

27 November 2024

English only

The Advisory Council calls for a commitment to guaranteeing young activists' access to rights and their safety

The Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ) notes with concern the opinions expressed by the National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS) and the European Youth Forum (YFJ) regarding the violation of young people's rights and the safety of young activists in Serbia.¹ Recent reports highlight arrests, surveillance, invasions of privacy, public smear campaigns, and hostility in the media targeting youth activists, undermining their freedoms and participation in public life.²

The Council of Europe's long-standing commitment to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law has been instrumental in safeguarding individual freedoms and fostering a culture of peace. Member States are united around and collaborate to protect and promote these interdependent principles, as enshrined in the *Statute of the Council of Europe*, the *European Convention on Human Rights* (ECHR), and reaffirmed in the 2023 *Reykjavík Principles for Democracy*.

The right to freedom of peaceful assembly (Article 11), the right to freedom of expression (Article 8) and the right to privacy protection (Article 10), as enshrined in the ECHR, represent cornerstone elements of democratic societies. These grant rights to young people to voice their opinions, participate in peaceful assemblies, and exercise their democratic citizenship. Moreover, the *Reykjavík Principles for Democracy* reaffirm these commitments, emphasising the need to invest in a democratic future by empowering young people to participate in decision-making processes and support civil society by maintaining a safe and enabling environment for organisations and human rights defenders, free from insecurity and violence.

Despite these safeguards, young activists in Serbia, and other member States, face increasing barriers that hinder their ability to exercise these rights.³ In all corners of Europe, young people are also at the forefront of social change, advocating - sometimes in the face of grave human rights infringements and other obstacles to their peaceful assembly - for environmental justice, gender equity, democratic accountability and other vital causes. For that reason, we emphasise the essential role of young people and civil society organisations, and the importance that all member States provide them with the foundations to uphold democratic values.

Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)6 on protecting youth civil society and young people and supporting their participation in democratic processes calls for support to the development of active youth citizenship and investment in initiatives that revitalise the social contract, improving young people's trust in democratic institutions. It also prescribes the need to protect young people's right to freely express their political preferences by allowing the assembly of peaceful public gatherings and demonstrations by youth civil society and safeguarding the right of young people to express their views freely while protecting them from violence and preventing subsequent detention for political reasons.

¹ [Motion on Condemning youth rights violations and threats to activist safety in Serbia](#)

² [Overview of Youth rights violations and threats to activist safety in Serbia - 2024](#) and [Serbia's Shrinking Civic Space Needs International Attention](#)

³ [Overview of Youth rights violations and threats to activist safety in Serbia - 2024](#)

During this period of shrinking youth civic space, the Advisory Council on Youth reaffirms its unwavering solidarity with young activists and democratic civil society organisations in Serbia and across Europe. We call on all member States to take concerted and immediate action – in line with *Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)2 on countering the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)* and *Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe* – to safeguard the rights of young people before this situation creates precedence and to support their role as advocates of democracy, equality, and justice for all.

Empowering youth and civil society is not merely a generous act of support, it is a strategic, long-term investment in the resilience of our democratic societies. We urge all Council of Europe member States to honour their commitments under the Reykjavík Principles by supporting and maintaining a safe and enabling environment in which civil society, as well as human rights defenders, can operate free from hindrance, insecurity and violence. By meaningfully working together, youth civil society and governments can ensure that young people have the opportunities, safety, and support they need to build a stronger Europe that upholds the values of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

The statements of the Advisory Council are published for the purpose of informing the public about the activities of the statutory bodies of the Council of Europe youth sector. The statements reflect the opinions and positions of the Advisory Council and its members. The views expressed therein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council of Europe.