argumentation, and dealing with different views. We learned how to deal with conflicts, fears, pressures, and different interests. That was real life learning.” (High school graduate, boy, smaller town)

“The graduates were continuously preparing for their exams, even though we didn’t have a special space for that. However, there was enough space for everyone who wanted to study and prepare. During the blockade, we all developed - not only academically, but also personally. We learned empathy, cooperation, teamwork, agreement and compromise. That experience shaped us in a special way - different from typical school learning.” (Younger high school student, girl, smaller town)

Lessons from the Blockade: Strengthening Schools

“A sense of belonging, friendship and community, and pride in how well we managed the school blockade. I hope that teachers will also have more respect for us and our ideas. Our ideas often seem unrealistic and unachievable to them, and the blockade showed everyone what is possible.

We saw how our suggestions influenced the teachers when we returned to lessons after the blockade. Since there was little time left to catch up on the material and finalize grades, we worked out and gave them concrete suggestions for implementing assessments at the plenums. We shared what we thought was meaningful and manageable from our perspective.

Some teachers accepted our ideas, while others only applied them at the beginning, and later returned to their own methods.” (Older high school student, girl, bigger town)

“Our engagement during the blockade and the plenum will, I hope, reflect on our position at school in the future. Now that we have started school again, we could already see that some teachers, those who supported the protest, were very proud and satisfied with how we took the initiative and how we organized everything. The teachers who did not support the protests were the same - there was no change in their attitude towards us.

More specifically the student parliament may be able to work without two adult coordinators, or their role could be redefined - adjusted to the experience gained during the blockade.” (Younger high school student, girl, smaller town)

Peaceful demonstrations

Peaceful demonstrations by high school students

Smaller, both spontaneous and organized, support protests emerged, where high school students from different schools stood in solidarity with one another. While these actions uplifted and empowered many participants, some students faced threats because of their involvement.

“During the blockade of high schools, we also organized two walks to the elementary school to support them. We were met by doctors, teachers and other fellow citizens – they came out to greet and support us, which was extremely encouraging.” (Younger high school student, girl, smaller town)

“There were smaller spontaneous protests in support of blockades in other schools. Sometimes we, the guards, organized ourselves to provide support, especially when a small number of students blocked a school. However, not every school received the same support. Ours, for example, did not. Two or three other high schools supported us, even though we were exposed to the most intense violence. Maybe the reason was that we were far away, but that is certainly no excuse.

There were also larger organized protests by high school students, and even peers from other towns came to us for the protest. At one of our high school protests, I had the opportunity to speak, to give a speech. After that, numerous negative reactions followed, including coordinated attacks by bots and supporters of the ruling party on social networks. They obviously recognized me, even though I protected myself with dark glasses. Terrible comments were shared, I don't want to remember and repeat them. I didn't even pay that much attention to it, it was clear to me what it was about, but my parents were scared. I didn't leave the house for 2 days just in case. The area I live in isn't exactly the safest either because of the people who live there and because of the ruling party's offices in my neighborhood.” (High school graduate 1, girl, bigger town)

Participating in peaceful student and civic demonstrations

High school students actively participated in student and civic protests. Beyond contributing to the cause, they acquired valuable skills such as organization and navigating difficult situations, including pressure and attacks.

“The largest protest ever held in my town was extremely beautiful and emotional. There were speakers from other towns, and among them was a student who was later detained for a long time (not for participating in our protest, but in connection with another event). I was a security guard at the time. The students, the organizers of the protest, came to the school to make an agreement — more security guards were requested, and parental consent was not required. Everything went well: there were no major incidents or any danger.” (Younger high school student, girl, smaller town)

“I was a security guard at a large protest in Belgrade on March 15. The high school students who were in charge of security at the time were only 18 years old and with experience with previous protests. We built experience from protest to protest — each one was a lesson. The protest on the three bridges in Novi Sad was extremely demanding and a real test of endurance. There were a lot of people, and we organized the crossing of the bridges. After midnight I couldn't take it anymore, and some of the guards got sick — it was physically exhausting.

The rules were clear. Any violence was of course forbidden. In the event of an attack by a provocateur (beater connected to the ruling party), we only had to shout so that other guards nearby would notice and to avoid a direct confrontation. Some guards were medically trained, and I, for example, had a certificate in basic first aid — which turned out to be very useful.

I walked to Belgrade with my peers for the protest on March 15th. This was exhausting, but it was also one of the most beautiful moments in all this darkness. When we arrived in Belgrade two days later, we were met by some of our friends and acquaintances who had arrived that day by car. I only remember crying and screaming with joy that we had made it.

In Belgrade on March 15, a sonic weapon was used against citizens who were protesting. I was at Slavia Square when it was activated. I wasn't in the center of those events, but I still heard the sound ringing in my ears. Our first instinct was to run, so we did, but it was certainly a terrifying experience.⁵” (High school graduate 1, girl, bigger town)

Growing Repression

While many high school students initially gained positive experience, a sense of empowerment, community and belonging, during the protests, repression escalated over time. In addition to verbal attacks, threats, and violence from organized groups, young people faced

⁵ More information in the joint communication of the Special Rapporteurs to the Government of Serbia in April and made public in June 2025: [here](#) (Special Rapporteurs, 2025).

police harassment, and arbitrary arrests, which led to a sense of insecurity, fear and disengagement.

“The protests were wonderful experiences for me. I was lucky — I didn’t find myself in situations of violence. I met wonderful people, open and ready to share their opinions. I made a thousand new friends. Through all those protests and meetings, you see how capable, brave and full of energy this youth is. As far as I remember, we didn’t talk much about safety during protests at the plenums. When protests are organized through schools, the security guards were in charge of “guarding” us and reacting in case of any danger.” (Older high school student, girl, big town)

On the other hand, many high school students were exposed to both verbal and physical violence, including from provocateurs (organized groups of thugs/beaters) and the police both during and after peaceful demonstrations. While in some places high school students had police protection during the daily minutes of silence for the victims of the roof collapse, others testify to serious incidents already during the first gatherings of high school students, back in November 2024, precisely during the symbolic action of silence, by organized groups of thugs (beaters, provocateurs) and sometimes by the school and local administration directly.

“A large group of students from our school, mostly first and third graders, were subjected to verbal attacks, insults and threats of physical violence, including from local officials and organized groups of thugs. They even encouraged a driver to try to drive his vehicle through the crowd!? All of this caused fear and even panic among those present, as I said, most of them were students from younger grades... We were not even able to continue with classes that day. And some students later returned to school because they felt unsafe, after hearing that the aforementioned groups were looking for them around the city - as they had threatened during the silent action itself. We called the police, together with teachers, and the police came, had a conversation with the thugs, who then only changed the location. We did not feel safe that evening or long after that. Due to fear, several students were transported to and from school in an organized manner over the next month to ensure their safety. We continued to protest. And the thugs continued with intimidation. The same group of thugs, a few weeks later, fired explosive devices into the schoolyard, while we students were there. We filed an official complaint at the end of January 2025. However, the prosecution dismissed the case in May without any explanation that would indicate that the complaint was being seriously considered. We have since filed an appeal. In the meantime, we have recognized some of the thugs in ‘ćaciland’⁶ and some of them scared me because they called me by name

⁶ Protesters sarcastically named the pro-government camp in Pioneers Park in Belgrade "Ćacilend," based on a misspelled anti-protest graffiti. By adopting the name "Ćaci," the protesters humorously reappropriated the failed slur, turning the misspelling back on the government and its supporters to highlight what they saw as their incompetence. More [here](#). The camp was organized just before the March 15 protest. While those staying at "Ćacilend" claimed to be students protesting university blockades, many were actually paid regime supporters and "fake students." They were tasked with staging a counter-protest in the heart of the city, where they were protected by the police. More [here](#). See also UN Special rapporteurs Communication from April 2025: [here](#) (Special Rapporteurs, 2025).

in a public place. Not only were we afraid, but we felt completely unprotected by the police and other institutions. Since the provocations continued, and the teachers had to stop suspending classes, we students organized a blockade of the school to try to protect ourselves.” (High school graduate 1, girl, big town)

The government’s reaction to the high school students’ protests was hostile from the very beginning. *“The government ignores the high school students in protest, neglects them and pretends that they do not exist, as if nothing is happening, and when it does react, it reacts with lies.”* (High school graduate 3, girl, big town)

In addition to denying the right and ability to join the protest, and attempting to stop the high school students indirectly - through pressure on parents, teachers and school principals, the Government of the Republic of Serbia ordered the early end of the school semester, in order to stop the spread of the protests, citing health and safety concerns due to the ongoing protests and strikes. Classes were abruptly suspended on December 23, without proper legal basis, transparency or communication with schools, parents and students (Stefanovic et al., 2025). Teachers and school directors who openly supported student demands have been facing increasingly intense repression and politically motivated retaliation. Following a wave of salary cuts in March of this year, they are now confronted with organized retaliation in the form of criminal charges, disciplinary proceedings, dismissals, and demotions. Although many cases remain unreported, data collected by unions and professional associations in a report published in September indicates that over 100 employees have already been dismissed or have not had their contracts renewed. At the same time, more than 110 disciplinary proceedings have been initiated in high schools and elementary schools across numerous cities (Gradjanske inicijative, 2025).

Police presence at protests has grown, but rather than providing security, it has increasingly contributed to a climate of fear. The authorities have repeatedly used the police to pressure young protesters, including by unjustified collection of personal data, surveillance and summons for questioning (Stefanovic et al., 2025). Since June 2025, there has been an escalation in repressive measures, as noted by UN Special Rapporteurs - including excessive police presence, the use of plainclothes officers and arbitrary detentions, even of high school students. (Shaheed et al., 2025, Mreža organizacija za decu Srbije [MODS], 2025a) The brutal use of force against peaceful protesters, including children and young people, culminated in August (Civil Society Organizations Statement, 2025b).

“The protests are becoming increasingly violent. There are more provocateurs and police arresting and beating people... It's terrible. I followed what was happening in Valjevo and other cities. There was a protest in my town the other day too. It was tense. There were a lot more police. The police came from other cities, and we saw groups of people also dressed in black caps entering a building near the protest, we saw them putting police helmets on their heads, getting ready... Two acquaintances, also high school students, were at a protest in Belgrade the other day. The police beat them, they caught them and pushed them into vans, they beat them and left them beaten up on the street, threatening that they shouldn't even call an ambulance... they are scared and so are their parents. They are afraid to sue the police.

They don't trust the work of the institutions, and they are afraid of retaliation.” (High school graduate, boy, smaller town)

“The situation at protests is getting worse all over Serbia, including here. There was a bigger protest the other day in my town, and it was tense. There were more police, and they immediately said: don't step out on the street, anyone who stands at the intersection will be immediately detained, we will file a report ... it was not clear for what, but the threat was serious. While they were there to protect us before, now it is not clear, their presence is somehow frightening ... especially when we see what is happening in other cities.” (Younger high school student, girl, smaller town)

“The reaction of the authorities, not only to the participation of high school students but also the entire protest, is, in a word, unjust. Protesting and blockading is our right under the Constitution. What the police are currently doing is against the law. The way the police are behaving is disproportionate to how the demonstrators are behaving (restrained). According to the Constitution, the duty of the police is to protect their people while they are peacefully protesting, not to beat them. The authorities are leading the police to break the law. I think we are all at risk right now of being unjustly detained by the police while peacefully expressing our discontent. There is also a risk of major or minor bodily harm if someone decides to drive a car into a group of protesters, or if a police officer decides, again unjustly, to beat us.” (High school graduate 2, girl, bigger town)

Media blockage and marginalization of high school students' voices

During the protests, national media ignored or falsely reported on the protests and blockades, portraying them as a “terrorist attack on Serbia.” Due to the media blockade, students launched their own social media platforms to share information and tell their own side of the story.

“Regime media working for the Serbian government are actively trying to destroy everything that has been achieved in 8 months of our joint struggle, but there are also media that support us and transmit accurate information.” (High school graduate 1, girl, bigger town)

“Given that there is no freedom of the media in Serbia and everything is corrupt, the media with national frequencies either do not report on the protests or lie about the protests. Journalists from N1 and Nova S are friendly and have been with the students from the start and have been reporting on our every step. The government treats and presents the protests as a "terrorist attack on Serbia" and spreads lies about the blockades of intersections and streets as soon as they have a chance to speak out (as soon as they open their mouths).” (High school graduate 2, girl, bigger town)

“An independent media outlet from our town reported only on the protests, but not on the blockade of the school. They probably did not consider the blockade important enough, or perhaps they were not allowed to report on it. We started our own Instagram account, where we regularly publish information and statements - so that we can tell our own story in our

own words. National television stations did not report correctly even about the protests, and even less and worse about the school blockades, and many of our fellow citizens have access to information only through this channel.” (Younger high school student, girl, smaller town)

Children and Young Human Rights Defenders

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), every person under the age of 18 is considered a child and enjoys full legal protection. This includes all high school students below 18 who, through their activism and peaceful protest, have acted as child and youth human rights defenders in Serbia. The status of a defender is based on their actions, not their name/title. This concept is in line with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (DHRD, 1998), which clarifies existing rights and facilitates their implementation in practice for all defenders, including children, especially in the context of children's civil and political rights.

The overview of the rights of child and young defenders is based on a guide developed by Laura Lundy (2020) in collaboration with the Child Rights Connect (CRCt) in 2020, as a follow-up to the Day of General Discussion (DGD) held by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2018 (UNCRC, 2018). This guide clarifies the rights of children acting as human rights defenders (CHRDs) and offers guidance on how those rights can be realized and protected. It can be accessed: [here](#).

Rights of child and young defenders and obligations of the state	Violations of children's rights in the context of the ongoing peaceful protest
<p>Although there is still resistance to the idea that children have rights on their own, the CRC guarantees this, emphasizing the obligation of the state to facilitate the participation and respect the voice of children (Article 12). States must actively seek and seriously consider the views of children to empower and include them in decision-making processes, including at the level of national policies and laws.</p> <p>The CRC also obliges states to take active measures (not just refraining from interference) to enable children to effectively enjoy their civil and political rights to:</p>	<p>State authorities not only failed to actively seek the opinions of children and young people on key social events, but also systematically ignored and actively silenced them. Statements from the top of the government that deny children's rights and abilities, which are in direct contradiction to the CRC, contribute to the marginalization of children in general, but also to the stigmatization and increased risk of violence against children and young people participating in the protest.</p> <p>The atmosphere of fear and self-censorship is further strengthened when opponents of school blockades repeat the government's narratives and directly attack high school students.</p> <p>Messages and reactions from those in power have reinforced social norms that discourage child engagement. This has, in some communities, led to the exclusion of younger high school students from the collective decision-making process, even though they actively participated in plenums and contributed to the formation of opinions, both collective and personal.</p>

Freedom of expression (CRC 13, DHRD 6, 7 and 14)	
<p>Children have the right to seek, receive and impart information about human rights. States are obliged to provide them with free and easy access to information (including online), develop their critical thinking and provide a safe environment for such activities.</p>	<p>Although high school students participated and contributed to peaceful civil protest in various ways, e.g. organizing blockades, plenums, protests, speaking publicly, providing security for demonstrators as security guards, etc., many were either afraid or punished through social and institutional mechanisms of intimidation. Biased reporting, especially on national television, violates both the right to information and freedom of expression. Calling protests “terrorist attacks” creates a hostile environment that further discourages the participation of children and young people in public life but also increases the stigmatization of those participating in protests.</p>
Freedom of thought (CRC 14, DHRD 6, 7)	
<p>More than simply not interfering, such as not punishing young defenders, states must actively enable children to freely form and express their opinions about human rights. Article 5 of the CRC is also relevant for understanding and exercising this right, according to which state is obliged to enable parents/families to guide and advise children regarding their rights, in accordance with the growing developmental capacities of children.</p>	<p>Numerous high school students, especially high school graduates, have been threatened with academic sanctions, including preventing them from completing their education. Instead of empowerment, parents employed in state-owned enterprises, and later in smaller private companies, were threatened with loss of jobs, professional positions, and property, which further pressured families to discourage youth participation. Some children were left without adequate parental support, leading to additional psychological exhaustion and feelings of isolation and helplessness.</p>
Association and peaceful assembly (CRC 15, DHRD 5 and 12)	
<p>This right is crucial for young defenders, as it helps them compensate for their lack of political power and representation in traditional structures. States are obliged to take positive steps, such as education in schools and active protection of participants in assemblies from violence, with additional protection measures for children.</p>	<p>Numerous cases of verbal attacks, threats of physical attacks, including by school or municipal employees, as well as beatings and illegal detention of high school students during peaceful demonstrations, have been documented, which represents a serious violation of the right to physical and psychological integrity. The use of sonic weapon and explosive devices against children and young protesters directly violates the right to safe and peaceful assembly.</p>

Privacy and protection of reputation (CRC 16)	
States must not only refrain from violating the privacy and reputation of children, but also actively prevent non-state actors, including the media, from doing so. This includes introducing training for media professionals and adopting codes of conduct, as well as legally requiring the media, including social media, to protect child defenders from attacks.	At least one example of a coordinated attack on social media (offensive comments from bots and government sympathizers) against a student after her speech at a protest has been recorded A documented case of a schoolgirl who was publicly identified by name by thugs has been documented, which has caused fear and a sense of insecurity, especially considering the inadequate institutional protection in previous similar situations (which indicates tolerance of violence and repression against children).
Access to the media (CRC 17, DHRD 6 and 7)	
Although often interpreted as a protective right, it nevertheless emphasizes the positive function of the media, and especially in combination with Articles 6, 7 and 14 of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, this right includes access to information about human rights and their implementation/realization at the national level.	Biased reporting, especially on national television, violates both the right to information and freedom of expression. Calling protests “terrorist attacks” creates a hostile environment that further discourages the participation of children and young people in public life but also increases the stigmatization of protest participants.
Protection from violence (CRC 19, DHRD 12(2), 9(1,5))	
This article establishes children as rights holders and obliges states to take preventive measures against all forms of violence, including non-physical ones. The provision provides broader protection for young defenders than for adults. See also 2023 UNICEF Guide on Policing Assemblies Involving Children for more specific guidance in this respect (Wernham, 2023): here .	High school protest participants were exposed to verbal threats, attempts at physical intimidation (e.g. a vehicle directed at the rally), but also physical violence - explosive devices thrown into the schoolyard and brutal police intervention. The police did not always provide adequate protection for the students, their presence contributed to intimidation, and the longer the protest lasted, the more violent the police became. Rare reports of violence (due to distrust in the work of institutions and direct intimidation) have been ignored by competent institutions. There has been at least one case where the prosecution rejected the complaint without explanation, which indicates institutional negligence and the absence of an effective remedy, in contradiction with international human rights standards. Professors threatened high school graduates with academic sanctions, while parents and teachers risked losing their jobs for supporting the protests,

	<p>which some did, indicating systemic collective retaliation.</p> <p>Anonymous support from citizens and fear of "brought-in thugs" reflect the atmosphere of fear and repression in public space.</p>
Protection from exploitation (CRC 36)	
<p>This article guarantees children the right to be protected from manipulation by adults and organizations that may use them for their own purposes. Although accusations of manipulation are often used to discredit young activists, states have a duty to ensure that their participation is informed and voluntary. It is important to note that voluntariness has a wide spectrum; even if children are not the initiators of protests or movements, they may be well-informed and have a personal, critical view of the causes they are fighting for.</p>	<p>The state authorities used accusations of manipulation to discredit the children and young people participating in the protests. This is obvious, given that no protective measures were taken. Quite the contrary.</p> <p>Instead of concrete support or protection, high school students were 'invited to withdraw from the protest' - by belittling their views and actions, denying and violating their rights, as documented here.</p> <p>The intensification of repressive measures exposed children and young protest participants (and observers) to additional risk and violence.</p>
Prohibition of torture (CRC 37)	
<p>The provision must be interpreted in a child-centered manner. Peer violence or sexual abuse can be considered torture, which obliges states to take strong corrective measures.</p>	<p>Cases of beatings and illegal detention of students have also been documented, which represents a serious violation of the right to physical and psychological integrity and a form of inhuman treatment.</p>
Rehabilitation (CRC 39)	
<p>States are obliged to provide immediate assistance and long-term rehabilitation to children who have experienced violence or abuse, including young defenders. Support must be aimed at strengthening the health, self-esteem and dignity of children and young people.</p>	
The right to education and rights in education (CRC Articles 28 and 29; DHRD 15)	
<p>States are obliged to provide education <i>about</i>, <i>through</i> and <i>for</i> human rights, with a special focus on the rights of the child, in accordance with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011) (here) and with the aim of empowering children to exercise their rights,</p>	<p>The sudden suspension of classes to prevent the spread of protests also threatened children's right to education and the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. The decision was made in a non-transparent manner, without communication with students and parents.</p>

understand the rule of law, and learn how to seek legal protection in the event of human rights violations in and outside of school.

empowering children with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for active participation in society and the protection of rights

Activities aimed at defending human rights are recognized and recommended as a valuable form of education - not an obstacle, but a way to learn, live and protect human rights.

School culture, shaped by principals and governing bodies, should respect the human rights of all – including the right of teachers and students to act as human rights defenders. This must be reflected in school policies and practices, particularly in the areas of discipline, child protection and school-wide participation.

Children should be included in the development and implementation of school policies that can enable or hinder their ability to act as human rights defenders. It is particularly important to ensure that schools and teachers do not violate the civil and political rights of children when they act as defenders of rights – including the rights to expression, association and peaceful assembly. To ensure this, education laws and policies must clearly guide schools on how to act in accordance with human rights when children act as defenders of children’s rights.

National human rights institutions (i.e. ombudsmen) should provide children with accessible information about their rights and how they can act as human rights defenders.

The risk and loss of jobs for teachers and principals who support the protests points to collective retaliation, which prevents schools from promoting human rights and protecting students from repression when expressing their views publicly.

Pressure on principals and teachers to stop protests and prevent high school students from participating constitutes an indirect violation of students' rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, as well as their right to education about, through and for human rights. This has left many students without adequate support and exposed to additional risks in the school environment.

Verbal violence, stigmatization, discrimination, and threats of academic sanctions by some teachers and principals further jeopardized the psychological and physical safety and security of children in schools (the right to education in a safe environment) and discouraged their participation in the protest.

Claims that peaceful protest, and especially school blockades, "endanger knowledge and the right to education" ignore the educational values that students promote - democratic learning, critical thinking, argumentation and empathy, etc. - point to a systemic/institutional misunderstanding of the obligations of the education system and the potential stigmatization of high school students participating in blockades and peaceful demonstrations.

Students were forced to constantly justify that the protests were not "running away from school" also points to potential institutional misunderstanding.

The inadequate response of the relevant institutions to the protest demands led to the blockades of some schools lasting an entire semester. During that period, many students missed a significant portion of their classes, and the make-up was organized at extremely short notice, without adequate pedagogical and psychosocial support.

The beginning of the new school year was marked by the replacement of principals, changes in school boards, and the firing of teachers in high schools across the country.

Recommendations

- Create an environment conducive to the exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly and protect human rights defenders, including child human rights defenders, from violence or intimidation against them for exercising these rights.
- Recognizing the positive, important and legitimate contribution that child and young human rights defenders make to the promotion of human rights, as well as their specific needs and rights, ensure a safe and supportive environment for their initiatives — both in and outside the digital space, including protection from all negative consequences (intimidation, deprivation of liberty, violence of any kind, retaliation, etc.)
- Ensure that all children in schools, through the mandatory national curriculum, receive education *about, through and for* human rights, with a special focus on the rights of the child in accordance with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training ([here](#)) in order to empower children and young people in the realization of their rights, and how to seek legal protection in case of human rights violations in and outside school.
- Establish and strengthen mechanisms for the meaningful participation of children and youth in decision-making at all levels, from schools to local communities and up to the national level, without discrimination. Since the experiences and perspectives of children are essential for decisions that affect them, especially concerning their safety in various environments, they must be included in the development of mechanisms and protocols that guarantee their safety while exercising their rights to free expression and peaceful assembly, too.
- Ensure that child human rights defenders are empowered to assess risks and have access to multiple child-friendly and safe mechanisms (in school but also in other child protection institutions) to report violations of their rights and receive appropriate support and protection.

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